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Series

## Active Imagination in Historical Perspective

**Dan Merkur.** *Gnosis: An Esoteric Tradition of Mystical Visions and Unions.* Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1993.

**Henry Corbin.** *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam.* West Chester, PA, Swedenborg Foundation, 1995.

**William C. Chittick.** *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity.* Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1994.

Reviewed by David T. Hartman

All three of these authors draw upon religious traditions to understand visionary or imaginal experiences, but there appears to be a basic difference in approach between Merkur on the one hand and Corbin and Chittick on the other. This difference may be spoken of in three related ways: realism versus nominalism, a plurality of worlds, and the traditional triad of spirit, soul, and body versus the modern duality of matter and spirit (the latter usually conceived now as mind).

Neither Corbin nor Chittick appear to question the main presupposition behind esoteric Islam, that is, that "what can be known for certain. . . can only be the reality of God" (Chittick, p. 161), or "the Real . . . the only reality that is real in every respect." (p. 16) Beginning with God as the Real evokes the old debate between medieval realism and nominalism, between the universal and the particular. (Paul Tillich. *A History of Christian Thought.* New York, Simon and Schuster, 1968, p. 142) For the mystical realist, what is most real is the "Essence of God," and not as with nominalism the particular entities of the physical world.

Along with Essence, they also accept—as Merkur does not—Essence’s corollary, “the plurality of universes in ascensional order” (Corbin, p. 19), which constitutes the Real in all its manifestations. Corbin argues that this plurality of universes (celestial, spiritual, imaginal, and physical) is necessary for there to be a balance to imagination. This corollary, and particularly the presupposition of realism behind it, is not called into question by either Corbin or Chittick.

Merkur, on the other hand, seems to take the particulars, the common-sense realm encountered through sense perception, as more real than the realm of the imaginal and the spiritual. Here we arrive at the third difference between him and his distinguished *confrères*. Merkur’s modern stance (the duality of spirit and matter) appears to resent having forced upon it by the visionary materials being discussed the older traditional triad of spirit, soul, and matter.

Merkur appears uncomfortable with this triad because he only partially accepts a modification of the modern human duality of matter and spirit. While he accepts the visionary realm as the imaginal and recognizes the soul, he does not bestow the imaginal with the subtle materiality which Corbin does. What reality Merkur willingly acknowledges for the imaginal realm, he derives from unitive experiences. These are encounters with the spiritual as the numinous, which may represent divine interventions: Merkur reduces them to encounters with the conscience, thus removing them from the supernatural. For him, the particulars of this world are most real; the divine may also be real, though not often encountered; and the imaginal takes its reality from its unitive experiences with the conscience.

Corbin, by contrast, explicitly warns against this reductive trend, and though he might follow Swedenborg’s position that among traditional peoples “the spiritual man has conscience” (Corbin, p. 73) and no longer direct perception of the divine, in a footnote to the second essay in his book, he cautions against the consequences of the nineteenth century’s reduction of the spirit to thought. For Corbin, the result of continuing this line of thinking is the inevitable loss of the spirit altogether.

#### **MERKUR’S VIEWS**

Merkur, in *Gnosis*, proposes to present an exploratory and provisional, yet systematic, history of the major trends of Western “active imagination.” He notes that C. G. Jung developed this

procedure in 1913 and that Henry Corbin spoke of an Islamic form of active Imagination. Beyond this historical focus, he offers a systematic phenomenology of visionary experiences. Thus his book will be quite important to students of psychology as well as mysticism.

In arguing that visionary experience and other religious phenomena associated with mystical experience needs to be acknowledged, Merkur maintains that students of mysticism need to be as conversant with psychology as with their own field. Earlier he declares that his own psychological orientation is Freudian and not Jungian. This orientation leads Merkur to reconceptualize active imagination throughout its history as reverie, that is, a form of visionary experience where reality testing remains in force. He insists that this form of active imagination must be distinguished from visionary states which occur in the absence of a reality testing, which instead recognizes that what is being experienced is, in fact, a vision. With this definition, Merkur is able to pull together a wealth of visionary material ranging from the Gnostic movement of around the first century C.E. to the spiritual alchemy of the nineteenth century C.E.

