



In the Beginning was Metaphor: Henry Corbin and the Quran

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4.1 INTRODUCTION: THE PURPOSE OF *IRANIAN ISLAM*

Corbin announces in the introduction of *Iranian Islam* that he wishes to make known a barely heard distinctive spiritual and philosophic Iranian voice which he believes has an urgent message for humanity (C1: x). This voice is inflected and conditioned to a very strong degree by imagination as it is deployed in the particularly rich poetic and spiritual tradition of Iran. The Quran has a special function in the Persian tradition: it conditions and is conditioned by Persian literary culture because of its status as Word of God, divine revelation (Zadeh 2012). The Quran makes characteristic demands upon the imagination, chiefly about the apparent aporeia of its strong insistence on the utter unknowability of God in intimate noetic harmony with the incessant and paradoxical insistence on the

For Hermann Landolt on his ninetieth birthday

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importance of the description of God. The metaphoric stress and creative tension involved here produces a particular type of imagination, ultimately sacramental and salvific. This distinctive Quranic phenomenon is nowhere better expressed than in *Surat al-Hadid*, the Sura of Iron:

He is the First and the Last and the Manifest and the Hidden. And He knows all created things. (Q57:3)¹

Such is a prominent characteristic of the voice which Corbin wanted to make heard in our time because he knew that there was essential life in this voice for any future of humanity.

“Imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos” (Stevens 1951: 153). Imagination is also the source of a statement such as “one cannot step into the same river twice.” And imagination is what leads us to observe that our river flows in two directions at once: (1) the riverine, natural “external” flow from its geological and aquatic source to its mouth and (2) the imagined flow that leads us to look back upstream toward the source, perhaps with “eyes of fire” (Corbin 1980c) and ponder. The imaginative vision depends upon the natural river. Corbin might add that even if we do not fully understand it, the nature of understanding being somewhat open-ended, “apophatic,” the natural river also depends upon the imaginative act: “a symbol is never ‘explained’ once and for all, but must be deciphered over and over again, just as a musical score is never deciphered once and for all, but calls for ever new execution” (Corbin 1981a: 14).

Corbin was a philosopher of the imagination who saw the imaginative faculty as means of salvation and as refuge, especially for the individual, from what he saw as a plague of materialism and secularism in the twentieth century. Here we would like to explore some of the tools and devices he used in order to mine his sources for their imaginal lode. Imagination as metaphor is at work in his understanding of the symbol, involving as it does an imaginative journey to the World of Images (*‘alam al-mithal*, *mundus imaginalis*) through the visionary recital (*hikaya*). It is also at work in his distinctive use of such technical devices as amphiboly (*iltibas*), isomorphism, docetism, and music. Despite the repeated use of such technical, even scientific, terminology, Corbin is adamant that his “vision of the vision” or spiritual vocation, does not involve anything that could

¹Quran translations are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1983), sometimes adapted.

be called a technique: “[H]ermeneutics is not a technique ... it is the very act of *Understanding*” (C2: 193; see also C2: 202; but cf. C2: 368–369). Finally, it is metaphor, or more accurately, metaphoricity (Ricoeur 2003: 168, 228, 289, 336, 338, 339, 341–346; Bal 2008, 2006: 27–28; Margaroni and Yiannopoulou 2006; Szawerna 2017), that permits and suffuses his elaboration of metahistory and the imaginal realm. He poses the Kantian question: “What are the conditions of the act of comprehension, that is to say the hermeneutic? In which space does it deploy itself? In which time does it accomplish itself?” (C1: 152) The answer here is, precisely, the time and place—the conditions and energies—of metaphor.

In what follows we will treat in turn and in connection with metaphor, the topics of the imaginal realm, covenant and *hikaya*, esoteric hermeneutics (*ta’wil*), apophysis, amphiboly, isomorphism, docetism, and music. These aspects are both distinct from pure science and simultaneously and also equally essential in the pursuit of truth. Indeed, Corbin’s admiration for Suhrawardi (d. 1191) was certainly much enhanced by the twelfth-century philosopher’s assertion in his major work, *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, that the ideal ruler must possess mastery of both “divine” and “rational” knowledge. Moreover, Suhrawardi argues that if a choice must be made, it is preferable for a leader to know only divine truth rather than solely rational knowledge (C2: 69–70; Landolt 1987: 482). In closing, we discuss the figure of Joseph as an embodiment or personification of metaphor in numerous dimensions in an attempt to expose the centrality of the metaphoricity of the Word-as-Quran and Quran-as-Word in Corbin’s work.

4.2 THE DAY OF THE COVENANT, THE MUNDUS IMAGINALIS AND METAHISTORY

The dominant *fact* of *metahistory* for Islamic consciousness is that to which the Quranic verse 7:172² refers. It is the question posed by God to all the “Spirits” of humans pre-existing before their terrestrial bodily existence: *A-lasto birabbikom*: “Am I not your Lord?”—a question which was answered with a unanimous “Yes.” (C1: 45)

²The Quran text Corbin relies on in *Iranian Islam* is identified by him as “the most widespread in Iran.” Corbin’s Quran verse numberings are based on the Fleugel edition which differs from Qurans now in use (C4: 537) based on the Royal Egyptian edition of 1928 in which this verse is numbered 7:172. All of Corbin’s references to this verse in *Iranian Islam* are to Q7:171. In this chapter his numbering has been changed for clarity. English translations of the Quran in these citations are based on Corbin’s French translations of the Arabic. Other English Quran citations are based on the translation by Abdallah Yusuf Ali.

It is obvious that the prophet Muhammad saw the Quranic message, his summons or invitation (*da'wa*, cf. kerygma), as a renewal of the ancient divine covenant between God and humanity as described, for example in the story of Noah (Genesis 9: 1–17). The most dramatic, narratologically, and theologically generative Quranic verse on the covenant is Q7:172. The idea of covenant, frequently referred to as “pact” (*le pacte*) in Corbin’s writings, is a major theme of the Quran, though one that is not always recognized as such. The basic idea is that at a time before creation God, in the persona of “your Lord,” addressed all humanity in their form as pre-existent realities gathered in His presence, with the question: *Am I not your Lord?* (*a-lastu bi-rabbikum*). To this question, all present in this mysterious, spiritual “metahistorical” realm responded enthusiastically and with love: “*Absolutely!*” or “*Yes indeed!*” (*bala*). Q7:172 is not only important for reading the Quran, but has a defining influence on the development of Corbin’s visionary “recitals of initiation,” because the dramatic event takes place in preexistence. For Corbin, drawing on Goethe’s masterpiece *Faust*, it is a “Prologue in Heaven” (Goethe 1962: 81–91), imbued with vibrant gnostic resonances. Corbin recognized and would henceforth be forever drawn to its importance in his very first study of Suhrawardi (Corbin 1933). This article was on the seminal visionary recital entitled *Muʿnis al-ʿUshshaq* (*Intimate Friend of Ardent Lovers* or, as Corbin initially translated, *Le familier des amants*, and later as *Vade-mecum des fidèles d’amour*). The function, narratology, time, and place of Q7:172, are precisely those of the *ʿalam al-mithal*, the world of images. Corbin also refers to this realm as the imaginal realm, mystical or spiritual reality, the Orient, the 8th clime, or Hurqalya. The covenant described at Q7:172 takes place in the mind or the soul, but because it is the Word of God, its occurrence is not limited to the individual mind or soul alone. Thus the Quran has a direct, originary influence on the shape and form of those visionary recitals that were the focus of Corbin’s earliest publication in Islamic studies and continued to be central to his reflections throughout his career. Thirty years after his initial study and translation of Suhrawardi’s recital, Corbin wrote:

The religious consciousness of Islam is centered not on a historical fact, but on a fact which is *meta-historical*, not post-historical, but trans-historical. This primordial fact, anterior to our empirical history, is expressed in the divine question which the human Spirits were required to answer before they were placed in the terrestrial world: “Am I not your Lord?” (Quran

7:172). *The shout of joy which greeted this question concluded an eternal pact of fidelity* [italics added]; and from epoch to epoch, all the prophets whose succession forms the “cycle of prophecy” have come to remind men of their fidelity to this pact. From the pronouncements of the prophets comes the letter of the positive religions: the divine Law or *shari‘ah*. The question then is: are we to remain at this literal level of things? If we are, philosophers have no further part to play. Or should we try to grasp the *true meaning*, the spiritual meaning, the *haqiqah*? (Corbin 1993: 3–4)

This event is referred to in the tradition as the Day of the Covenant, *yawm al-mithaq*, or the Day of “Am I Not?,” *yawm a-last*, as in the all-important question posed here by God and quoted above in the person of “your Lord / *rabbikum*” (n.b. *your* is plural).

The Day of the Covenant would remain a central icon for Corbin from his earliest encounter with Islam. This is evidenced by the numerous other explicit references and allusions to it throughout *Iranian Islam* (C1: 35, 38, 63, 66–69, 87, 91–105, 115, 125, 126, 132, 207, 230, 247, 253; C2: 265, 268, 322, 309, 332–333; C3: 28, 52, 93, 101, 117, 120, 176; C4: 144, 147–148, 205, 215–216, 223–224, 237, 239; see also Corbin 1981a: 115–116, 280, 386–387; 1980a: 61, 81, 114, 176, 186, 190, 204, 229). Thus, we see that his initial understanding of the significance of Q7:172 only grew more profound over time. The *Fatiha*, meaning “The Overture” or “The Opener,” is the renowned and constantly recited first sura of the Quran, outlining the true path (*sirat al-mustaqim*). It serves as the “beginning” or “opening” of the Quran as the *Mushaf*. This may be thought of as the “demotic” Quran, the widely available printed book. It is distinct from the *Tanzil*, the chronologically revealed revelations as “sent down” whose order, significantly, the *Mushaf* reverses (Lawson 2017a: 1–26). Q7:172, therefore, serves as the opening or *Fatiha* for a third book: the invisible, secret, and mystical—yet no less real—book. This is the book that is the object of anagogic interpretation, *ta’wil*, the book which *is* visionary recital or *hikaya*. We will see this idea repeated below in the discussion of Q41:53.

