



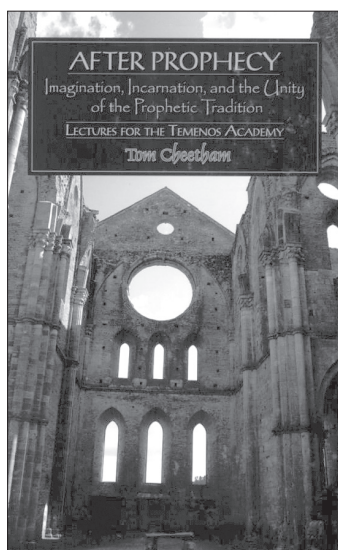
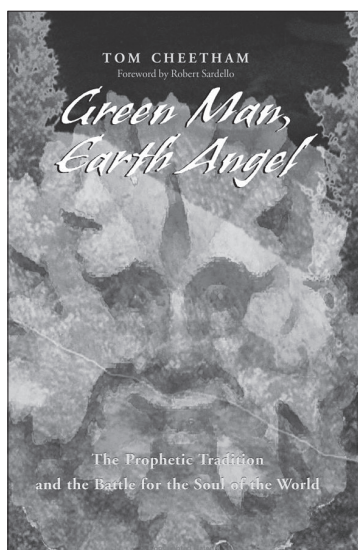
Henry Corbin

THE WORLD TURNED INSIDE OUT

Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism



Tom Cheetham



The Corbin Trilogy:

The World Turned Inside Out: Henry Corbin
and Islamic Mysticism

By Tom Cheetham

Spring Journal Books, Conn., 2003

Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition
and the Battle for the Soul of the World

By Tom Cheetham

SUNY, New York, 2005

After Prophecy: Imagination, Incarnation, and
the Unity of the Prophetic Tradition (Lectures for
the Temenos Academy)

By Tom Cheetham

Spring Journal Books, Louisiana, 2007

Reviewed by M. Ali Lakhani

This trilogy of works centers on the metaphysical thought of the French Islamic scholar, Henry Corbin (1903–1978). A student of Scholasticism under Etienne Gilson, and a close associate of Louis Massignon (whose position he succeeded, as Director of Islamic Studies at the Sorbonne), Corbin was not only a pre-eminent theologian but also a mystical philosopher. Influenced by the German theological tradition of Boehme, Luther, Hamann, Heidegger, and Barth, among others, Corbin developed a philosophy of mystical hermeneutics, which drew greatly from Christian and Muslim mystics and philosophers who viewed reality phenomenologically, as an unveiling of the inner Light of transcendent Reality. A major figure (along with Jung, Eliade, and Scholem) at the Erano conferences, Corbin spent many years living in the Muslim world and was regarded in the West as an authority on medieval Muslim

philosophy (particularly the teachings of Avicenna, Suhrawardi, and Ibn 'Arabi). Also, as head of the Franco-Iranian Institute in Tehran, he was a specialist in Irano-Islamic studies (particularly Suhrawardi's revival of Zoroastrian angelology), Persian Sufism (in particular, Mulla Sadra), and Shi'a theosophy (including Isma'ili gnosis and hermeneutics). Corbin's legacy has been immense, ranging from his influence upon traditionalist metaphysicians or those with traditionalist leanings (notably, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Toshohiko Izutsu, William C. Chittick, Sachiko Murata, Hermann Landolt, Kathleen Raine and Philip Sherrard), and extending beyond into the fields of literature and psychology (his ideas have influenced, for example, the literary critic, Harold Bloom and the Jungian scholar, James Hillman).

Dr. Cheetham is a scholar of Corbin, and a fellow of the Temenos Academy, which—through its journal and lectures devoted to the Arts of the Imagination, and to Perennial Philosophy, both arguably key aspects of Corbin's thought—has promoted Corbin's work for several decades. Cheetham also maintains an online blog on Corbin at "<http://henrycorbinproject.blogspot.com>".