But this is only one of his many distinctions. For instance, Merkur distinguishes three forms of what he calls unitive experience, against the background of what he terms "ecstasy." Following not Eliade, but Ernst Arbman (*Ecstasy or Religious Trance: In the Experience of the Ecstatics and from the Scientific Point of View, Volume I*. Stockholm: Svenska Bokforlaget, 1963), Merkur defines as ecstasy any experience of an alternate state in which contents present with enough sense of the numinous that they can be interpreted religiously. Merkur finds that these numinous alternative states occur less often in deep trance and more in reverie. By his definition most of the visionary materials, which have emerged out of religious traditions, would be ecstatic in origin.

Relating what he calls ecstatic experiences to Ronald E. Shor's three factors of hypnosis (trance, role-taking, and archaic involvement), Merkur adds a helpful fourth category that distinguishes "two types of ecstatic content" (Merkur, p. 14), narrative and unitive. That the ecstatic experience of the numinous may be "narrative" means that some visions have a story line. This narrative line may be brief or extensive, may be derived from previously held beliefs or post-event interpretations. On the other hand, numinous content may also be ex-

perienced as "unitive." Merkur maintains that the unitive form of thinking is a basic human tendency. Unitive ideas are structural, ordering presuppositions which "are inherent in the structure of the ecstatic apperceptions" (p. 15), not added to it.

Merkur points to three types of unitive experiences (introspective, extrovertive, and communion). He excludes a possible fourth one (nothingness). Introspective union is for Merkur an impersonal form of mysticism. This experience is a serene and blissful sense of the self, or the Self as God. In introspective unions there may be a sense of identity between self and other, and subject-object distinctions may be lost, though not necessarily. Extrovertive unions maintain a perceptible sense of the physical world during the experience. Communion experiences are a dyadic, or dialogic, union with a Thou, and thus personal mysticism.

Merkur rejects however the experience of nothingness as a category and also rejects the validity of experiences of nothingness. For him, the idea of nothingness "misrepresents the nature of consciousness" (p. 23) and "is a selfcontradictory idea. . . . [which] cannot exist; but it can seem subjectively to be experienced in trance when the trance state reifies the idea." (p. 25) In somewhat Lacanian terms (Steven M. Joseph, "Fetish, Sign and Symbol through the Looking-glass: A Jungian Critique of Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits*," *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, Vol. 7, no. 2, 1987, pp. 1-21), he explains this "experience of nothingness as an *awareness of absence*—specifically, the superego's awareness of the ego's absence." (p. 25) Merkur maintains that the "experience of nothingness occurs when meditation stops just short of unconsciousness." (p. 26) Nothingness, for him, is the superego's, or the conscience's, awareness of the ego's absence.

In speaking of visions, Merkur appears to have an implicit spectrum of unitive experiences in mind with experiences of ecstatic death more at the extreme extrovertive end and beyond the introvertive end the experience of nothingness. Unity may precede experiences of nothingness, since nothingness occurs in deeper trance states than do unitive experiences. Therefore, "[a] tradition that . . . aims at unity may experience nothingness only by accident." (p. 27) Communion experiences may occur prior to introspective ones or they may be combined with them. Ecstatic death experiences and extrovertive unity experiences may be prior to communion. Thus, this spectrum may run from

extrovertive to communion to unitive experiences. While unity experiences are often distinguished from visionary materials, they may add complexity to these visions.

Merkur also distinguishes three forms of interpretation, the mythical, the allegorical, and the imaginal. He suggests that the mythical approach to interpretation takes the nature of the vision at face value. Its opposite, the allegorical interpretation, uses the images of the vision to interpret them "as metaphoric presentations of abstract ideas." (p. 115) Merkur correlates the allegorical interpretation of visions also with an active reality testing, but it involves, unlike mythical interpretation, the concealment by the interpreter of a secret, non-phenomenological sub-text and the use of a combination of autosuggestion and hypnagogic states.

Between these apparently incommensurable mythical and allegorical approaches, however, lies a third one, the imaginal interpretation of visions, which straddles mythical and allegorical methods of understanding unitive experiences. For Merkur, "imaginal" refers to a vision, an active imagination. Imaginal experiences are intrapsychic; are real, in the sense of being determined by the unitive qualities of such an experience; are encountered through lucid hypnagogic states; and are highly variable. Imaginal materials themselves vary "from moment to moment and individual to individual" (p. 115), and the quality in these variations of the images of visions may be correlated with the spiritual status of the visionary. Jung's active imagination is therefore thoroughly imaginal in character for Merkur, while Silberer's method, which evoked the autosymbolic phenomena of visions, is autosuggestive and therefore allegorical in nature.