The Day of the Covenant as delineated in the Quran has emerged as a pivotal area of study that illuminates a crucial aspect of Islamic thought, spirituality, and religion (Böwering 1980, 2001; Lawson 2003b, 2014, 2017a: xiv–xv, xx–xxi, 7, 28, 43–47; Lawson 2024; al-Qāḍī 2006; Pourjavady 2014; Lombard 2015, 2021; Jaffer 2017). This line of inquiry highlights what Corbin deemed the most significant key to understanding

Islamic metaphysical and theological concepts. Though a comprehensive summary of this scholarship is beyond our current scope, it is clear that contemporary studies may have, in some respects, begun to align with Corbin's guiding observation about the defining role of Q7:172-3. This passage not only serves as a "Prologue in Heaven," reflecting an Islamicate "gnostic pleroma" (C1: 204), that signals an authentic conversation with the broader, somewhat nebulous tradition of Gnosticism (Corbin 1933: 385), but it also emphasizes a foundational Islamic doctrine: all humans are inherently "good," created according to the *fitra* or "original nature" by God (Q17:51), thereby sharing a spiritual unity. While Corbin remained focused predominantly on individual spiritual experience, often overlooking collective dimensions indicated by his sources, the Quranic narrative of "Return"—particularly the closing verses of the Surat al-Fajr, Q89:27–30—speaks to a collective redemption and restoration of this primordial unity:

(To the righteous soul will be said:) "O (thou) soul, in (complete) rest and satisfaction! [27]

Return to thy Lord, - well pleased (thyself), and well-pleasing unto Him! [28]

Enter thou, then, among My servants! [29]

And enter thou My Heaven!" [30]

Corbin refers to this passage more than once in *Iranian Islam* (C2: 37, 189; C3: 9, 13; C4: 24). His selective citation of verses 27 and 28, while omitting the concluding verses of the sura, seems to reflect a discomfort with and deliberate avoidance of acknowledging the collective nature of the Quranic vision of paradise (C2: 37). This omission contrasts with the collective framing of the original "prologue in heaven" at Q7:172-173, where the Lord addresses humanity in a plural sense, *rabbikum* ("thy Lord," in the plural), rather than the singular *rabbika* ("your Lord" directed to an individual). The response to this question is also very much a collective "shout of joy" (as above).³

The Quran teaches that humans possess an innate goodness and moral disposition, known as *fitra*, which is present both individually and collectively. The *fitra* was the state of all those present at the Day of the Covenant before they had become identified as members of this or that religion. If

³What has been deemed, rather superficially, a blindness to the problems of society, Corbin's horror of churches, religions, and governments, kept him from being tempted by "external history" (Corbin 1986: 338).

this original condition is forgotten or betrayed, it can be reawakened according to the Quran's powerful and pervasive theme of remembrance. The idea of remembrance is a prominent leitmotif in the Quran, construed on the Arabic trilateral root *DH-K-R* which occurs 292 times. In some ways, *dhikr* is the spiritual counterpart to the Christian idea of salvation, highlighting the absence of original sin in Islam. Instead, human beings (*al-insan*, *al-nas*) are prone to forget their true purpose, necessitating remembrance as a form of "communion." Interestingly, early literature traces the etymology of *al-nas*, "mankind," to the Arabic word for forgetfulness (*al-nasiya*, *al-nisyan*), traditionally cited by Ibn 'Abbas (d. 687), young cousin of Muhammad, rather than the more "correct" source, *al-uns*, meaning sociability or even intimacy (Böwering 1980: 253–255).

So we see a double connection between the Day of the Covenant and Corbin's *hikaya* which also "calls to mind" past events and figures. The focus of remembrance is the joy of mutual recognition between humanity and God, depicted as a peaceful and harmonious scene where every human being ever to be is addressed directly by God. The epic struggle between Ignorance and Knowledge, resonant with the gnostic tradition (Lawson 2014), is born at Q7:172, from which flows both exterior/material and interior/spiritual history (Lawson 2003b). Corbin is emphatic about the centrality of this passage for his philosophers:

This pre-existence ... is assumed by the Suhrawardian and Avicennan recitals. It is in no sense an "allegory"; but how should the soul become conscious of *its* own pre-existence to its terrestrial condition, except in symbols? And how should it speak of it without the discretion of symbols? (Corbin 1980a: 179)

Preexistence in the imaginal realm introduces an additional dimension to history, distinct from the conventional narratives rooted in astronomical time and geographic place. It represents a *meta-history*—one that, for Corbin, is primarily personal. Its energies and symbols serve to revive and form the soul, guiding the individual on a transformative journey, an exodus from the world of darkness to the world of light.

This Quranic moment, unique among Abrahamic scriptures, offers a new perspective on "monotheism," a term with which Corbin was uneasy (Corbin 1981b), expanding its implications both in normal historical terms and *a fortiori* in metahistorical terms. It posits that all humanity, having received divine messages in their own languages (Q10:47, Q16:36,

Q14:4), is chosen—on the Day of the Covenant—highlighting the purpose of human diversity as a means *to understand and recognize each other* (*lita'arafu*, Q49:13).⁴ This recognition, akin to gnosis (*irfan*), is based on the kinship revealed on that Day. All humans are equally responsible: having been directly addressed by their Lord, they are in some sense in that class of beings known as *muhaddath*, “spoken to by angels,” along with prophets and messengers. The metahistorical vision of a peaceful, joyful, and loving assembly of humanity, presented in early Quranic revelations, could conceivably have profoundly influenced its initial audiences across the Nile-to-Oxus region. Q7:172 must be read with the imagination, as Corbin and his thinkers do, leading to a deeper understanding of the subsequent verses that explain this “supernatural,” supra-rational—what Balakian (1959) might call *surreal*—preexistential scenario:

Or, lest you should say, “It was our forefathers who, before us, ascribed partners to God, and we are only the descendants who came after them. Will you destroy us because of falsehoods they invented?” (Q7:173)

The epic action that starts on the *Day of A-last* is also set to conclude on the Day of Rising (*yawm al-qiyama*), encapsulating a paradigmatic narrative in Northrop Frye’s sense of myth as a “metaphor in motion” (Happy 2011). Rather than being a mere fantasy or “untrue,” myth, as Frye argues, serves the fundamental truths or primary concerns of a culture (Frye 1991: 23–25), such as the Quranic gnostic motif of origin and return. This epic journey bears a striking resemblance to the sentiment expressed—without any intended Islamic resonance—by T. S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(Eliot 1943: 9)

⁴The rest of the verse affirms that race, language, ethnicity are all irrelevant: *the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most pious* (Q49:13).

4.3 METAPHOR AND *TA'WIL*

The word for this type of engagement with the Text is *ta'wil*, a technical hermeneutical term which means “to lead back to the origin.” This idea provides a fascinating parallel to the concept of metaphor. Both words denote a journey or movement from one place to another. The word *metaphor* itself derives from the Greek word *μεταφορά* (*Metaphor*), meaning “transfer” or “transport,” and signifies “carrying across or beyond.” Interestingly, in Modern Greek, moving vans and public buses are called *metaphors* (Stallings 2007).

This notion aligns with the classic understanding of metaphor as a process involving two components: the tenor and the vehicle. The *tenor* refers to the main subject—the unknown or imperfectly understood concept, often poetic or “unreal,” that serves as the metaphor’s destination. The *vehicle*, on the other hand, is the known or “real” term used to illuminate the *tenor* (Richards 1929). For example, in the beautiful “Light Verse” (Q24:35) the Quran says *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*. This is a metaphor in which the tenor is *God* and the vehicle is *light of the heavens and the earth*. The word *metaphor* is thus a metaphor for the process of transfer (Ricoeur 2003: 18, 339). On the one hand, it is accurate to say that a metaphor does “*transfer* the term in question from its accustomed place in our verbal classificatory scheme to some other unaccustomed place for special temporary expressive purposes” (Hills 2017: 7, italics in original). But, in the context of Corbin’s work, the situation is different, enriched. The verbal figures employed by the authors he studied—such as Ibn Sina (d. 1037), Suhrawardi (d. 1191), Ruzbehan Baqli (d. 1209), Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), Nasiruddin Tusi (d. 1274), Haydar Amuli (d. 1385), Mulla Sadra (d. 1640), and Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i (d. 1826), among others—do indeed appear and function in unexpected and sometimes unpredictable contexts.⁵ Yet, this literary feature is not Corbin’s central concern, nor is it the primary focus of these thinkers, many of whom were also poets. Instead, their presupposition is distinct: they aim to uncover origins, to return to the source, specifically the Day of the Covenant. This orientation is evident in Quranic verses such as Q89:27–30 and many others (Pourjavady 2014). For Corbin, the reliving and interpretation of this

⁵ Full transliteration of the names of these scholars and others mentioned in this chapter is found in the References.

metahistorical event—what he refers to as the *reversal of time* (*revirement du temps*)—directs the individual toward the Day of the Covenant, offering an enriched perspective on the world and humanity’s role and purpose. This transformative act of understanding is fundamentally a *ta’wil* event—both an interpretative journey and a spiritual experience.

The divisions of secular and sacred have no place in Corbin’s thought. The world, the cosmos, and all creation are, by their very nature, sacred and holy—an imaginal (not imaginary) emanation from the Real. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s words, all creation is “alive” (Ibn ‘Arabi 1948: 10). The connection between exoteric history and metahistory, or spiritual history, is facilitated by the act of interpretation (*ta’wil*) and the essential role of the imagination. Ibn ‘Arabi further illuminates this concept by emphasizing the role of prophets as translators or interpreters (*tarjuman*) of the divine for humanity (Ibn ‘Arabi 1966: I.47, 1980: 45; Ibn ‘Arabi 2021; Lawson 2022: 108–109). They translate the unseen and insensible realm (*al-ghayb*) into forms comprehensible to us. In turn, we interpret the visible realm, leading it back to its origin. To engage in interpretation, therefore, is to emulate the prophets and messengers, following their example (*sunna* or “path”). Further, the very act of interpretation is itself sacred. To study, analyze, and interpret The Word is also to digest it—a form of communion, akin to a “eucharist” or sacrament.

Esoteric *ta’wil* (C3: 110) takes its meaning from a particular Quranic presupposition or axiom. As was indicated above, the Quran teaches that the signs (*ayat*) of Truth, *al-Haqq*—the most exalted name for God, The Truth—are embedded in three distinct realms: the revealed scripture (*kitab*), the external world, and the internal world of the self. The most explicit expression of this is:

We will show them Our signs in the furthest region of the earth, and in their own souls, so it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth. (Q41:53)

In line with the Quran, Corbin emphasizes the essential instrumentality of the metaphorical process in the life of the soul. This understanding of metaphor derives from the literary and intellectual culture of the authors he studied, all of whom were deeply engaged with the Quran and firmly rooted in the belief in the idea and reality of divine revelation. This verse explains that revelation occurs simultaneously on three distinct levels: first, in “signs/verses” (*ayat* / *ay*, singular *aya*) that have

been placed in books of revelation revealed by prophets and messengers; second, through “signs” that have been placed within the natural world, or the *furthest regions of the earth* (*fi al-afaq*—literally, the horizons); and third, through signs within the inner world of individuals—their *own souls* (*fi anfusihim*).

Through *ta’wil* the reader of these divine signs/verses (*al-ayat*) is transported to and transfigured by its inner anagogical meaning and energy. The transference is through the act of imagination and reading the quantum of truth, perhaps Ruzbehan’s atom (see below), masquerading as, say, a historical event, an inner motion or feeling, a Quranic word or phrase, or even a random object. The process involves a journey, and it is here that the role of metaphor becomes indispensable. Unlike the term *symbol*, which suggests union and carries an inherent sense of stasis, *metaphor* conveys movement and transformation, entailing a dynamic and active semantic field. The *hikaya* emerges as an enriched form of Remembrance (*dhikr*, mentioned above) whereas the semiotic charge is no longer from a single word or short phrase such as “He is God”—*huwa allah*, frequently reduced to the simple “He”—*Huwa*. Rather, meaning and experience (hermeneutical and, as will be seen, musical) are now generated from a complex narrative with a rich vocabulary each element of which has its own semantic life. In a real sense, then, reading, which originally meant “to read aloud,” also means “to be made ready” (Boyarin 1992: 73–74).