In *The World Turned Inside Out*, Cheetham has provided perhaps the best available introduction to Corbin's thought for the general reader. The second and particularly the third volumes of this trilogy, *Green Man*, *Earth Angel*, and *After Prophecy*, respectively, are more interpretive works, exploring the relevance and significance of Corbin's ideas for our lives and the issues that confront us in the modern world. Those volumes will be of especial interest to readers of *Sacred Web*, given their interpretive focus. In the comments that follow, we have chosen to review the works collectively, as a trilogy, rather than individually. For readers unfamiliar with Corbin's writings, they might do well to read the books in the order they were written. For others who may be more familiar with Corbin's ideas—and this review will attempt to provide the reader with an outline of the key ideas—and who wish to sample but one book in this trilogy, we would recommend the final volume which anthologizes Cheetham's lectures for the Temenos Academy.

In considering Corbin's ideas, Cheetham remarks on the "astonishing variety of influences" that shaped them—"Christian theology, Heideggerian phenomenology, and Islamic mysticism fused with Zoroastrian angelology; all united by a deep reverence for what in Islam is called

the Primordial Revelation: the book of nature.” Cheetham traces the early philosophical influences of Heidegger in Corbin’s hermeneutics and phenomenology, clarifying that unlike for Heidegger, whose quest for the “history of Being” remained situated entirely within the Western philosophical tradition, Corbin’s research extended beyond and came to be largely influenced by Irano-Islamic metaphysics, which led him in the direction of a transcendently rooted understanding of “Being” as “Presence”—an understanding based on the reality of the “mundus imaginilis”, the realm of the Creative Imagination. The reality of the imaginal world (Cheetham states: “Corbin called it the mundus imaginilis, the imaginal world, to underscore the fact that it is not imaginary or unreal”) was central to Corbin’s worldview. This domain of reality was “a median and mediating power” between the sensible and the intellectual, the metaphysical threshold (“barzakh”) of transcendence and of immanence. By contrast, Heidegger (in George Steiner’s appraisal of him) based his metaphysics on an effort to view reality as immanence without transcendence. In Cheetham’s words, “Heidegger tried to erect a philosophy denying the need for the category of the Person and the transcendence implicit in that Being.” Corbin, however, regarded “Being” not as an escape from the particulars of mundane reality into the realm of abstraction, but as an opening into the “spiritual corporeity” of Divine Presence rooted in Personhood.

Corbin’s true influences in this regard were the Sufi and Shi’ite metaphysicians about whom he later wrote, including in particular, Avicenna (981–1037), Suhrawardi (1155–1191), Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1240), and Mulla Sadra (c.1571–1640). Corbin was introduced to Suhrawardi’s works by Massignon, and the influence on him of this twelfth-century Persian mystic was seminal. Corbin later wrote: “[T]hrough my meeting with Suhrawardi, my spiritual destiny for the passage through this world was sealed. Platonism, expressed in terms of the Zoroastrian angelology of ancient Persia, illuminated the path I was seeking.” From Suhrawardi, the founder of the Illuminationist School of Persian mysticism, Corbin learned of the importance of the intermediary imaginal realm as the means of the visionary perception of the “sacral light” that was central to Zoroastrian faith and to the Abrahamic traditions. Thus in the Zoroastrian tradition, the Celestial Light of Ohrmazd and His six Archangels in Avestan cosmology, is opposed to the Darkness of Ahriman. The Light is

embodied for all created beings in their Fravarti or personal angel and soul's guide, and illuminates the path of the soul's personal embodiment of the Light through spiritual transformation. Similarly, the Light of God appears as the "Burning Bush" in Judaism, the apparitions of Gabriel to Mary and Muhammad, and as the symbolic "Light upon Light" of the Surah of Light in Islam. These are images of the divine theophany and of the soul's destiny to actualize on earth the "Energy of sacral Light" through spiritual transformation.