In addition to these sets of distinctions, Merkur defines a number of key terms that he thinks can aid in discrimination of visionary experiences. These terms include trance, reification, reverie, and (hypnotic) autosuggestion. Trance states involve levels of intensity, leading to decrease in the level of the will, in sense perception, reality-testing, memory, thinking, and so on. When hypnosis is present, the materials, or contents of the vision, are autosuggested and thus not autonomous. Conversely, autosuggested experiences tend to take place in trance states, though Merkur admits at least the existence of autosuggested materials in reveries. This material is then reified.

When autosuggestion is at a minimum, the decrease in normal functioning may allow autonomous manifestation of

unconscious psychic materials to surface. Then autonomous phenomena are experienced as passively received and independent of the will's control. Under such circumstances, the autonomous material presents itself in a compelling manner as a psychic reality, which leads to a strong involuntary belief in the contents which are revealed. Merkur states that such materials cannot be reality-tested and so are reified.

By "reified" Merkur means that the presentations of the mind "are assumed to represent perceptible realities" (p. 21), and that thus, with the loss of reality-testing the presentations are taken as literal, actual, concrete, and real. Reification may be avoided when a vision is taken as metaphorical or imaginal (that is, subjective or intrapsychic).

In contrast to states of trance, in states of reverie there is no reification, no taking of the visions as real, for not only are "the experiences . . . known subjectively to be intrapsychic," but also "[a]s reverie states intensify, the relative proportion of auto-suggested materials lessens, and autonomous materials increase." (p. 34) In reverie, the ego functions are not repressed (as in trance) but only relaxed. For instance, where anxiety accompanies a vision we know that the ego remains present; indeed, the ego's anxiety in the face of non-ego perceptions can intensify into ecstatic death experiences in which the ego imagines itself surrendering to an unknowable greater reality.

Beside ecstatic near death, Merkur finds extrovertive and communion experiences associated with reveries. Reveries may range in intensity from lucid daydreaming through lucid hypnagogia. They may be described as pseudo-hallucinatory. Merkur implies that reveries are present in the majority of visionary experiences he reviews.

#### ACTIVE IMAGINATION

In two locations Merkur defines active imagination in a way which is congruent with Henry Corbin's view of active Imagination. Corbin defines "active Imagination [a]s the preeminent *mirror*, the epiphanic place of the Images of the archetypal world." (Corbin, p. 12) Imagination, occurring in activated form in a state between waking and sleeping, marks the appearance of the images of the *mundus imaginis*, Corbin's "imaginal" realm.

Similarly, Merkur speaks of active imagination as "a proce-

ture for inducing visions," which entails the combining of "hypnagogic states with visualization techniques in order to induce waking imaginations . . . that [are] autonomous . . . and not consciously directed." (Merkur, p. ix) Later, he defines active imagination more precisely as referring to "occasions when imagination seizes the initiative, coming alive on its own," "the lucidity of the imaginations. . . . [is used] in order to achieve desired sorts of relations with archetypal symbols of the unconscious" (p. 43), and as "a powerful alternate state, closely resembling the hypnagogic state between waking and sleeping." (p. 44) These definitions, which are more in line with the material reviewed in his book, appear to me to be more adequate for Corbin's view of active Imagination as a lucid visionary experience than they are for Jung's view of the phenomenon, which involves much more active participation on the part of the ego, beyond its simply passively "reality-testing."

More in line with Jung's perspective, Merkur adds that active imagination "requires both the direction and the suspension of critical attention in rapid sequence" (p. 41), that "Jung urged the exercise of criticism after the affect was exhausted" (p. 42), and that active imagination initiates a "conscious interaction with the unconscious manifestations." (p. 44) Merkur argues that because "[a]ctive imagination may be considered a *lucid hypnagogic state*" and "[l]ucid hypnagogia is a form of reverie," therefore "[r]eality-testing remains uninhibited" (p. 44) in active imagination. Thus, the presence of reality testing creates a "conscious" interaction which is key both for Jung's active imagination and Merkur's definition of reverie.

When he emphasizes the return of the critical functions and conscious interaction alongside reality testing, Merkur comes very close to Jung's position on active imagination. This does not cover all the historical material he surveys, however, which is more evidence of Imagination than "active" imagination. For Jung, the key to his process is the ego's reactions in "having it out and coming to terms with" the evoked imagery. Thus, active imagination becomes "active" when a person participates with the imagery through his/her real, and not a fictitious or uninvolved, ego. For instance, when caught in an affect a person may sit with it, ask it what and who it is, and listen for its response. All of this may be done in writing. Then, maintaining one's everyday reactions, the person will respond back to what

was heard, and a dialogue ensues. The key for Jung was for the ego to be real with this imaginal material. Jung emphasized that the "real" ego involves one's everyday reactions or, in Merkur's terminology, reactions based on reality testing. It would appear that for Merkur the reality testing which is present in the state of reverie defines visionary experience as active imagination, but he does not always admit what a vigorous process the testing of reality can be.