4.4 APOPHASIS AND ITS ROBE

The act or event of *ta’wil* depends upon the imagination and imagination, not dialectic, is what is required in the deployment of and participation in metaphor. There are numerous types of metaphor. While the largest class of metaphor is that which counts all words in whatever language as metaphorical (McLuhan and McLuhan 1992: 12), it is not necessary to go to such lengths to identify the prominent role of metaphor in Corbin’s thought. It begins with this primordial Day of the Covenant, an image, an icon: not an allegory, not a simile. Corbin’s term for this and other stories, images, and accounts of the type one might normally refer to as “fable” or “myth” is, as mentioned, *hikaya*. Metaphor enters through a number of gates. The first and most important is precisely Corbin’s beloved apophaticism or negative theology. It centers on the utter unknowableness of Absolute Reality, *al-Haqq*, the loftiest name for what is otherwise called

God/*Allah*, another of the many words for God in the Quran. It is supported by numerous Quranic verses and aligns with the Islamic prophetic view of history. In this context, “external” history is perceived as having a definite, irreversible progression with indisputable events. Such a history, which is pressed into the service of Quranic exegesis from a very early date, says that Muhammad’s chief role as a divine messenger and prophet was the reestablishment of the oneness and unknowableness of God. Numerous Quran verses, such as sura 112, the sura of purity, are frequently referred to as warrant for this apophatic position. We see it reasserted throughout the history of Islamic thought and literature of whatever type, scholarly, artistic, historic, scientific, and even epistolary.

The utter unknowableness of God is set in dramatic relief by the powerful and frequently encountered two Quranic companion motifs: (1) the names of God and (2) the “straight path.” The numerous divine names which are strewn liberally throughout the text generate a noetic and productive tension between knowable and unknowable. This is a common feature among a wide range of scriptural “apophaticists” (Sells 1994). In such a context all names and attributes are metaphors. Some of the words for *road* and *travel* have become defining emblems of Islamic identity, for example, *sunna*, *sharia*, and *the righteous path* (*sirat al-mustaqim*, Q1:6). The numerous words for *road* or *path* in the Quran point to a theme of epic journey in the quest for truth which Corbin saw as the theme of liberation (Corbin 1983; cf. Lawson 2017a: 190–191, n. 2). These words are metaphors. The phenomenon and experience of metaphor are essential for conceiving the idea of metahistory, which, at its core, is a literary figuration of history transfigured from a state of closure and stasis into one of an enlivened dynamism. The role of Islamicate apophatic and metaphorical dynamism in generating a “new” religion has been explored in several studies of the Bahá’í Faith, offering insights that are relevant to the present discussion (Buck 1995; Lambden 1997; Lawson 2023).

The ultimately apophatic dimension of metaphor has, in recent years, become a subject of discussion amongst literary scholars, philosophers and linguists. Martin (2012: 863) contends that to understand metaphors, “one must find meanings not predetermined by lang[uage], logic, or experience.” Bal suggests a shift in perspective by reconceptualizing metaphor “within a non-representationalist, ‘performatist’ view of language,” proposing a concept of metaphor as an ongoing activity of creating meaning, rather than a static representation (2006: 163; cf. Frye 2008: 78,

passim). This approach negates traditional distinctions and emphasizes the dynamic process of “metaphoring.”

With regard to Islamicate metaphoric activity, apophaticism is not seen as a simple manifestation of “negative theology,” but as a distinct mode of discourse in which “the effort to engage ‘the real’ in language leads to a continual turning back of language on itself. The real is unknowable, yet that unknowability, rather than resulting in silence, becomes the dynamic of a new discourse” (Sells 1994: 220). This perspective aligns with broader contemporary understandings of metaphor, which often lean toward a modulated apophaticism, reflecting uncertainty about the exact categorical “reality” of metaphors (Kittay 1990, 2006; Hills 2006; Ricoeur 2003; Sells 1994; Balakian 1959). One can only smile at the way Corbin might have smiled at this development, seeing it as another instance of modernity catching up with traditional Islamicate spiritual discourse, similar to his interpretation of Heidegger, albeit with necessary adjustments (Fakhoury 2012: 349–351; Landolt 2017: 487–489, 512). Before examining the sacramental value of the sign (C3: 17), and therefore of metaphor and metaphoricity, in Corbin’s discourse on symbols, a brief discussion of allegory will help contrast its more static representational nature with the dynamic and transformative character of metaphor in the context of Corbin’s scholarship.

4.5 ALLEGORY

For Corbin, allegory is a highly problematic figure precisely because it represents a statement or concept that can be said perhaps even more clearly and more accurately in another way (C1: 153; C2: 193–194, 303). Allegory’s meaning, unlike the meaning of music or symbol, is meant to be decoded once and for all in a single act of exegesis. It functions on the same level as common perception, “denaturing” the visionary experience because it cannot deal with events that are not of the senses (C4: 72, 87). It is the trope of so-called rationalism. In addition, allegory risks being confused with symbol and therefore “spiritual meaning.” As Corbin says, “Allegory is harmless, but spiritual meaning can be revolutionary” (C2: 50, C3: 302; see also Corbin 1993: 2; 1980a: xii, 31, 32, 126, 135, 235). That is, allegory has little chance of challenging the status quo and has had a universal emasculating effect on the spiritual realities to which it has been applied (C1: 152).

For Corbin, allegory is a menace to spiritual development, whereas metaphor represents its very heart and soul.

Allegory is a more or less artificial figuration of generalities or abstractions that are perfectly cognizable or expressible in other ways. To penetrate the meaning of a symbol is in no sense equivalent to making it superfluous or abolishing it, for it always remains the sole expression of the signified thing with which it symbolizes. (Corbin 1980a: 30)

In addition, Corbin infers that allegory may be inoffensive to the institutions of religious or political power because of its susceptibility to be pressed into the service of “crowd control.”

This is why the soul requires an absolutely individual expression of this Self, one that could pass into the common stock of symbolism (or into allegory) only at the cost of its painfully won individual differentiation being repressed, leveled, and abolished by ordinary consciousness. (Corbin 1980a: 20)

4.6 METAPHOR: THE JOURNEY WITHIN THE JOURNEY WITHIN THE JOURNEY

It has become increasingly clear that metaphor is an inherent feature of the Quran’s form and message (Sister 1931; Sabbagh 1943; Heinrichs 1977, 1984, 1991; Heath 1989, 1992, 2003; Sells 1994; Toelle 1999; Lawson 2017a, 2020, 2022, 2024, 2025; Dagli 2022), whether from a purely religious perspective or from an aesthetic or philosophical perspective (Corbin 1993: 3, *passim*). It is important to note that metaphor is both process and “part of speech.” In the above example, for Corbin, the vehicle “light,” however exalted it may be as an image, is ultimately ontologically impoverished when compared to the tenor “God,” who, as The Absolutely Real (*al-Haqq*), transcends human comprehension. This is reflected in Q42:11: “*Nothing is even like his likeness*” (*laysa ka-mithlihi shay*), and in the *locus classicus* of Quranic apophaticism found in Q112:4, the Sura of Divine Oneness or Sincerity (*Ikhlās*): “*None is like Him*” (*wa lam yakun lahu kufiwa ahadun*). At the same time, the Quran insists that God’s remoteness is of a unique kind, as He is also infinitely close to the “reader.” This is illustrated in Q50:16 “*We are nearer to him than his jugular vein*” (*wa nahnu aqrabu ilayhi min habl al-warid*), and in Q57:4: “*He is with you wherever you are*” (*wa huwa ma‘akum ‘ayna ma kuntum*). For Corbin and the thinkers he engages with, these apparent paradoxes do not signify confusion but

rather reflect a profound Quranic pedagogy. This pedagogy generates an aesthetic, noetic, and ontic tension, with metaphor at its core—a dynamic process designed to safeguard the ecology of the imagination.⁶

At its essence, the metaphorical process serves as both a paradigm for the spiritual quest, moving from vehicle to tenor, and a kind of pact or covenant that holds significance by its very existence (Ricoeur 2003: 119, 159, 204–205, 222). While the term “metaphor” can refer to the transfer of words from their usual meaning, Corbin focuses on how the act of reading—a seemingly innocent or purely literary event—transforms the reader, *transporting* her to a “new place,” a new experience. For Corbin, metaphor is thus an ontological figure, one that also happens to be poetic or literary in nature (Corbin 1993: 2–3; C1: 127, 148, 153).

Bachelard’s brilliant insight that the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—serve as the “hormones of the imagination” (Bachelard 1983: vii) is worth bearing in mind when considering the dynamism of the metaphorical process. When Corbin appears to critique metaphor, it is not the metaphor as a whole but rather the *vehicle* he intends to critique. This occurs when a metaphor such as “light” for God traps the imagination, reducing God to the concept of physical light and halting further anagogical movement (C1: 127, 148). His critique does not extend to the metaphor’s “main event,” the *tenor*, nor to the metaphorical process itself.

Contemporary studies of metaphor now suggest that the classical model—which emphasizes the vehicle pointing to the tenor—also implies a kind of reciprocity. While the vehicle indicates the tenor, the tenor, in turn, conditions the vehicle. For example, light may indeed become infused with the qualities of “God” (cf. Bal 2006: 164), but not in the same way that bread might be mistaken for the literal body of Christ (Hatcher 1977: 9; Lawson 2003b: 62–67). This view of metaphor aligns with Corbin’s broader intellectual project and harmonizes with his interest in amphiboly (*iltibas*), which will be discussed further below.

The axiom, briefly stated, is this: all created things (*al-ashyaʾ*, singular *shayʾ*) are distinct from God, their Creator. As products of creation, they serve as divine “signs of God,” which may be more or less disguised but ultimately point to the divine reality from which they originate. As the oft-quoted *hadith* declares: “*In each created thing there is a sign of God*

⁶For a lucid discussion of the paradoxical and generative dynamism of apophasis, see Sells (1994: 1–12).

demonstrating that He is One” (*wa fi kulli shay’ labu ayat tadullu annahu wahid*).⁷ Note here the compelling dynamism of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the unity of multiplicity and oneness. Created things are thus signs of divine Knowledge, Love, and Being. Each created thing functions as a living metaphor, composed of a *vehicle*—its outward form—and a *tenor*—its target or destination. Within this external form lies, if you like, an atom or electron of divinity, a point that generates understanding, love, and being. As the Quran states, *God speaks to mankind through metaphors* (*wa yadrabu Allah al-amthal li’l-nas*) (Q24:35).