From the Muslim texts that he studied, Corbin learned how life could be viewed as a "dramaturgy", an awakening of the soul through its encounter with its archetypal image in the "*imago mundi*"—with the personified presence of the soul's Heavenly Twin, its Guiding Angel or Fravarti. The soul's encounter with its "Angel" is to be understood here as its submission to the active Intelligence. The Angel is identified with such figures as the Paraclete in the Gospel of St. John, or Khidr in the Qur'an, with the Archangel Gabriel, and with the *Logos* or Angel Holy Spirit. Corbin was greatly influenced here not only by Suhrawardi's revival of Mazdean angelology, but also by the Kubrawite phenomenology of lights and colors developed by the central Asian school of Sufism of Najm al-Din Kubra (1146–1220), and his followers Najmeddin Razi (d. 1256) and Alaoddawleh Semnani (1261–1336), as well as the illuminationist metaphysics (of illumination as the "intensification of being" and inner light) associated with the Persian, Mulla Sadra. This "imaginal" encounter with the Angel, with "the light of that Presence which is the ultimate source of all personification" formed the basis of the soul's individuation, its ethical valorization and its harmonization with the world. Cheetham notes: "It is not too much to say that Corbin's entire work revolves around the ontological priority of the individual. It is the Presence of the Angel that provides the conditions for the possibility of the experience of the Person."

It is only through our interiority and heliotropic orientation to the Angel Face that we can hope to unveil the theophanies of the soul and the world. The Angel is the inner Guide, the exegete, the Intellect, the "Khidr of your being." It is also the hermeneutical principle or *ta'wil*, the opening to the Origin, unveiling the Divine Face that is uniquely and "imaginally" discernable by each visionary. Here, knowledge and being interpenetrate. How we see the world is dependent on the quality of

our vision. What we perceive is dependent on how we choose to see. According to the doctrine that "like can only be known by like", what is known corresponds to the mode of being of the knower: Light can only be perceived by light. We can come to know the hierarchies of being through a growth of consciousness—through *dhikr* or prayerful and contemplative remembrance, which is central to Corbin's praxis of spiritual awareness and transformation. Cheetham remarks that for Corbin, "Prayer is the supreme form of the creative imagination, and as such is the ultimate exercise of human freedom." It is through the discipline of *dhikr* or the intensification of spiritual awareness that we are enabled to ascend to the divine. Our growth in spiritual consciousness effects our alchemical transformation into an ontologically higher "mode of presence," so that our growth in knowing corresponds to the intensification of our being as light.

The mediate realm of "imaginal" archetypes and the symbolic significance of the "image" that corresponds to the visionary's degree of receptivity are central to Corbin's ideas. They are the basis of his theophanic worldview of creation as the "Face of God", and of his doctrine of the Guiding Angel that is the soul's heavenly counterpart and the means of its spiritual transformation into the "Body of Light." It is in this context that one can understand Corbin's critique of the official Church doctrine of the Incarnation by which Jesus is the hypostatic union of God and man, a divine person with two natures—fully human and fully God. Historically, the doctrine of the *Logos* reconciled Christian theology with Greek philosophy in respect of the possibility of the Supreme Being's ability to relate personally to His creatures. But if the *Logos* was identified with Christ, it became necessary to consider the theological difference between the Father and the "human" personality of Christ as the Word of God. The Council of Nicea in 325 had rejected the Arian view that Christ, though the first among creatures, was not co-eternal with God, decreeing instead that Father and Son were of one substance—*homoousis*. In a further elaboration of this position, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 had decreed the official doctrine of Incarnation—that the Son was consubstantial with the Father, being "of two natures in one person" so that the divine and human were united substantially, yet by nature distinct. Corbin found the official doctrine of the Incarnation to be deeply flawed because it had reduced the theophanic significance of