Of more interest than how he defines the term is Merkur's argument that "Jung did not develop active imagination in a vacuum." (p. 52) Merkur suggests that Jung may have become acquainted with the evoking of imagery while studying medicine, for during this period he acquainted himself with occult writings. In addition, Jung was acquainted with the work of Herbert Silberer. Like Jung, Silberer "was also familiar with literature on the psychic techniques of occultists." (p. 54) By 1909 Silberer had developed a method of evoking hypnagogic imagery which transformed conscious ideas into autonomous imagery. Merkur implies that by 1913 Jung may have been influenced by Silberer's method in his first use of active imagination. So, occult techniques and not alchemy may be the source of Jung's active imagination. This is in line with other historical discoveries about the origins of Jung's approach to psychology. (See S. Shamdasani, F. X. Charet, etc.)

#### ALCHEMY

In the fourth chapter of his book, Merkur argues that Maria and Zosimos provide the only pre-Renaissance mystical and visionary dimension to alchemy. Merkur follows Arthur John Hopkins' and F. Sherwood Taylor's positions that for the most part alchemy was a practical production of bronzes and alloys, and Taylor's reconstruction of the alchemical process with modifications from the work of Fulcanelli. Merkur finds that the alchemical literature which is not oriented to these physical processes is for the most part formally religious in nature and not mystical. Jung's favorite early alchemists, Zosimos and Maria, stand out as exceptions.

According to Merkur, mainstream Western alchemy did not turn to mysticism until the late Middle Ages. During the Renaissance it was Ficino and Paracelsus who brought the mystical dimension into alchemy, creating the tradition that Jung mostly



draws upon. In chapter three Merkur suggests the dependence of Jung not on Renaissance masters, but on nineteenth century spiritual alchemy, particularly the work of Mary Anne Atwood. Merkur maintains that this spiritual alchemy had a direct connection with Gnosticism, which led Jung, falsely, to attribute active imagination to alchemy and alchemy to an underground tradition that began with Gnosticism. Yet, he feels Jung was correct in suggesting that some alchemists did have visions and that they did have an indirect connection with Gnosticism.

#### **VISIONARY MATERIALS**

The second half of Merkur's book supports his view that Jung found precursors of active imagination in alchemy only because this tradition was modified by Gnosticism. For Merkur, the true precursor of active imagination is Gnosticism.

Merkur believes, however, that the visions of the Gnostics were sometimes like Jung's active imagination and sometimes like the guided imagery used in other forms of therapy. Regrettably, the author is not clear on his criteria. Possibly the issue is how the Gnostic initiated the vision (in an active versus a passive manner), or it may be the spontaneous character of the imagery of the vision, or it may lie in the internal dialogues of the Gnostics with visionary figures. Merkur does not indicate how he chooses to compare this visionary material with Jung's active imagination.

After the Gnostics, Merkur traces visionary experience through Merkabah mysticism's visionary journeys and the experiences of esoteric Islam. Interestingly, although the author does not say so, esoteric Islam came to speak of the "Eighth" Climate much as Gnosticism spoke of the "Ogdoad," or eighth heaven, that is, as the location of the resurrection body and access to one's angelic double. Merkur also reviews the visions of Muhammad and his relation to Merkabah mysticism.

In the closing chapter of his book (chapter 10), Merkur proposes that from esoteric Islam gnosis entered the Latin West through such colorful and seminal figures as the troubadours, Ramon Lull, Nicholas of Cusa, and Marsilio Ficino. Then another charismatic individual, Paracelsus, synthesized gnosticism (Merkur uses the lower case when he speaks of the esoteric Western practice of visioning generically) with alchemy, creating the spiritual alchemy which Merkur presented back in chapter

three. The last chapter ends rather abruptly, forcing the reader to return to the third chapter to pick up the story.

#### CRITIQUE

The abrupt ending to Merkur's book is the first of several problems. I am not convinced by Merkur's arguments that trance states cannot be lucid and that reverie, or lucid daydreaming, is not a form of trance. Ernest L. Rossi has demonstrated that trance may be a normal, everyday occurrence ("Altered States of Consciousness in Everyday Life: The Ultradian Rhythms," in B. B. Wolman and M. Ullman, eds., *Handbook of States of Consciousness*. New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986, pp. 97-132), and though that appears to include reveries, I am not sure the general term "trance" can bear the weight Merkur appears to give it. Perhaps he is wanting to distinguish between two forms of trance, reverie and hypnotic.