The highest value of the created thing (*al-shay’*) lies in its role as a sign of God, though this is not its only value (CI: 176–177). This ontology and epistemic perspective are broadly accepted in the Islamic tradition, underpinning the theories of Knowledge (*ma’rifa*, *‘irfan*, *‘ilm*), Love (*mahabba*, *‘ishq*, *walaya*) and Existence/Being/Identity (*wujud*, *‘ayniya*, *ana’iya*) among theologians, philosophers, mystics, and poets. For this real but largely anonymous sodality—which Corbin refers to as the *Ecclesia spiritualis*—the metaphorical vehicle (Arabic *majaz*), the “created thing” (Arabic *shay’*), though it appears real, is in constant transformative motion. It is ephemeral and, compared to the truly Real, a “non-existent” disguise (*iltibas*, see below). This disguise obscures the truly Real, *al-Haqiqah*, a term for which the English equivalent, “God,” is both inconvenient and unsatisfactory. Thus, Islamicate gnosis reverses our traditional understanding of metaphor: what appears metaphorical in conventional terms is, within this perspective, an essential pointer to the Real, while the so-called reality of the created thing is but a transient and illusory veil.

4.7 METAPHOR CONTINUED

This metaphorical process is closely tied to Corbin’s related concept of the symbol. It “leads out of this world” and is often marked in the literature by words derived from the frequent Quranic trilateral root *M-TH-L*. This is exemplified in Q24:35, where God is described as speaking in metaphors. The metaphorization of a created thing represents its “investiture of the archetype” which “exalts it to its maximum meaning.” Corbin acknowledges that such an exaltation can sometimes “cause it to be understood as a hypostasis” (Corbin 1980a: 30). However, there is never any

⁷Widely quoted in the Arabic tradition. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i ascribes it to the 6th Imam, Ja’far al-Sadiq (d. 765; Ahsa’i 1999: 277); see Lawson (2019: 134).

suggestion of divine incarnation (*bulul*). Instead, the concept of “place of manifestation (*mazhar*),” often shortened to “manifestation,” is a more accurate representation of this process.

The symbol is not an artificially constructed sign; it flowers in the soul spontaneously to announce something that cannot be expressed otherwise; it is the unique expression of the thing symbolized as of a reality that thus becomes transparent to the soul, but which in itself transcends all expression. (Corbin 1980a: 30)

The Quranic metaphorical process, or the “metaphoricity” of its statements, exerts a reverse gravitational pull that elevates the soul, mind, consciousness—an anagogical movement toward a destination traversing “a plurality of worlds that all symbolize with each other” (Corbin 1993: 2). This process relies entirely on the individual imagination while simultaneously enriching it, serving as a tonic against the dangers of political cant and manipulation. Corbin, relying on Suhrawardi, emphasizes that the spiritual or metaphysical duty of the individual is to read the *ipsissima verba* of the Quran—“that which has been sent down” (*al-tanzil*)—according to the individual’s quite unique lights and capacities, as if it were revealed specifically to and for that individual (C2: 182, 212, 367). This personalization transforms the Quranic heroic sacred epic (Bausani 1970: 69; Lawson 2014, 2017a) into a personal mystic epic (Corbin 1983; C2: 367), a key component in Corbin’s hermeneutic, as Hadi Fakhoury has so lucidly discussed (Fakhoury 2012: 367). This transformative moment is when one actually *becomes* philosophy (C2: 202) by *embodying* the epic at an existential and spiritual level (C2: 103). In this context, Northrop Frye’s reflections in *Words with Power* offer a resonant parallel worth noting. The widely read Frye, who, as far as I am aware, never engaged with Corbin’s work,⁸ offers the following strikingly familiar observation: “The metaliterary begins with the process of perceiving some kind of ‘that’s for me’ detail in one’s reading” (Frye 2008: 108, see also 70,72,105).

This attitude echoes a Quranic approach to reading and understanding its metaphors (von Denffer 1994: 181). Yusuf Ali’s preface to his renowned

⁸“Frye only knew of Corbin as a name” (Willard in Denham et al. 1994: 2; thanks to J. Einboden for this reference, personal communication).

translation of the Quran reflects this process clearly, describing the personal journey toward understanding the Text. He writes:

I spoke of the general meaning of the verses. Every earnest and reverent student of the Quran, as he proceeds with his study, will find, with an inward joy difficult to describe, how this general meaning also enlarges as his own capacity for understanding increases [...].

How much greater is the joy and sense of wonder and miracle when the Quran opens our spiritual eyes! The meaning which we thought we had grasped expands. New worlds are opened out. As we progress, still newer, and again newer worlds “swim into our ken.” The miracle deepens and deepens, and almost completely absorbs us. And yet we know that the “face of God”—our final goal—has not yet been reached. We are in the *mulk* [dominion] of Sulaiman [Solomon] (Q2:102) which the evil ones denied, belied, and even turned into blasphemy. But we can ignore blasphemy, ridicule and contempt, for we are on the threshold of Realities, and a little perfume from the garden of the Holy One has already gladdened our nostrils. (Ali 1983: v–vi)

This description of Quranic study as a deeply personal, revelatory process would undoubtedly appeal to Corbin. For him, understanding the Text accords with the individual’s unique identity and origin, transforming it into a revelation uniquely tailored for that person. This process is steeped in metaphorical, apocalyptic, apophatic imagination, validating the truth of the reading only through living it—through “performance.” The Arabic word *hikaya*, cherished by Corbin for its connotation of enactment, aptly captures this experiential aspect (cf. Meisami and Starkey 1998: 52–54, 441, 596; Pellat et al. 2012).

Corbin’s analysis of Avicenna’s visionary recitals provides an especially vivid illustration of the role and value of metaphor. Here, the gnostic *élan* of Corbin’s thought is evident:

“To come into this world” is to pass from the world of Reality in the true sense (*ḥaqīqat*) to the world that is doubtless real for ordinary consciousness, but which in the true sense is only figure and metaphor [n.b. as “vehicle” i.e. “illusion” =] (*majāz*); this coming into the world means that realities in the true sense have become doubtful or improbable, suspect and ambiguous. “To leave this world,” to reach the true world, will mean that this Darkness and these doubts are removed from a consciousness that passes from the state of infancy (*ḥal-e tiḡūlīya*) to the age of maturity. To attain this

true consciousness of the True Real is *eo ipso* to become a stranger to the world of *metaphor* [i.e. the mere vehicle], with which ordinary consciousness remains satisfied as a true world. To leave this world is not to “die” as those have died of whom it is said that they have “departed,” for many of those who have thus departed have in fact never left the world. Their departure too is metaphorical, for it is not thus that, in the true sense, one leaves the cosmic crypt. Really to leave it, one must have become, or rather have again become, the Stranger—that is, a soul regenerated in the Spring of Life, having accomplished the passage of return from *Majāz* to *Ḥaqīqat*. (Corbin 1980a: 27)

Corbin is not rejecting the metaphorical process here. It is clear that in the context of his “prophetic philosophy” (Corbin 1985) metaphoricity, even if unnamed, is indispensable. He assigns value to the two parts of a metaphor: the *vehicle* and the *tenor*. Corbin is saying that individual existential-spiritual-mystical growth depends on the metaphorical process, which entails transforming and transcending initial understandings, such as the concept of “light,” to attain a fuller, more perfect understanding of *God* as *light* (not light as God). The metaphorical “vehicle,” the *majāz* or illusion, represents a “trap” from which the soul must escape.

Yet, paradoxically, the vehicle that must be abandoned is also the means of escape. This paradox aligns with Corbin’s notion of the *majāzi* (illusory) world, which veils the *ḥaqīqa* (True Real). This is illustrated by the widely quoted *Hadith of Truth* (*Hadith Ma al-Ḥaqīqa*, lit. “What is the Truth?”), in which the Imam Ali instructs his disciple Kumayl: “Truth is removing the veils of glory without any other focus” (*al-ḥaqīqa kashf subḥat al-jalāl min ghayr ishāra*) (Landolt and Wannell *In press*; Shah-Kazemi 2006: 170–171; Lawson 2003a: 230–247; Lambden 2003). The soul cannot escape this *majāzi* trap without the active operation of metaphor, which leads it to a reality beyond. The paradox obtains: the vehicle to be abandoned must be also traveled with in order to escape.

4.8 METAPHOR AS METAHISTORY

Corbin’s engagement with *hikaya* began with his discovery of Suhrawardi’s “tales of initiation” (Corbin 1933: 383–384). His interest in the psycho-spiritual power of these accounts deepened through his studies of Avicenna’s similar visionary tales. Corbin’s choice of the term “recital” reflects not only its performative and musical undertones (Corbin 1980b)—“The rhythm of music is the rhythm of my soul (Corbin in Jambet 1981: 16)—but also its

dual connotation: referring both to a story and an act of imitation or performance. This double usage extends even to grammatical analysis, where grammatical mistakes or linguistic anomalies are quoted “uncorrected” as an emblem of accurate reportage and verisimilitude.⁹

For Corbin, *hikaya* transcends genre. It is a mode uniquely suited to the spiritual meditations of the Muslim gnostic philosopher, particularly when contemplating the Day of the Covenant. In this context, the story’s telling, occurring within the *mundus imaginalis*, is itself the *hikaya*. Corbin elaborates:

[T]he Arabic-Persian term *hikāyat*, ... may itself be the source of inexhaustible meditations, because it has the virtue of connoting the idea of history [*histoire*] and the idea of *imitation* (the Greek *mimēsis*). All external history only symbolizes, imitates, re-quotes, an interior story, that of the soul and the universes of the Soul. This interior story is not a *chronicle* but that which makes the events [*les récurrences*] understood and delivers them to a *typological* [italics added] hermeneutic. To consider only “exoteric” historical events is to cling to a paltry chrysalis. Yet, it is to this castoff shell that many philosophies of history have attached the virtue of primary historical causality. Measured against the demands of our thinkers, such a misunderstanding is typical of the agnostic ... There could be no question, therefore, of subjecting Iranian-Islamic philosophy to some historical dialectic which was external to it. We sought to understand its inner “esoteric” story. (CI: xviii)

This is a perfect reflection of the important hermeneutic principle stated by Corbin in his book on Avicenna: “A certain minimum of attention, love, and sympathy are required for an understanding of the secret aims of a book or a soul” (Corbin 1980a: 126).

Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i provides a succinct and powerful articulation of *hikaya*. Ahsa’i explains that in the act or action of the recital, such as our Q7:172, the *hikaya* may be likened to the primary Islamic pillar, the *shahada* (testimony of faith): “there is no god but God” (*La ilaha illa Allah*). Here, there are three elements: (1) the witness (*shahid*), who contemplates; (2) the witnessed (*mashhud*), which is present to the witness; (3) the act of witnessing (*shahada*), encompassing both testimony and martyrdom. All three are one in the act of witnessing, differentiated only by

⁹The same phenomenon, in another literary context, is called “the Uncle Charles principle,” by means of which otherwise awkward or uncouth language is appreciated for its verisimilitude (Kenner 1978).

perspective. True realization of the *hikaya* demands “the leveling of the mountain of ego,” an allusion to Moses’ encounter with God in Q7:143, and correlates with the Sufi concept of *fana*’ (annihilation), where the self dissolves into divine unity. This triadic unity is echoed in Ahsa’i’s reflections on *hikaya* reported by Corbin:

Therefore it is correct to say that the (1) reciter [*ḥāḳī*], (2) the recited action [*al-maḥḳī*], and (3) the hero of the recital [*al-maḥḳī ‘anhu*] (the exemplary hero, the one “imitated”) form one single reality [*ne font plus qu’un*]. This happens in each being according to the capacity of each being. Think about this and think again! (Corbin 1983: 187; see also C2: 202–204)

This unity transforms the act of recital into an ontological event—a lived convergence of narrative, imitation, and spiritual awakening. This concept finds striking parallel in Plotinus’ clearest statement on mystical experience, where he likens it to the person so deeply absorbed in reading that they completely forget they are reading.

[S]uch a one has broken through the barrier that ordinarily stands between himself, as knowing subject, and the object of his knowledge; there is no longer consciousness of himself as subject because he is situated [!] now at the interior of the object. He is not reasoning, evaluating, judging. He is not reflecting upon himself nor is he reflecting upon his reactions; as soon as he does, the absorption is destroyed and he is once more placed at a remove from the object of his knowledge. His absorbed state is *pathema*, he is acted upon. (Plotinus and O’Brien 1975: 30)

Notice the language of “breaking through the barrier,” which resonates quite harmoniously with Corbin’s concept of *arrachement*—“tearing out [history from history]” (Corbin 1983: 218, see also 164, 171–175, 214; C2: 203). As Corbin continues, “From here we can understand that, in the triunity of the *hikaya*, while the reciter is the active agent of the recited act [*gesture*], he is also simultaneously the passive subject acted upon by this same gesture [*le patient agi par elle*]” (C2: 205; cf. Corbin 1983: 218/C3: 249).

For Corbin, *metahistory* is essential because it represents the dimension with which the individual must connect, journey to, and ultimately inhabit in order to progress along the existential path toward “being-beyond-death.” While Corbin admired Heidegger, he rejected the German philosopher’s notion of “being-towards-death” as a bleak and comparatively

hopeless framework. For Corbin, *metahistory* served as an antidote (Fakhoury 2012: 349–350; Landolt 2017).

However, Corbin's concept of *metahistory* should not be conflated with other uses of the term, such as Hayden White's influential work (White 1973), even though there may be some points of comparison. The distinction is rooted in the French word *histoire*, which retains its dual meaning of "story" and "history." Unlike in English, where "history" is often divorced from its narrative origins and presented as a positivist, factual account, *histoire* in French still conveys the intertwining of narrative and meaning. White's achievement lies in neutralizing the "scientific smugness" of historiography, showing that histories are creative narrative constructions—fiction in the sense of crafted stories, not falsehoods. While there are commonalities between White and Corbin, Corbin's emphasis moves beyond literary critique to the philosophical, existential, and ontological. His *métahistoire* refers to what transcends the historical narrative, engaging with spiritual realities behind historical phenomena but in story form.

As a correlate of the Arabic *hikaya*, Corbin's use of *métahistoire* is more verbal rather than nominal: he emphasizes storytelling as a dynamic and unfolding process, rather than a static or immutable "story." The reader/mystic becomes both *the site* where the story unfolds and its actor and subject; thus, the story remains alive and unending (Corbin 1983: 218). This calls to mind William Faulkner's profound insight: "The past is never dead, it is not even past" (Faulkner 1975 [1919]: 86). Similarly, Northrop Frye writes:

It would perhaps be difficult to prove completely the axiom that objects do not cease to exist when we have stopped looking at them. Yet it is hard to see how we could maintain a consistent sense of reality without assuming it, and everyone does so assume it in practice and would even assert it as the first article of common sense. For some reason it is more difficult to understand that events do not necessarily cease to exist when we have stopped experiencing them, and those who would assert, as an equally obvious fact, that all things do not dissolve in time any more than they do in space are very rare. (Frye 1969: 247)

Corbin's *metahistory* thus rests on the all-important dimension of "story." While it certainly acknowledges the literary and poetic features of narrative, it aims at something more: a philosophical, existential, and

ontological exploration. White's "meta" refers to the literary substrate which is "beside" the history in question and points to the literary dimension of the text. Corbin's *méta* points to that which is beyond, hovering above the "the story / vehicle." The starting point for this understanding is Q7:172 and the consciousness that it produces, the so-called coranisation of memory (Nwyia 1972: 46) in the individual believer, who, as reader, is also a traveler *in medias res* (Lawson 2017a: 3–7, 179) and who thus both carries the Quran and is carried by it. For Corbin, *metahistory* saves the phenomenon of "external, irreversible time," imbuing it with meaning through its connection to the spiritual dimension (Corbin 1980a: 23 n. 27). Contrary to some critics' misinterpretations, Corbin does not dismiss or devalue observable, recorded history.¹⁰ Rather, he regards it as the *exoteric* dimension of reality. While real and important, it is not the most real or most important—it is not the history "that counts" (C2: 203; Corbin 1981a: 239). At its simplest, a journey through *metahistory* is a journey through the spiritual dimension—a reversal of time (*revirement du temps*, C1: 177). It may be considered, pessimistically, an escape from brutal time. Certainly, Corbin's life and work happened during a period punctuated by a series of horrific and inhuman events in "irreversible time" from which a desire to escape was shared by many. However, this journey to another time also indicates that the human being indeed does have power over time and history, the power to understand and *interpret* the apparent chaos of the "nightmare of history," which is what we conventionally call "the real world."

Corbin's presupposition is that all events in time—what he calls "fallen time"—have their original and pure reality in *metahistory*, the spiritual realm or World of Images. This framework, rooted in Schelling's concept of "narrative philosophy," was influential for Corbin in his younger years and acquired further explanatory power through his discovery of Islamic thought, particularly Suhrawardi. Inspired by Scholem's adoption of Schelling's category of "narrative philosophy" in his study of Kabbalah, Corbin developed concepts like "prophetic philosophy" (Corbin 1985: 41; 1986: 11, 53; Wasserstrom 1999: 100), "prophetic historiosophy" (Corbin 1986: 103), and "prophetic hierohistory" (Corbin 1986: 107,

¹⁰ "M. Corbin était un homme intelligent." Verbal response of Stella Corbin (widow of Henry Corbin) in the late 1990s at the home of Hermann and Annette Landolt in Montreal, when asked by the author if Corbin actually thought normal history was unreal and unimportant, as many of his critics had charged (Corbin n.d.).

332). In these frameworks, the prophet is foremost a storyteller. And this is where it is important to mention again that the French word *métabistoire* combines in a way that is foreign to English, both ideas of “story” and “chronicle.” The importance of this cannot be overstated. It is also important to observe that, during the period of Corbin’s intellectual formation, religious studies often divided Biblical and other sacred texts into the dichotomy of history (truth) and myth (falsehood). Frye helped correct this baleful understanding by pointing out that myths convey the “primary” truths of a culture. And as Frye observed, “a myth is a metaphor in movement” (Happy 2024: 6).

4.9 AMPHIBOLY, *UNUS-AMBO*

The profound and radical metaphoricity involved in the act and event of the recital helps us understand that which the poets have said concerning the famous heroes of love, Majnun and Layla. Majnun cannot actually see Layla because her beauty is so extraordinarily powerful that it blinds him. The lover can only gaze upon the beloved through beloved’s own gaze as she views herself—a gaze that, in mercy and generosity, she bestows upon the lover. Similarly, God allows humanity to see Him only through the gaze with which He contemplates and reveals Himself *to us, through us* (Ibn ‘Arabi 1966: I.53).¹¹ This perspective leads to the phenomenon of identity-blurring or role-reversal, a concept of great significance, especially in the context of the discussion on Joseph below. In a profound sense, Majnun is Layla, and Layla is Majnun. Likewise, God is humanity, and humanity is God, both individually and collectively.

This idea is also one of the main revelations of Attar’s *Logic of the Birds*, in which Joseph holds a prominent role. It resonates with the teachings of Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad Shirazi, known as the Bab (d. 1850), who drew on the insights of Ahmad al-Ahsa’i and his successor, Kazim Rashti (d. 1843/4). In his earliest work, the Bab lists the four pillars that uphold true Religion (*al-din*), as taught by the Shaykhi school: affirming Divine Unity (*tawhid*), Prophethood (*nubuwwa*), Guardianship (*walaya*), and Community (*al-shi‘a*). He emphasizes their interdependence, stating:

¹¹ See also the Hadith of the Hidden Treasure and Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of the Day of the Covenant as God both asking and answering the question *Am I not your Lord* (Corbin 1981a: 126).

“These are four gates of which no single one is of any use without the other three” (Lawson 2003a: 237).

The word “amphiboly” is Corbin’s translation of the Arabic *iltibas*, which means “confusion.” It is a key technical term used by the influential Persian mystic Ruzbehan Baqli, whose distinctive thought and recorded visionary experiences have since become the subject of significant scholarship (Ballanfat 1998; Ernst 1996). In Arabic and Persian, the literal translation of the word is “obscurity, confusion, equivocalness, ambiguity, intricacy.” The word stems from the Arabic verb *labisa* (“to put on clothes”), with *libs* meaning “clothes” and *labs* denoting confusion. Corbin’s translation of *iltibas* as *amphiboly* (*l’amphibolie*) is important and interesting for a number of reasons. To anticipate our conclusion in connection with the story of Joseph—where garment is also the key element (Lawson 2024)—the term resonates with the idea of Joseph’s true status not being recognized in Egypt until he “miraculously” interpreted Pharaoh’s dream. Notably, this dream, as recounted in the Quran (Q12:44), was initially dismissed by Pharaoh’s wise men as mere oneiric chaos, *adghath ahlam* (“jumbled dreams”)—for which they could offer no interpretation.

Amphiboly is also an interesting choice because it conveys more than mere ambiguity. In its grammatical sense, amphiboly refers to the confusion arising from the structure of a sentence, often unintentional and the result of bad writing—for example, “The enemy is ready to attack.” However, Corbin’s concept of amphiboly extends far beyond this, deriving from the very structure of creation itself. Unlike ambiguity, which is based on the multiple meanings of a given word: (e.g., “My father was big”), amphiboly in this ontological sense—known here as *iltibas* or “disguise”—is intentional and intrinsic to the fabric of reality. It arises from the apophatic situation: the paradox that God can only be indicated through His creation. In this view, every instance of creation becomes an amphibole—part material (*vehicle*) and part spiritual (*tenor*). This ontological amphiboly is implicated in traditional understandings of Aristotelian hylemorphism, the relation between essence and existence. With Corbin’s thinkers, however, there is a significant departure: due to the amphibolous structure of phenomena, the classical principles of Aristotelian hylemorphism are no longer fixed. Instead, existence and essence are dynamic, capable of mutual transformation, and role reversal. Existence and essence engage in an intense “conversation” with each other, each conditioning and being conditioned by the other. The story of Majnun and Layla is a

dramatization (story, *hikaya*) of this philosophical topic. It explores the themes of perpetual substantial motion (*haraka jawhariyya*, as articulated by Mulla Sadra) and ontic circulation and interpenetration (*sarayan*, as described by Ibn ‘Arabi). This ongoing motion and interplay are dynamic processes, for which the Holy Spirit may be seen as a metaphor or isomorphic counterpart.