the Incarnation to a mere doctrine, a dogma rather than a "*dokema*" or theophany. By allowing God to be seen as entering history and so into social and material reality, the Incarnation had effectively secularized the sacred and dissolved the transcendent God into the natural world. By adopting the viewpoint that Jesus *was* God, the Church had effectively compromised the metamorphic function of the Logos as a theophanic vision. Corbin preferred to regard the Incarnation in terms of a fusion of docetism (the view that Christ was an apparition of God) and early Ebionitism (the view that Christ was a Prophet, a human messenger of God). He emphasized that a thread of docetic angelology—that of the True Prophet and Guiding Angel—runs through each of the Abrahamic faiths and this was a key to his ecumenic regard for the monotheistic faiths as an Abrahamic Harmony that he termed "*Harmonia Abrahamica*." Corbin's docetic interpretation of the Incarnation eliminates any schism between matter and spirit, so that Christ's reality is not based on a bifurcation of Christ's dual nature but on the theophanic reality of his unique personhood, representing each human being's potential for spiritual transformation and the realization of his or her own personhood. The Incarnation was the reality of the Word made flesh—not matter. The significance is that "flesh" is not impersonal or abstract (like matter) but is the concretely unique personified fragment of the Real Presence of God. Rightly understood, Corbin claimed that Christ was the Angel Holy Spirit, a theophanic vision and archetypal embodiment of Personhood, of the Real Presence of the Person—both "ensouled flesh and personal substance," the imaginal reality and potential of each soul.

Cheetham discusses how Corbin's views share some similarity with those of the Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and how it also differs from Balthasar's Trinitarian emphasis which it rejects. Balthasar interprets the Incarnation in terms of God's self-giving (kenotic) love through Christ, who is the immanent and intimate aspect of God's transcendent mystery. But while for Balthasar Christ is the absolute guarantor of objectivity (the only Son of the Father), for Corbin Christ is the Heavenly Twin who, in appears in various other guises, as the Soul of the World and is the source of all Presence. Christ is the *Christos Angelos*, the theophanic vision of God coming into contact with humanity only by transforming the latter. Cheetham summarizes: "Theophanic psychocosmology is based upon this transfiguration. In it ontology and

epistemology are united in a cosmogenesis of the individual.” The key to understanding this alchemical “transfiguration” is the role of the transfiguring presence of the Christic Image and its ability to ignite the soul of the seer. In the imaginal realm, thought is united with being and the mode of presence is dependent on the orientation of the soul because “whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.”

This “unveiling” of the soul of the self and the world is the hermeneutical counterpart to our orientation to the Divine Face. It is only by our receptivity to the Word that we can decode the true meaning of the cosmic Book—which includes ourselves. By orienting ourselves to transcendence, by interpreting the world and our selves imaginally as manifestations of a greater reality, we are able to unveil the innermost Self that pervades all creation. For Corbin, the aim of hermeneutics, which he regarded as the proper function of phenomenology, was the recovery of the interiority of the text of the soul and the world. The aim is to unveil the Face of the Self, to recover the “Lost Speech”, the integral Word or *Logos*. But Corbin was clear that *ta’wil*, the hermeneutical orientation to the Origin or *awwal*, “is not theory; it is an initiation to vision.” And this vision is transformative. Knowledge is realizational: to *know* is also to *be*. Reality, in its corporeal intimacy cannot be properly reduced to an abstract idea, nor can its essential mystery be reduced to its outer surface or literal form. Rather, the world must transcend both abstraction and literalism and be perceived imaginally, symbolically, and participatively, as a continually renewing theophany of the unveiling of Presence so that each unveiling is in respect of a unique and individualized manifestation of the divine theophany that is the Face of God. Corbin explained that “the Divine Being is not fragmented, but wholly present in *each* instance, individualized in *each* theophany” because, as Ibn ‘Arabi taught, “Each being has as his God only his particular Lord, he cannot possibly have the Whole.” This “wholeness” (“holiness”) or “Presence” means that each being can, by choosing to see the Other in this participative mode, view the world conjunctively rather than disjunctively, through “a kind of reciprocal imaginative interaction, a sympathy between self and world.” This kind of engaged interpretive envisioning entails an imaginative sympathy between subject and object so that what we see in our clarified perception is the unveiling of the Presence of the Supreme Reality of the

Divine Subject who manifests that continually renewing theophany within which we immanently participate and which transcends the disjunctive vision of our egoic subjectivity.