Merkur uses the term *reality-testing* in a way that equates it with reality-orientation. I would suggest that these are not the same thing, even though reality testing is dependent upon reality orientation. For instance, experiences of lucidity, as in the dreaming state, allow the dreaming ego to function with some continuity with everyday reality in a situation where his/her reality orientation has faded and been replaced by autonomous psychic manifestations. The lucid dreamer appears to rely on memory and habits established by previous experience with reality orientation to function in an "awake" manner. Ronald Shore (whom Merkur quotes with regard to trance states) doubts that in the deepest trance reality-orientation is ever completely lost.

Therefore in spite of Merkur's claim to the opposite, in trance there may never be the complete loss of the ability "to decide whether a mental presentation represents a perceptible phenomenon or is intrapsychic alone." (Merkur, p. 21) Also contrary to an earlier statement, it may not be automatic that there is no reality-testing with the presentation of autonomous materials in trance states, and that this is the reason that such material is reified.

Like Jung, I wonder if the issue of reification—the difficulty granting the reality of the psyche that leads Merkur to such convolutions of explanation—pertains mainly to Cartesian thinking and the form of science based upon it. Cartesian thinking divides reality into subject and objective, thus creating an objective stance over against the thing in itself. This is a powerful

idea, that the observer can be objective and separate from the observed and that there is an outer reality not only distinguishable but divided from the observer's ideas and images. Such an objective stance takes the position that ideas and images can be not only distinguished but also separated from perceptions. From this perspective, to confuse an idea or an image with a percept is the act of reification, and requires an altered, even a impaired consciousness.

I would prefer to call into question a position which fails to recognize the role of imagination (and ideation) in perception and in turn claims that the attribution of reality to the subjective is a (falsifying) reification. One could just as easily say that the notion that the images of the vision need reifying is based upon a reification of the Cartesian idea that subject and object are inevitably divided.

Merkur also follows the psychoanalytic position too closely to my taste when he reduces his three forms of mystical or unitive experiences to early developmental stages: intrauterine life ("introspective"), post-birth ("extrovertive"), and a stage where there is conscience ("communion"). Even though he admits that this regressive perspective is not a literal return to the stages of infancy, this is just the sort of developmental fantasy that has been called into question by the transpersonal psychologist Ken Wilber. (See for instance "The Pre/Trans Fallacy," *ReVision*, Vol. 3, no. 2, 1980, pp. 51-72.)

To his credit, even though Merkur takes the position that what is encountered in introspective unitive experience is the person's own self or conscience, he is open to the possibility that "some unitive experiences, rightly understood . . . correspond to the actual order of existence. It is only the collapse of this correspondence into an identity" (p. 20) which is unacceptable to him. He does not preclude the possibility of divine intervention, even though he questions if the Divine is what the mystic truly encounters.

On the presence of inner communication between the ego and the Self in the visionary states involving unitive experience the reader may wish to consult the writings of Roland Fischer. According to Fischer ("A Cartography of the Ecstatic and Meditative States," *Science*, Vol. 174, no. 4012, Nov. 26, 1971, pp. 897-904), visionary states may occur around either side on a circular continua of both higher and lower levels of arousal. Also, Fischer presumes that knowledge is a given and claims that

memory is state-bound to many "phantom" (imaginal) worlds created in dematerialized inner space.

My most severe reservations center around Merkur's Freudianism. In his critique of Jung's taking the dream and its images for what they appear to be and of not looking for the latent (the assumed sub-text) behind the manifest (as did Freud), Merkur claims Jung's position is like the merkabah mystics' refusal to take their visions as "fictions of their own improvisation." (p. 163) I find Merkur's reduction of Jung's phenomenological method to "fiction" hard to follow. I believe Jung's position is consistent with a visionary and imaginal approach as described by Merkur himself elsewhere in relation to Jung; that is, Jung takes the dream and its images phenomenologically, as visionary and imaginal, bracketing off considerations of their physical reality, and not literally, as Merkur seems to imply by the use of the word *fiction*.