Amphiboly leads to a blurring of identities and an exchange of roles, bringing us back to metaphor as a key concept (Frye 2006: 446; Nelson 1975: 79). In the story of Majnun and Layla, Corbin explains that Majnun, in the intensity of his love, becomes the “mirror of God.” It is God Himself who, in the love of the lover for the beloved, contemplates His eternal visage. This constitutes a *vision of the vision*—a meta-event that Corbin identifies as esoteric *tawhid*. Importantly, the Arabic word *tawhid* is not a static noun but a dynamic participial, signifying an active unification. Thus, this unity is no longer merely $1 + 1$ or $1 = 1$, but $1 \times 1 = 1$, the “formula” for Hallaj’s infamous declaration: “*I am Truth (Haqq = God)*” (C3: ix).

Layla, as a *mazhar* (place of manifestation) of divine beauty, becomes the reality of Majnun’s identity—this he knows in the moment of ecstasy. When asked his name, Majnun responds, “Layla,” thus his “possession” (i.e. his insanity), reflected in his name, *majnun* (possessed). Divine love can *only* be known through human love. Layla’s beauty becomes a sacred sign (*aya*), a sacrament that transforms the common understanding of love—as a static noun—into a dynamic process: it becomes active and verbal.

In Arabic, nouns are never “inert;” they carry a verbal, active charge. Love (*‘ishq*), too, is dynamic, unfolding through an individual spiritual effort that remains hidden to the “pious believers,” who may only see an aesthetic flourish where others perceive a sacramental theophany (C3: 17; see now Stang 2016). According to Ruzbehan, this “vision of the vision” occurs in a sacred place, the *mashhad* (place of witnessing or of testimony). The beauty of Layla enters into the form of Majnun the way an image enters a mirror. With the notion of transfiguration we are again in the presence of metaphor: a figure pointing toward another destination, particularly within the context of apophatic metaphoricity.

The earthly human condition cannot be redeemed by a descent [*avilissement*, “degradation”] of the divine to its level, but by the transfiguration that the divine accomplishes in the human. The Image is not incarnate in the

mirror, but in its appearance in it (in this *mashhad*) it sees and shows [lit. “she sees and shows,” image is a feminine noun in French] to himself the one who looks at himself in the mirror and of whom she *is* the image. The one who looks sees himself by means of this very image. He would not be able to see himself without her. ... It is the gaze of Majnun who *is* Layla, the secret of the Lover who *is* the Beloved. (C3: 79–80, italics in original)

The metaphoric relation—in which reciter, recitation, and recited become one—parallels this “vision of the vision” in which love, lover, and beloved are indistinguishable in theophany. God is both *shahid* (witness) and *mashhud* (witnessed) in the act of *shahada* (witnessing). This theophany of beauty is anthropomorphized, linking preexistence (the Day of the Covenant) with human beauty and the celestial Anthropos. The mystic contemplates the power of the Creator in the creature, a truth constantly experienced by true lovers, who perpetually gaze at the mirror. From this perspective, there is no “outside the mirror”; all creation is the mirror itself (C3: 79–80).

Creation is theophany, as affirmed in Q41:53: “*We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the Truth.*” The Quran is a “unique text” that must be read as a mirror reflecting the divine. This requires never regarding the mirror without the image; to do so is to remain trapped in *‘ishq majazi* (metaphorical or illusory love). True love (*‘ishq haqiqi*) is found in gazing at the Image within the mirror, where human love leads to esoteric *tawhid*. Love must pass the test of the Veil, the test of the ephemeral “vehicle” of *majaz*. Through love, the Veil is made as transparent as the mirror, revealing that Majnun *is* Layla. Majnun knows that it is Layla who loves herself through his love for her. This is esoteric *tawhid*: God loves Himself through Majnun’s love for Layla, who reveals God to him. Esoteric *tawhid* expresses the supreme experience of human love and necessitates a metamorphosis of self-consciousness (C3: 79–81).¹²

4.10 ISOMORPHISM

There is no syncretism to be constructed, but only isomorphisms to be noted when the axis of symmetry is governed by one and the same *intelligentia spiritualis*, when, unbeknownst to them, a pre-established harmony

¹² On the metaphysics of beauty in an Islamicate context see now Holbrook (2022).

gathers all these “esoterics” fraternally in the same temple of Light, the same kingdom of spiritual man, which is limited by no other frontiers than those set up against it by In-science, *a-gnosia*. For in Christianity as in Islam, in Islam as in Christianity, there have always been “disciples of Khidr.” (Corbin 1981a: 93)

Corbin’s most helpful explanation of this much-used scientific term *isomorphism* comes from the realm of music. In speaking about Raymond Lull’s use of the word metaphor, Corbin gives us a powerful clue about the meaning of this at times opaque word: “the accuracy and ‘truth’ of a transposed melody in a higher key does not consist in returning to the original key; it resides in the preservation of the structure, the *isomorphism*, of the one with the other (C2: 367).” Another clue to the figurative function of isomorphism is hinted in Corbin’s discussion of typological hermeneutics: “This interior story is not a *chronicle*, but it is what makes it possible to understand the recurrences [*réurrences*] and allows a *typological* hermeneutic” (C1: xviii, italics added; see also Corbin 1989: xxviii and 71).

It was not until 1939, with the publication of Leonhard Goppelt’s seminal work (Goppelt 1939, 1982), that typological figuration began to gain recognition as an interpretative framework in Biblical studies.¹³ However, Corbin’s first use of the term *isomorph* appears only after his Eranos lectures of 1955 and 1956 (Corbin 1956, 1957a), when he was preparing his perhaps most universally admired work, *The Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Corbin 1981a), first published in French in 1958. The term appears in the introduction (Corbin 1958: 74), in the passage cited at the beginning of this section (Corbin 1980a: 93). In *Iranian Islam isomorphism* becomes a frequent technical term, functioning almost as a universal principle. The concept of *isomorphism* is also well established in chemistry, mathematics, biology, and psychology—particularly within *Gestalt* psychology and structuralism—where it may have first caught Corbin’s attention as an explanatory model (C1: 141 n. 107). This statement from *Spiritual Body* indicates as much:

[T]his way of thinking in cycles demands a kind of harmonic perception; or, again, the perception of a constant structure, just as the same melody can be

¹³ It has finally become recognized in Western scholarship as a viable way of reading the Quran (Zwettler 1990) though a close reading of the Quran reveals that it was part of the Quran’s self-understanding from the beginning (Lawson 2012a).

produced in different registers. Each time the melodic elements are different, but the structure is the same the same melody, the same musical figure, the same *Gestalt*. (Corbin 1989: 71)

Corbin's use of the scientific term *isomorphism* is both both ironic and didactic. It is ironic from the point of view of his critique of positivism, orthodoxies, rigid categories, and "universals," as well as his condemnation of a pervasive blind faith in science alone as the sole means of liberating humanity from materialism and what he calls "secularism." At the same time, *isomorphism* offers a fitting and compelling image for the explication of esoteric *tawhid*, illustrating the harmonious correspondences among all the elements of sensible experience that reveal their eternal *Hurqali* (spiritual) dimension.

Corbin invokes *isomorphism* consistently throughout *Iranian Islam* (C1: 140–149; C2: 367; C4: 208, 286–299), often in contexts where the near-synonym *homologation* also appears. However, his use of *isomorphism* reaches a crescendo in his discussion of "The Shaykhi School" (C4: 203–299), a subject on which Corbin remains an underappreciated pioneer. Since his discovery of Shaykhism and its importance for Islamic thought—particularly in the development of modern and contemporary Shi'ism in Iran—scholarship in this area has steadily grown, though with varying levels of quality and depth.¹⁴

In a long section at the close of *Iranian Islam*, Book 6 (C4: 284–299), Corbin discusses at length the *isomorphism* of time and space, demonstrating how time becomes space. The primary aim here is to show how chronological, or "fallen," time emerges from an originary divine act of creation, as reflected in: "*Our command is but one—as the twinkling of the eye*" (*wa ma amruna illa wahidatun ka'lamhi bi'l-basar*) (Q54:50). Sequential, exterior time and space become objects of meditation, and *ta'wil* serves as the means for the gnostic return to the time and place of the original covenantal response *bala* ("Yea verily!" Q7:172). The *isomorphism* evident in the structure of divine revelation—repeated throughout the ages in the sequence God > Messenger > Book > Community—is an example of the isomorphic structure and reality of human unity. Because of these

¹⁴In alphabetical order, the interested reader may consult the works of Bausani (1970), Buck (1995), Cole (1994), Ioannesyan (2023), Lambden (1997, 2003), Lawson (2005) and Rafati (1979). In addition, the "Shaykhi School" maintains a very useful website with free downloadable texts by the founders and successive leaders: <https://www.alabrar.info/>.

common isomorphic or typological characteristics, revelation produces its own distinct music—a music of thought and experience. The illusion of irreversible time serves as a navigational tool for the mystic, allowing her to move through created phenomena and reach the state of esoteric *tawhid*—the realization of the interconnectedness of all creation. In this state, *everything* happens at once. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i’s describes this experience with the term *dufatan* (“all at once,” Ahsa’i 1993: 256–258). This is the moment when time becomes place, and the *vision of the vision* is achieved.

4.11 DOCETISM

They did not kill him and they did not crucify him. Rather it only appeared so to them. (Q4:157)

The *locus classicus* for docetic “figuration” is, of course, the crucifixion of Jesus as treated in the Quran. The underlying attitude or mode of perception, however, has far-reaching implications beyond this single event. Corbin openly proclaims himself a docetist on multiple occasions, viewing docetism as a form of “spiritual realism” (C1: xxi; C3: 19). The term derives from the Greek *δοκεῖν* / *δοκέω* (*dokein*), meaning “to seem, to imagine, to think, to decide,” and it is thus closely related to *iltibas* (amphiboly), a marker of perceptual uncertainty. Interestingly, *dokein* is also the root of several important religious terms. Doxology—a “liturgical expression of praise to God”—derives from *doxa*, which can mean opinion, glory, doctrine, dogma, and even paradox. When Corbin calls himself a docetist, he signals a particular interpretative approach to the Quranic account of the crucifixion of Jesus in Q4:157–8. The key phrase *wa lakin shubbiha lahum* (*but it only appeared so to them*) indicates for Corbin that while Jesus’ material or physical body perished, his spiritual reality was neither killed nor crucified (C1: 164–165; C3: 19, 86–87; Lawson 2009: 143–150). This reading aligns perfectly with the structure of metaphor as explored here—it is an *isomorphic*, typological figuration. Once again, a musical dimension emerges. Just as a transposed melody retains its structural integrity in a higher key, so too does the spiritual reality of Jesus persist beyond its material appearance.