Corbin's epistemology is founded on the doctrine of participation and it is sympathy that is the foundation of his ethics. His hermeneutics engage our capacity for angelic vision, for the iconoclastic rendering of the idol as transparent to the light invested in it. This involves a way of seeing that Corbin speaks of in terms of the hermeneutics of "transmuting the idol into an icon." To endow things with ontological presence, to see them in all their spiritual corporeity, one has to perceive them imaginally, with a participative sympathy. This involves breaking "through the mutual isolation of consciousness and its object, of thought and being," writes Corbin, adding: "here phenomenology becomes ontology." As Cheetham explains, "It is sympathy that is the prerequisite of *ta'wil*... It is the ability to open oneself to the presence of things and of persons." This is what Corbin refers to as the "cognitive function of sympathy" or, adopting the terminology of Etienne Souriau, calls "the angelic function of a being." What is at stake here is the recovery of the meaning of spirit as substance, not as dichotomies of mind and matter, but as the embodied Presence of body, mind, and being, poised here and now in what the poet Gary Snyder calls the "mythological present"—as a concrete reality that is a theophany opening into mystery. To open ourselves to such a Presence requires us to have "a sensate, imaginative sympathy" where images carry an ontological force, and where the natures of the world and the soul interpenetrate and so each can meet the "Other" in mutual Presence. As Cheetham notes, "This kind of attention is intensely relational because it is felt, it is sensuous, and it is embodied."

It is easy to understand why, for Corbin, prayer, love, and beauty would play a central role in spiritual transformation. He regarded prayer as the supreme act of the Creative Imagination, as one's orientation to the Pole Star of transcendent Being. Thus it was "the expression of a mode of being" and the means by which Creator and Creature were irrevocably entwined in mutual sympathy. Prayer, thus understood, is the response of each soul to the prophetic summons to experience divine love and beauty through seeing the world as a theophany, through seeking the Angel Holy Spirit in our encounters with the Other, and through incarnating love with other *persons* whom we encounter not merely

abstractly, through their *personas*, but as the iconic face of the Beloved, in the esoteric unity of Love, Lover and Beloved.

For Corbin, beauty is the essential divine attribute and the source and reality of our love. To perceive this divine beauty, however, requires a quality of attention and perception that has an ethical foundation, one that is premised on the profound connections between *asceticism* and *aesthetics*, between renunciation and beauty. Cheetham uses this idea to provide a critique of modernity in respect of the loss of this dimension of perception, suggesting that is required to regain an appreciation of beauty in the world is a quality of detachment. To "refuse to become unconsciously ensnared by the allurements of a commercialized world... (t)o begin to be sensitive to the manifold effects of this impersonal world on our actions, thoughts, and emotions and so gain some distance from it is already an act of renunciation and of aesthetic discrimination." [Though Cheetham uses the word "renunciation" in this quote, the better term might have been "detachment."] But the detachment that pulls us away from things must be balanced by the sympathy that draws us to them. Aesthetics, Cheetham observes, is rooted in a cosmological *synaesthesia*: "All the beings of the world are connected within and among themselves by the vibrations of harmonic *sympathy*. Our place among them is not one of dominion, but of interconnection." The imagination is synaesthetic, filled with harmonic sympathy: "When harmonic sympathy is fully in operation, then *to speak is to be*. Understanding something, we say we can *make sense* of it, and now it is clear that this making sense is not theoretical, but is primarily aesthetic, concrete, and sensuous." It is the function of beauty to awaken us to the spiritually embodied realization of Presence: "When imagination and renunciation are wed, then all the world becomes sensuous and my individual world, my life, can make sense to me. The spiritual world is no longer abstract and distant, but alive and intensely real." Cheetham laments, "The true meaning of the word *substance* has faded from our consciousness. The spirit *is* substantial. Understanding this can help reclaim a sense of the concrete significance of the individual."