Several criticisms arise in relation to Merkur's comments about Jung and active imagination. For instance, Merkur suggests that Jung did not teach active imagination to any patient until "the late 1920s." (p. 37) But, Tina Keller ("Beginnings of Active Imagination: Analysis with C. G. Jung and Toni Wolff, 1915-1928," *Spring*, 1982, pp. 279-294) claimed to have learned active imagination from Jung between 1915 and 1916.

Merkur further proposes that Jung may have learned the initial steps of active imagination (its visionary aspects) from either Silberer or from readings in the occult tradition. (See for instance Sonu Shamdasani's "Automatic Writing and the Discovery of the Unconscious," *Spring* 54, 1993, pp. 100-131.) I would suggest he may have learned it from reading Goethe, who, if Geoffrey Ahern (*Sun at Midnight*. Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, England, Aquarian Press, 1984, p. 135) is correct, was already influenced by the gnostic and esoteric traditions of the West. The poet W. B. Yeats (*Mythologies*. New York, Collier, 1959, p. 344) claims to have learned from one of Goethe's letters how to evoke images through entering a light trance. Jung may have also.

Even more likely is the possibility that Jung was simply turning to a youthful practice. In one of his lectures Jung recalls his discovery, as a child, of how to animate an image. He spoke of the time, as a boy, when staring at a picture of his grandfather that the image of him moved. ("The Tavistock Lectures," *The Symbolic Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976,

pp. 171–172) This spontaneous experience was most likely the origin of Jung's practice of active imagination, though he may also have been influenced by other writers.

In chapter eight Merkur takes a portion of the holy Quran, a monologue, and renders it as a dialogue between Muhammad's ego and what Merkur calls Muhammad's conscience. While Merkur does not say so, I would identify this dialogue as being very close to an example of Jung's active imagination. What keeps it from being an identification with this later method is the apparent lack of lucidity on Muhammad's part, which Merkur does note. Thus, this mystical communion failed to be of the nature of active imagination, because Muhammad failed to distinguish between his voice and the voice of heaven. He confused the two voices and attributed both to revelation.

I do not agree with Merkur that the example he presents from Suhrawardi has to do with a trance attained through the "training in self-hypnosis." (p. 225) It appears to me to be more a training in becoming lucid through one's inner senses.

On the positive side, Merkur uncovers an important point: visionary materials are variable appearances. The issue of variability "arose from the very nature of the Gnostics' visionary experiences." (p. 134) This aspect of the visionary experience rings true, for the one invariant of imagination is its variability. (Edward S. Casey. "Imagination and Phenomenological Method," in Frederick A. Elliston and Peter McCormick, eds., *Husserl: Expositions and Appraisals*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1977, pp. 70–82)

Given the resources available, I believe Merkur has very adequately accomplished what he set out to do, that is, to trace the roots of active imagination (or at least of active Imagination) from Gnosticism through early Islam and medieval Judaism and then into the Latin West, where it made its way into spiritual alchemy and into Jung's thinking. Merkur's is thus a long overdue history of the visionary tradition, and for this we can only be grateful. Finally, we may look forward to Merkur's discussion of that gnostic episode known as kabbalah which he hopes to present in the future.

#### CORBIN

In *Gnosis* Merkur notes that Corbin draws parallels between Western thinkers, such as Swedenborg, and the esoteric hermeneutics of Islamic theosophers. Corbin makes these con-

nections, for the most part in the second of the two essays which have been brought together in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*. (Despite the claim on the back of the cover, the first essay [“*Mundus Imaginalis*, or The Imaginary and the Imaginal”] is being published for the second time. It was originally published in English in *Spring*, 1972, where it was translated by Ruth Horine. This new translation is by Leonard Fox, and includes three portions which the 1972 publication excluded. These three excluded portions can be found on pages 4, 8, and 20–30.)

Though made available to Jungian readers for the second time, this particular essay is still important. Readers of Hillman’s work will know how central it is to his own notion of Revisioning. In this essay are to be found Corbin’s views on a cognitive, or active, Imagination of Suhrawardi and those that followed him. This form of imagination is a mirror, or place of epiphany (appearance). It is the establisher of an analogical knowledge and of the imaginal world, which lies between the physical and pure Intelligence. This imaginal world, a world of imaginal bodies, is both objective and real (a position to which Merkur objects).

The second essay, titled “Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics,” is published in English for the first time. In it Corbin carries out a comparison of hermeneutical practices and reveals parallels between Swedenborg’s understanding of the devolving of human knowledge and the Isma’ili view.