Historically, the term docetism has been used in Christian theological discourse to discredit heterodox “gnostics.” For Corbin, however, this very association transforms docetism into a badge of honor (C3: 224),

much like the way *taʿwīl*, formerly a term of theological condemnation, became an emblem of spiritual aristocracy in his *ecclesia spiritalis*.¹⁵

Corbin identifies a similar interpretative mode in the work of the Sunni philosopher Simnani (d. 1336), who provides an extraordinary reading of Q4:157. Simnani rejects both the traditional Christian doctrine (“Jesus is God”) and what he considers the erroneous claim of certain mystics (“I am God”). Instead, he insists on a *theophanic*, rather than incarnationist, understanding of the verse. From this perspective, Jesus—as a theophany—could never be killed (C3: 286–287).¹⁶

For Corbin, docetism does not negate the reality of the crucifixion. Rather, from a “docetic perspective,” it indicates a level of perception “on a plane of spiritual reality where materialization and secularization, that is to say reduction to the level of empirical evidence, are radically impossible” (C4: 318). In this sense, docetism functions as a counterpart to *taʿwīl*, serving as a critique of conventional epistemology (C1: 164–165).

It is significant that the illuminating potential of docetism is revealed through the tragic yet generative problem of the crucifixion as presented

¹⁵ The arbitrariness, or at least accidental nature, of this lexical opprobrium is demonstrated by the fact that one of the prime sources for established exegesis, the *Tafsir al-Tabari*, composed by the historian and exegete Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923) and which developed within what is known as Sunni Islam, was originally entitled *Taʿwīl ay al-Qurʾān*. It was only after the vigorous debates over belief and practice that occurred during the first four centuries of Islam that the word *taʿwīl* came to be despised as representing questionable and heterodox readings of scripture, largely those of the Ismaili community whose Fatimid dynasty posed a “clear and present danger” to the Abbasid dynasty under whose aegis much of the early, formative *tafsir* was composed and sponsored. *Taʿwīl* could also include works from within the so-called Sufi tradition and other Shiʿi groups that did not hew to the line of what had simultaneously become something of an alternate orthodoxy: *Ithnaʿashari* or “Twelver” Shiʿism. *Taʿwīl* emerges as a peculiar technical term in Qurʾanic hermeneutics that has, for a variety of historical reasons, come to stand for suspect interpretative procedure when compared with the more straightforward and indeed historically anchored “exoteric” interpretation, *tafsir*. In a similar vein, the name *Shaykhi* originally emerged as an insult, directed at a group perceived to venerate their *Shaykh*—in a manner reminiscent of Sunni Sufi traditions—more than the Imams. Corbin retained this term in his writings, though the Shaykhis themselves originally referred to their movement as *Kashfiyya*, meaning “people of intuition” or “revelation, disclosure” (Rafati 1979: 48). Over time, much like *taʿwīl* and *docetism*, the once-pejorative label *Shaykhi* was reclaimed by its adherents, transformed into a badge of honor, and is now worn with pride.

¹⁶ Simnani would have no doubt appreciated the docetically inspired reflections on this same verse by the tenth-century Shiʿi poet and scholar, al-Sharīf al-Rāḍī (Abu Deeb 2000: 337).

in the Quran (Lawson 2009: x, 2–6, 12, 79–80, 96–97, 144). Across *Iranian Islam*, it becomes clear that docetism, for Corbin, is an early expression of what his sources articulate as *theophany* (*mazhariya*, divine manifestation; C1: xxi; C2: 117–118; C3: 224; C4: 163, 317–321, 359). Thus formulated, one might suggest that Corbin’s docetism is really a door to understanding the pervasive role of what we are here calling *metaphoricity* (see also Corbin 1957b and now De Smet 2016).

4.12 MUSIC

It is thus both indisputable and significant that music was a central structuring element not only in Corbin’s study of the Quran but in his work as a whole. The influence of music on writing and thought has increasingly become a topic of scholarly interest, particularly how themes and motifs in music shape the “morphology and syntax” of a composition, imparting musicality even to a seemingly “prosaic” text (Lawson 2017b; Crawford 2016; Limb 2010; Shin and Kim 2006; Jarrett 1999). However, it is not merely a matter of listening to music while reading. Instead, music—whether known consciously or heard involuntarily—acts as a structuring force, filtering and shaping textual reception for the mind. Here, perhaps, music stands as a pure form of meaning (Scholem 1961: 130–135), just as metaphor represents a pure, open-ended mode of meaning production. Corbin, who was a serious student of music from an early age, approached the Quran and other classics of Islamic literary culture through the “lens” of sonorities and rhythms—perhaps even through what could be called a “musical semantics.” More significantly than whether his musical influences were European or otherwise was the fact that they were music *qua* music—musicality as a world of exquisitely interconnected meaning, abstract yet deeply structured, ineffable yet intensely present, and ultimately apophatic. This perspective extends beyond the auditory, embracing the inherent visual musicality of the Arabic script itself.

For Corbin, the essential experience of music is far more significant than the recall of specific symphonic or operatic passages. Music operates as a *field of meaning qua feeling*, orchestrated under a central motif and governing vision of being—one that is both edifying and aesthetically satisfying, pleasurable yet challenging, and above all, performed (*interprété*). Feelings, after all, are as ontological as representation (Ricoeur 2003: 361). They are as much a part of being as any other phenomenon, and like

all created things, each carries within it an electron of Truth, revealing, or at least pointing to (*tadullu*) divine presence.

Corbin's ability to *trust* music enabled him to recognize the musical dimension of the Quran itself, attending to the interplay of two forms of music that, through their union, engender meaning. The Quran's music—whether encountered audibly, auditorily, or through silent reading—imbues it with a distinct unity. This truth is metaphorized in the Quran when both it and the Hadith affirm that whenever the Quran is chanted, divine tranquility (*sakina*) descends upon the listener, producing a transformation (*isomorphism*) of time and space: time is momentarily suspended, and space is imbued with a heightened vitality. Obviously, music is not restricted to the physical ear. Scholem's concept of “the music of pure thought” comes to mind (Scholem 1961: 232). There is also *a music of ideas and meanings*, one that depends upon an inherent formal structure—a metaphysical *rhyme* or *harmony* between insights. This phenomenon resonates with the fantastical vision of the land of Cockaigne, where beer is drunk from glasses made of beer (Pleij 2003: 33), or with Melville's depiction of “the unity of being” in *Moby-Dick*, where the Pequod's dining room is furnished with whale bone, whale is eaten under the light of whale-oil lamps, with utensils made of whale bone, by whalers who have just hunted a whale (Melville 1967: 254–256). In these instances, the vessel and its content become one, much the way Arabic is both an instrument of meaning and the music of meaning itself (Sells 1994: 7).

Music, with the regard to the epic struggle between time and eternity, provides a *dar al-hijra*—a refuge where time is recast, sculpted, or even erased for the duration of the recital. This *isomorphic* transformation of time and space echoes the function of typological figuration, which similarly negates or suspends “fallen time” (Lawson, 2017a: *passim* and esp. 41–43). Thus, for Corbin, music forms both the *space* and the *time* in which the Quran is encountered—and the heart of this space and time is *metaphor*.

An illustrative example of this musical and metaphorical resonance appears in Corbin's translation of Mulla Sadra's *Commentary on Kulayni's al-Kafi*:

From now on, it must have become clear to you that no group other than the Shi'ites has succeeded in establishing the agreement [*accord*], the symphony (*jam'*) between the Divine Law (*shar'*) and philosophical research (*tahqiq*). And this is because the Shi'ites draw their science and philosophy

from the Niche of Lights of prophecy and *walāyat*, following the paths of the holy Imams. (Sadra Shirazi, *Sharh al-Kafi*, translated in Corbin 1970: 148; cf. C4: 74–75)

Who but Corbin would translate *jamʿ* as “symphony”? Here, the term functions as a supreme metaphor precisely because its *tenor*—the divine harmony between revelation and reason—remains utterly unknown. Similar uses of *symphony* appear throughout *Iranian Islam* (C4: 47, 69, 74–75, 260–261), reinforcing Corbin’s tendency to render conceptual unity through musical metaphor.

This inclination toward musical analogy is evident across his entire body of work. A relatively early example appears in his 1953 introduction to the eleventh-century Ismaili philosopher Nasir-e Khosraw’s *The Book of the Harmony between the Two Wisdoms* (*Kitab-e Jamiʿ al-Hikmatain*), where Corbin explicitly frames *taʾwil*—the esoteric process of interpretation—in musical terms:

For us, it is musical analogies that spontaneously present themselves to characterize the different processes employed by *taʾwil*. We observe transpositions, alterations of tonality, changes of key, register, or keyboard, etc. All these comparisons can help to understand the exegetical process: how one “links” [*enchaîne*], for example, from the Aristotelian schema of substance (*jawhar*) to the Ismaʿili schema of the religious organism (*din*), in short, how the “union of the two wisdoms” aims at a grand and precise goal: a harmonic interpretation of Greek philosophy and Ismaʿili theosophy. (Corbin 1953: 72)

Corbin’s untiring recourse to translations and analogies derived from the realm of music raises the ultimate question: *how to understand?*

4.13 JOSEPH AS METAPHORICITY

The esoteric meanings of *tawhīd* are not for any newcomer who sets out to uncover them; for the secret of the *tawhīd* that needs to be uncovered is the garment [*vêtement*] covering the divine condition by which the soul of the soul (the Beloved in the true sense) is amphibolized. As long as he does not become 1 x 1 (*wāhid dar wāhid*, not 1 + 1), the mystical pilgrim does not attain the vision of the vision, (*ʿiṣān-e ʿiṣān*) which is this *tawhīd*. (C3: 81, translating Ruzbehan Baqli, *Risala-yi Qudsiya*)

The mention of the *garment* here, following the earlier discussion of the spiritual significance of beauty in the story of Layla and Majnun, inevitably evokes the story of Joseph in any discussion of Islamic mystical thought. According to Hadith, “*God created Beauty in a hundred parts and gave to Joseph ninety-nine*” (cited in Lawson 2024: 403). The purpose of this and the following section is to suggest that the story and figure of Joseph function as a *symphony of metaphoricality*, entailing the key concepts discussed above: *hikaya*, *ta’wil*, amphiboly, isomorphism, docetism, and music. Joseph emerges as a *mazhar* or personification of this symphony.