In the second and third volumes of the Corbin trilogy, in particular, Cheetham considers Corbin's ideas and their significance in providing a critique of modernism. The defining characteristic of modernism is its loss of a cosmological sense of wholeness, of a hierarchical continuum

that includes the verticality of transcendence. Just eight months before his death, Corbin had written: "To confuse Being with being is the metaphysical catastrophe." This "metaphysical catastrophe" has led, in Cheetham's recounting of the implications to modernity of Corbin's ideas, to "three great crises: a rupture between the individual and the Divine, a severing of the felt connection between human beings and the living earth, and a profound breakdown of long-held assumptions about the nature and function of language. In traditional terminology, we are witnessing a collapse of the structures that make sense of the relations among God, Creation, Logos, and the human person." These are respectively, the crises of the spirit, the environment, of the loss of meaning.

Cheetham notes that a shift from a conjunctive to a disjunctive mode of perception occurred in Western Europe around the 12th century, resulting in a "withdrawal of participation", a disharmony between man and nature, and the birth of a mechanistic cosmology based on abstract materialism. "It was Corbin's contention that European civilization experienced a 'metaphysical catastrophe' as a result of what we might call the Great Disjunction. This was signaled by the final triumph of the Aristoteleanism of Averroes over Platonic and neo-Platonic cosmology championed by Avicenna. To the defeat of that cosmology is coupled the disappearance of the *anima mundi*, the Soul of the World. The catastrophic event that gave rise to modernity is the loss of the soul of the world."

The loss of the imaginal realm has both materialized and abstracted reality, leading to the loss of the theophanic sense of Presence, the sense of the sacred. Cheetham considers at some length the attempts by modern psychology, particularly through the theories of Jung and his research into traditional alchemy, to recover this lost realm. He cites Corbin's criticism of Jung that his theories were overly empirical and not grounded in sound metaphysics. Readers of this journal will know that traditionalist authors, notably Titus Burckhardt, have criticized Jung's conflation of the spirit and the psyche. This conflation is at the heart of Corbin's critique. Cheetham focuses on Corbin's criticism that Jung failed to transcend the realm of the psychic world, and so to properly distinguish between two kinds of metaphysical darkness: the demonic darkness of nihilism and the hypertrophic (Faustian or Nietzschean) self, and the mystical darkness of poverty that opens into the plenitude

of theophanic light. In Corbin's traditional metaphysics, there exists a higher consciousness than our ordinary consciousness, one that is intensely personal, in contrast to Jung's undifferentiated consciousness that is "collective" and unable to transcend the impersonal laws of the natural world. This higher consciousness is signaled by the Black Light of *fana'* (or egoic death), and associated in the spiritual journey with the flight into the Darkness of the *Deus absconditus*, the Hidden Treasure of the celebrated *badith* ("I was a Hidden Treasure and yearned to be known, so I created the world in order to be known"). It precedes the Green Light of *baqa'*, of the ultimate theophany, which is associated with pleroma of the *Deus revelatus*. Jung failed to distinguish between these two types of darkness. For Jung, good and evil were psychic projections that needed, as opposites, to be integrated within the self. In Jungian therapy, therefore, the dark side, represented by the psychic *shadow* of our struggle with material darkness, was an element to be integrated within the individuated self, not to be overcome or repressed. But as Corbin explained, only complementary elements could be integrated, not contradictory ones. God was Good, not evil, and therefore the demonic darkness of the Black Light of the psychic *shadow* was to be vanquished by the spiritual transformation of the self into the Body of Light (as the Illuminationists claimed), and not integrated (as Jung claimed). The task of putting on the Body of Light occurs by the simultaneous growth in spiritual consciousness and illumination of being, and represents for Corbin the path of spiritual ascent. Of this ascent, Cheetham observes that even though it involves purgation of darkness, the necessary self-emptying (though not integrative in the Jungian sense) is a path to wholeness: "This ascension does involve increasing wholeness, since one does become more complete, more real, closer to God. To attain the full possibilities of human perfection human beings have to experience to some degree all the attributes of God. But the journey toward the Divine consists in overcoming that which is lower, not in integrating it to become whole. The lower is the less real; one includes it only by surpassing it. The wholeness to be attained is a wholeness of perfection, not a wholeness of inclusion." In the end, the path to Light lies through Darkness: we can know only through our own unknowingness, and we can be born into Being only through our own mystical poverty.