For Swedenborg, celestial humanity had “a direct spiritual apprehension” (p. 57) of “everything that is the object of sensory perception, but simultaneously and immediately they perceived things of another order, ‘represented,’ symbolized, by [these] sensory things.” (p. 55) Celestial humanity possessed this “mode of spontaneous perception of the suprasensory in the sensory” (p. 56) through a distinct physiology involving an internal respiration, which moves “from the navel toward the interior region of the breast.” (p. 137) For this earliest humanity, the world was diaphanous and living (rather as Gaia is conceived to be today by radical ecologists).

Celestial humanity devolved into spiritual humanity, who lost the internal respiration and knew only “by means of correspondences and representations that are the external forms of heavenly things.” (p. 64) Spiritual humanity, having lost original perception, was left only with a conscience.

In its turn spiritual humanity has devolved into a material humanity. The material person of this dead humanity "does not recognize anything as true and good except that which belongs to the material body and to this world." (p. 71) Material humanity has lost the conscience and lives out of an illusory self in a dead and inanimate world. (This devolving view of humanity is in stark contrast to the scientific myth of Progress and echoes Romans 1:18–32, but with a less moralistic tone than Paul's. Paul spoke of an original vision in which God's "invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, [was] . . . clearly perceived in the things that . . . [were] made" [Romans 1:20, in *The Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 1360]. As its mind darkened and became senseless, humanity lost this original vision.)

Turning to the Isma'ili Corbin notes that the soul and the body, the esoteric and the exoteric, coexist. Each needs the other. When they do not coexist, then the esoteric "degenerates into a purely abstract knowledge" and "the exoteric, deprived of its theophanic function, degenerates into a covering, a hollow cortex." (p. 107) Much as with Swedenborg's material humanity, the sensory becomes dead and the sense of the symbolic is lost. Corbin says that the esoteric is a function of man's inner feminine.

Corbin's first essay on the *mundus imaginalis* reflects more the thinking of Ibn al-'Arabi, while his second essay moves beyond that thinking. In a footnote, Chittick recognizes Corbin's failure to note Ibn al-'Arabi's negative attitude toward hermeneutics. What Corbin is presenting is the Isma'ili view of hermeneutics and not Ibn al-'Arabi's.

Fox's translation of these two essays is fluid and this book is helpful in evaluating the influence of Swedenborg on Corbin.

#### CHITTICK

*Imaginal Worlds* presents Ibn al-'Arabi's response to religious diversity. Born of Arab parentage in southeastern Spain in 1165 C.E., al-'Arabi, after much traveling in the Middle East, settled and eventually died in Damascus (Syria) in 1240 C.E. Long before his death al-'Arabi was considered the greatest of the masters of the esoteric visionary tradition of Islam. While an Islamic master of the esoteric, al-'Arabi experienced the religious diversity of his times, for he had lived among Jews and Christians.

Neither an inclusivist nor an exclusivist, he was a pluralist: so suggests William Chittick in this gathering of essays, which “were originally written between 1984 and 1992.” (Chittick, p. 12)

The foundation of al-‘Arabi’s pluralist view is that all things reveal and conceal (that is, manifest and veil) the Real, or God as manifest through the things of this world. Put more simply, one’s beliefs shape one’s reality, while at the same time they are one’s knowledge of God. With regard to organized religions, al-‘Arabi’s view was that “[e]ach revealed religion establishes a unique imaginal world” (p. 175) which both manifests and veils the Real. So, religions, beliefs, and the things of the world are a plurality of distinct manifestations of the Real.

A good portion of Chittick’s book is on the visionary. Portions of chapters one, four, and ten and all of chapters five and six are dedicated to the issue of readmitting imagination as an activity which “can [help us] acquire real and significant knowledge” (p. 11), defined as knowledge of God, and not just information about the world.

As does Merkur, Chittick notes Ibn al-‘Arabi’s belief that “imagination is by definition sensory” (Chittick, p. 103), while at the same time the cosmos itself, which gives rise to sense perception, is imagination. Merkur says that “[f]or Ibn al-‘Arabi. . . [i]maginables were a type of sensible” (Merkur, p. 226) and that for Suhrawardi, one of al-‘Arabi’s predecessors, “[s]ight perception was . . . a mere variant of visionary experience” (p. 222). The recognition means that there are distinguishable levels of imagination, based on the uncertain join between the nature of reality and the nature of perception. The cosmos is discontinuous imagination, while as a human activity imagination is contiguous with other forms of perception. Chittick speaks of the soul, therefore, as our ordinary awareness. The soul “is woven of imagination” (Chittick, p. 71), but is given rise to by the spirit, which comes from God.