The stance that is involved in spiritual growth, then, is one of self-discipline (*ascesis*), not indulgence, of sympathy (*aesthetics*), not anaesthetization, of love (*caritas*), not power. Cheetham is rightly critical of the lustful, desensitizing and power-driven forces that pit man against nature and that dominate the modern world. He writes: "...in so far as we live in a world dominated by the products of the human economy, oriented towards producing and gratifying human desires, we will suffer from a dangerous restriction of experience, thought, and expression, and of our capacities for love and relationship, lacking even the memory of the desire for transcendence...A degree of poverty is a prerequisite for the experience of the fullness of this world. This poverty is the result of letting go of a desperate grip upon the world. Creation unfolds only when power is renounced. For the things of this world grow opaque when we try to control and possess them. They withdraw into themselves and block our access to the riches at the roots of things." Paradoxically, we must open into the darkness of the unknown in order to discover the Presence that we, and the world, are. Corbin presents an alternative vision of life grounded in the renunciation of power, in mystical poverty, freed from passions for control, "because everything is gratuitous—it is all a Gift." This higher consciousness is the basis of a spiritual ecology that is implicit in Corbin's ideas. Cheetham is critical of the materialistic scientism that overreaches, that enacts the creed that there is nothing in the universe that cannot, and should not, be unveiled, or that is inviolate. It secularizes and demystifies the world to the point that the soul becomes unmoored, and enters what Corbin terms its "vagabondage and perdition." From Corbin's traditional perspective, the soul and the world should not be pitted against each other, but should be seen as mirrors of each other, as microcosm and macrocosm within the same cosmos. In contrast to the technologies of modernistic science, which are grounded in the lustful desire for power and its ideological assumptions ("that knowledge is synonymous with power, and power is always good, and that knowledge must invariably be exercised by changing the world"), Cheetham advocates the development of counter-technologies in modernity to "help us reveal that everything we need is already at hand." And it is to poetry and the project of recovering the Lost Speech that he turns to search for a solution.

At the heart of Cheetham's critique of modernism is his contention that man has experienced a loss of meaning through his loss of the imaginal realm. Corbin correctly identifies the need for the application of a hermeneutical corrective to address this loss of meaning. In Islamic metaphysics, creation is divine speech, and all creatures are revealed "words of God." The world is an ever-renewing theophany, made and unmade in each moment. For us to perceive the theophany afresh in each moment requires us to be engaged in a "perpetual hermeneutics" of continual openness to its ever-new Presence. This dialogue of inner and outer, the Adamic language of "naming," is the Lost Speech that we need to recover. Meaning is to be sought through transmuting idols into icons, so that we can perceive Truth, in the constantly changing yet ever-present *here* and *now*, as Presence. But the modern world is in danger of becoming, in George Steiner's celebrated description of the post-literate world, an "After-Word", lacking the imagination to perceive "Real Presences." The recovery of meaning in this world requires us to discover the primordial techniques of sympathetic awareness, a kind of therapeutic literacy that Ivan Illich describes as "an ontologically remedial technique." We need to rediscover the power of language as symbolic, of its potential to imaginally awaken within us an awareness of our participation in, and harmony with, that synaesthetic substrate of reality in which spirit and substance are unified. Cheetham writes: "When harmonic sympathy is fully in operation, then *to speak* is *to be*. Understanding something, we say we can *make sense* of it, and now it is clear that this making sense is not theoretical, but is primarily aesthetic, concrete, and sensuous...When imagination and renunciation are wed, then all the world becomes sensuous and my individual world, my life, can make sense to me. The spiritual world is no longer abstract and distant, but alive and intensely real. The true meaning of the word *substance* has faded from our consciousness. The spirit *is* substantial. Understanding this can help reclaim a sense of the concrete significance of the individual."

The loss of the imaginal dimension in modernity is evident in the loss of its primordial poetic sympathy, which Cheetham calls "that forgotten language and the energies that would return us home to a world we dimly recall." We can therefore define the urgent task of modernity as the need to recover the Lost Speech of the angels, or the recovery of the

poetic sensibility. The function of *poesis* is, in this regard, to unveil for us the reality of that personified and qualitative and sensate Presence through language that is both concrete and resonant of transcendence. Cheetham views poets, therefore, as "the guardians of the person and of the soul of the world," both inextricably linked so that "a violation of either is a violation of both." He contrasts poets with scientists. While the latter would leave no room for mystery and wonder in their quest for abstract and literal Truth, Cheetham says this about poets: "They speak to us out of intimacy. They are the guardians of the inviolate individual, of the mystery of the Person." But the responsibility to perform as poets rests with each of us, and it is a heavy responsibility for to lose our poetic sensibility would be to deface the soul and the world: "To the degree that the language of the imagination is lost, to that degree are people and all the elements of Creation de-personalized, turned into objects, into abstractions. The final result is Hell. The final result is a world without a Face."

Cheetham is wary at times of Corbin's mysticism, of his "nostalgia for the Elsewhere and his desire for the Body of Light." He prefers a more grounded counterpoint to his views. For this "coagulating" counterpoint to Corbin's "sublimating" tendencies, Cheetham turns to the polymath thinker, Ivan Illich (1926–2002). He finds in Illich's ideas a complementary but more developed sense of meaning and Presence that opens up a way into the Beyond through the deepest reality of the present. He discusses Illich's dislike for the depersonalizing influences of institutions—including the Church—and of secularism in society, and his critique of Western culture's attempts to (in Cheetham's language) "institutionalize grace and the call that is implicit in the divine face of the other person." For Illich, the Incarnation is central to Christian revelation. It represents the possibility of a profound continuity between "the eyes of the flesh" and the "eyes of fire" that forms the condition of the "ethical gaze." Illich explores the medieval connections between optics and ethics, the view that how we discipline our seeing through *ascesis* can condition how we see. We need to look with eyes of inner light (or *lumen*), rather than be passive recipients of the light of external vision (*lux*). The secularization of images occurs through the loss of inner light or "in-sight", and this has profound implications for moral conduct, leading to the "secularization of the Samaritan" and an outlook

that conditions our definition of the “neighbor” instead of allowing us to respond through a willingness to remain open and surprised by our faith, and an interiority that demolishes the constraints of our conditioning. The moral decline of modernism is marked by our loss of the openness and interiority of the ethical gaze, the vision of love, of our potential to perceive the iconic face of all creatures, and by the corresponding loss of our ability to “prolong the Incarnation” by incarnating our spirituality in personal relationships.

The Corbin trilogy deserves a wide readership. Cheetham presents Corbin’s ideas accessibly, in a manner that will not deter the general reader who is interested in them. These ideas are important not only because Corbin is a seminal thinker whose influence has extended beyond the fields of his specialization, but also because of the profound implications of his ideas to the issues that confront us in the modern world. Cheetham interprets these ideas for his readers in a personally engaged and critical manner, drawing on related ideas from a wide variety of other thinkers, and demonstrating the connections between Corbin’s ideas and theirs in a way that will no doubt inspire the reader to explore their ideas and to seek a deeper meaning in their personal quests for Truth as Presence in their own lives.

This essay was first published in Volume 23 (2009) of the journal, *Sacred Web* (www.sacredweb.com), and is reproduced here with the kind permission of Sacred Web Publishing.

The Matheson Trust