A key activity of the soul, for Corbin (*Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1969) is the active Imagination, or the “organ of theophanic perception” (p. 80) through which a concrete person may be transfigured into a spiritual presence or a spirit may become concertized as an apparitional form. For instance, Ibn al-‘Arabi had several encounters with the spiritual being known as Khidr, the guide of Moses who is often identified with Elijah.



Appearing once as a stranger in the street, Khidr spoke to al-'Arabi. Later as an apparition, Khidr came across the surface of the waters to the boat which al-'Arabi was on. Khidr talked with him and then moved off to a mountain in the distance. These were instances of theophanic perception mediated through the active Imagination.

Chittick presents several criteria for such visionary experience. First, there is the state of the subject, who can have two types of waking visions and two types of nonwaking visions. The type of waking vision present is determined by which "eye" of the soul is used, perception or imagination. Similarly, he distinguishes between dreaming and spiritual nonwaking visions. But again, the cosmos determines some of what is "imagined": "[t]he realities that undergo imaginalization are . . . God, angels or luminous spirits, jinn or fiery spirits, and human beings." (p. 89) Next, these realities must take on some sensory (and/or imaginal) form. Lastly, the location of manifestation may be determined by the eye used, that is, "the imaginal being perceived by the eye of sense perception would be located 'out there' in the world of discontinuous imagination, while the being perceived by the eye of imagination would be 'in here' in the world of contiguous imagination." (p. 89) Chittick does not mention the "location" of a vision occurring in a spiritual state, but presumably it would be "the place of no place," of which Corbin speaks.

Parallel to Jung's view of active imagination, Chittick brings out al-'Arabi's attitude toward reason and imagination. For him "reason and imagination . . . [are] the 'two eyes' with which God can be perceived" (p. 77), and while "rational thought tends to negate attributes from God and affirm His incomparability, 'imagination' . . . has the power to grasp God's similarity" (p. 24) to the cosmos. "If imagination's proper function is to recognize the Real within the images of Its self-disclosure, reason's function is to recognize that the images can never be the Real." (p. 165) Reason and imagination are to work together, though ultimately (in contrast to the tradition of the post-Enlightenment West) imagination takes precedence over reason. Only in Jung, among modern depth psychologists, does imagination (as psyche) take precedence over the critical faculties. Jung's role for the critical faculty is key, however; it is indeed critical "in having it out with" the evoked images of the psyche.

Also like Jung, Chittick notes that "people can discipline reason and imagination in order to combine the visions of incomparability and similarity." (p. 29) For Chittick "[t]hose who are able to combine reason and imagination in proper balance are those who have truly witnessed the lifting of the veils between themselves and God." (p. 123) The lifting of the veils which conceal God from the world is a form of revelation. For its part, "revelation . . . combines the two perspectives. . . . of incomparability and similarity" (p. 166), thus providing "a balanced knowledge of God." (p. 123) "[R]evelation has to do with the imaginal embodiment of meanings in language." (p. 77)

Chittick warns against attempts to imitate God, for "the goal of human endeavor must not be to acquire *divine* attributes. Rather, the immediate goal is to eliminate *human* attributes. . . . that . . . grow up from self-will and caprice." (p. 36) "Once all trace of self-affirmation has been erased, God's self-disclosure remains" (p. 59) and "God discloses Himself fully within" (p. 170) such persons. (From Corbin's perspective, they become transparent to God's light.)

But not all encounters with the world of the spirit through the imaginal are revealing of the light of the Spirit. The role of the jinn are to deceive. Chittick's mention of the marks which keep the visioner from being deceived remind me of the teachings Don Juan gave to Casteneda on the visionary appearance of different kinds of beings.

*Gnosis, Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam, and Imaginal Worlds*, take their place within a burgeoning post-Jungian literature that has contributed to a revival of imagination, the imaginal, and the visionary as topics of serious discourse. Each helps to locate Jung's form of active imagination within an historical context. But they also contribute to the present history of a difficult paradox. With regard to the particular and the universal (nominalism verses realism) Ibn al-'Arabi may still help the Western debate over what Jung called the reality of the psyche and Freud "psychic reality." Al-'Arabi takes the position of both/and. Therefore might not both the particular and the universal be affirmed at the same time? Freud worried about the future of an illusion. In his active imagination Jung attempted to affirm both his particular subjective self (ego) and the universal (the archetype of Self and the objectively Real), never denying the reality of illusion itself (*Maya*, the *anima*).