Joseph is the central figure and hero of Sura 12—the only sura that follows a conventional narrative structure with a beginning, middle, and end. The sura explicitly refers to itself (Q12:3) and is traditionally regarded as *ahsan al-qasas*, “the most beautiful story,” due to its narrative coherence and its protagonist’s embodiment of beauty (*husn*), a divine attribute. Joseph, as the perfect *mazhar* of beauty, becomes the central theme of the sura. Yet beauty is two-edged: on the one hand, it incites destructive jealousy among Joseph’s brothers (Q12:5-20), arousing desire and leading to Joseph’s punishment in the story of Zulaykha (Q12: 23-36); on the other, it is manifest in Joseph’s *character*, which is marked by kindness, honesty, forgiveness, patience, and love (Q12: *passim*; Lawson 2024). Beauty in Sura 12 is also the *object*, *subject*, and *interpreter*—the very essence of *hikaya* and *ta’wil*. The term *ta’wil*, the primary Quranic word for interpretation, appears seventeen times in the Quran—eight of which are found in this sura, underscoring its hermeneutical significance.

Returning to the *mundus imaginalis*, the scene at Q7: 172—where all future human souls bear witness to God—presents an experience of beauty both individually and collectively. In the Islamic tradition, Joseph embodies this originary beauty, functioning as an emblem, symbol, metaphor, and perfect *mazhar* of divine beauty. He is a kind of *hologram* of the creative and imaginal beauty associated with the Day of the Covenant. Beauty is both the origin and the goal—the place of return—of love. Thus, metaphoricality is the beautiful means by which this return takes place: the natural home of humanity.

Joseph also embodies beauty as perspective, process, and active essence. Corbin highlights Joseph’s role in Suhrawardi’s visionary recitals, where he represents divine beauty (*husn*), Zulaykha represents love (*‘ishq*), and Jacob represents sorrow (*huzn*). This triadic structure serves as a map or paradigm of the mystic quest, which, in Islamic thought, is spiritually comparable to the categories of *Being*, *Love*, and *Knowledge*.

The *logic of metaphor*—akin to the *logic of the birds* (another way to translate the title of Attar’s *Conference of the Birds: Mantiq at-Tayr*)—renders love reasonable (though not necessarily rational) and structures the mystical journey as a movement from *vehicle* to *tenor* through an intermediary space, represented here by Jacob. In this triangle, Jacob’s famous “house of sorrows” (*bayt-i huzn*), where he weeps for forty years, symbolizes the body in which the spirit resides.¹⁷ Joseph represents the hidden mystery (*deus absconditus*). Canaan represents the heart, which receives the scent of Joseph. Joseph is both *tenor* and *vehicle*: his cloak (vehicle) covers him, yet he himself is the cloak or garment of God, particularly in the context of the Day of the Covenant.¹⁸ Corbin sees this scene, along with Suhrawardi’s treatment of it in *Mu’nis al-ʿUshshaq*, as a true icon—not only because of its gnostic resonances (Landolt 1986: 200), but because of its deep structural significance. As Attar famously said, “*Whoever has no loss of Joseph in their heart has no faith*” (Ritter 2003: 348).

The *hikaya* of Joseph in Sura 12 has recently garnered renewed scholarly attention (Lawson 2024, 2019, 2012a, 2012b; Kennedy 2016; Keeler 2016, 2012; Firestone 2010; Cragg 2009; Dadbeh 2009; Kia 2009; de Prémare 1989; Johns 1981; Mir 1986). His *hikaya*, as it lives in Islamic literary and intellectual history, is inseparable from his famous *qamis* (garment), which serves as the preexisting type for the Sufi *khirqā* (robe of initiation). The *qamis* carries an ontic status analogous to that of the Day of the Covenant—a symbol of a time before creation, a “prologue in Heaven.” More than just an item of clothing, then, Joseph’s cloak carries a profound significance. Having preexisted creation, it first belonged to Adam and subsequently passed down through prophetic history. This lineage underscores the idea that there is no distinction between material and spiritual history; both are facets of a singular, sacred reality, just as all prophetic figures are in some sense the same (Lawson 2012a: 94–5; Suhrawardi 1982: 95–102). In Sura 12, Joseph’s *qamis* plays a central role, marking major transitions in the narrative and effectively becoming a character alongside Joseph himself. In the episode with Zulaykha, the torn garment proves Joseph’s innocence (Q12:23–26), though he is sent to prison anyway (Q12:35–42). The cloak restores Jacob’s sight, lost due to his incessant weeping for Joseph (Q12:94–98). The early jurist al-Shaʿbi (d. 723) famously remarked that Joseph’s entire story is “in his garment” (Johns

¹⁷Note here the musical resonance between *husn* “beauty” and *huzn* “sadness.”

¹⁸Ruzbehan Baqli refers to Adam as the “garment of God” (Ernst 1996: 69).

1981: 38). The relation between Joseph and his cloak serves as a perfect isomorph for the very structure of metaphor: the cloak functions as the vehicle, while Joseph represents the tenor—the reality to which the cloak points. This dynamic generates a cascade of related metaphors. In some interpretations, Joseph himself becomes the vehicle for the apophatic God, isomorphically echoing the relation between the *qamis* and Joseph. In Shi'ism, the Mahdi, or Twelfth Imam, is foretold to return wearing the *qamis* of Joseph (Lawson 2012a: 97–98).

Corbin's discussion of Suhrawardi's *Mu'nis al-Ushshaq* in *Iranian Islam* (C2: 361–381) is essential for understanding Joseph's metaphoric role. This section stems from Corbin's first scholarly article on Suhrawardi (Corbin 1933), extending a thematic continuity in his work. In Suhrawardi's visionary account, the narrative unfolds as a kind of "event in Heaven," much like the Day of the Covenant (Q7:172) or the Quranic scene where the angels bow to Adam (Q15:30). In this celestial drama, Adam becomes the manifestation of Beauty, a garment for God. Love and Sadness enter the scene, recognizing the human form as *mazhar*, the place of perfect manifestation of Beauty. Beholding Beauty, Love is immediately stupefied. Sadness, Love's companion, comforts Love: he sees all the beings of the celestial world. This vision closely parallels the vast imaginal gathering at Q7:172, when the "seeds" of all future humans stood before God. In Suhrawardi's account, these beings are grouped around Beauty in order to submit and kiss the ground at the threshold of Beauty. This is the meaning of the mysterious verse "All the angels adored (*sajada*: "bowed down to") him" (Q15:30) (C2: 373). In this verse it is, of course, Adam who is worshipped, according to Suhrawardi, as a manifestation of Beauty. But Adam and Joseph share the same "isomorphic" function and are thus in some sense identical.

Corbin, however, evinces some restiveness in his treatment of Suhrawardi's *Mu'nis al-Ushshaq*, particularly regarding its reliance on allegory. The characters of Joseph (Beauty), Zolaykha (Love),¹⁹ and Jacob (Sadness) might initially seem like abstract personifications. But Corbin insists that these are not allegorical personified abstractions: "Personified, an abstraction ceases to be abstract. An abstract person is not a person" (C2: 365). Instead, he argues that they represent metaphysical, rather than logical, universals. Corbin resists reducing them to the "rut" (*ornière*) of universals (C2: 364),

¹⁹This name appears neither in the Bible nor the Quran, as Corbin well knew. But it is so much a part of the post-Quranic tradition that it is natural and unexceptionable to use it.

instead seeing them as *active essences*, or *imagines agentes*—images that enliven and are enlivened by the imagination. Corbin says that if we use the word metaphor here, as Raymond Lull does in similar contexts, we must stress the idea of movement and direction that it carries. Metaphor is not static: it is a *transumption*, a transposition, a transfer (C2: 367).

Joseph, as the perfect image (*mazhar*) of Beauty, initially rejects Love and Sadness, initiating the epic (*histoire*) of separation and eventual reunion. Each of the two younger “brothers” (Persian has no grammatical gender) embarks on a search for an earthly “home.” Sadness chooses Jacob in Canaan. Sadness tells Jacob, “I come from No-Place-Land [*na-koja-abad*, the invisible realm, *al-ghayb*, the 8th clime, Hurqalya, *mundus imaginis*] from the City of the Pure Ones.” Jacob and Sadness become inseparable: now Jacob *is* Sadness. Love encounters Zolaykha in Egypt. Zolaykha asks Love, “Where do you come from? What is your name?” Love responds: “I come from the Land of the Spirit (*Ruh Abad*). There where is my home, Sadness is always very close ... In the heavens I am known as the primordial Mover [cf. tenor]; on earth I appear like a beggar [cf. vehicle].” When Joseph finally appears, Love embraces Zolaykha’s shoulder, and together they move toward the contemplation that ends separation and the quest. Zolaykha is Love; Beauty and Love are reunited.

Following the Quranic narrative, Sadness leads Jacob to Egypt, where they find Beauty and Love enthroned. Then Sadness, Jacob, and his sons who had sold their brother Joseph, prostrate themselves, and Joseph speaks (in Persian) Q12:100: “Father, this is the meaning (*ta’wil*) of my dream (*khwab*, *ruya* in Arabic) which I told you long ago.” Then, in Arabic, he re-recites Q12:4, the dream he had as a child: *O my father! I saw eleven stars and the sun and the moon; I saw them bow down [in worship] to me.*” At this moment, Beauty as divine manifestation speaks through Joseph (C2: 374).²⁰

²⁰ Suhrawardi closes the recital: “If God is beautiful, He necessarily produces beauty. If everything that exists, whether in a corporal or spiritual state, seeks perfection, then likewise, you will see that no being is without the desire for the beauty of forms. Reflect on this carefully and with deep understanding: Beauty—it is she who haunts the desires of all; it is in joining with her that all efforts are consumed. Alas! Access to this Beauty, the object of universal aspiration, is most difficult. For to unite with her, a mediator is required, and there is no mediator except Love. But Love does not welcome just anyone; he does not settle his dwelling just anywhere; he does not reveal himself to all eyes. If someone presents himself to him, prepared for this happiness, he sends towards him Sadness, his faithful messenger, so that he may purify the dwelling and ensure that none but Love himself may cross its threshold” (Suhrawardi, trans. from Corbin’s French in C2: 374).

4.14 JOSEPH ON THE THRONE AND THE DAY OF THE COVENANT

With this closing scene of Sura 12:100, which Joseph recites in Persian, we have a recital that resonates with Q7:172. As extensively discussed in a recent study (Lawson 2024: 413–436), this connection is not merely narratological but deeply metaphysical. Here, we offer a summary of that argument. After enduring betrayal, slavery, sexual abuse, false imprisonment, and years of heartbroken separation from his father Jacob, Joseph rises to god-like authority in Egypt. His ascent is catalyzed by his ability to interpret Pharaoh's puzzling dreams, which earns him the highest office in the land. When his brothers arrive in Egypt, they do not recognize him. Rather than immediately punish them for their past treachery—a power he now wields—Joseph orchestrates a scenario that compels them to bring Benjamin, his full brother, to Egypt. Through a final act of dramatic revelation, Joseph then discloses his identity and commands them to return to Canaan and bring the rest of their family, including Jacob, to Egypt for a long-awaited reunion.

One of the unique features of the Quran's account of Joseph is the subtle yet unmistakable blurring of Joseph's identity with that of God. Throughout the sura, Joseph is associated with the divine names and attributes, including beauty and grace (*husn* x8: Q12:3, 22, 23, 36, 56, 78, 90, 100; *jamal* x2: Q12:18, 83; *lutf* x1: Q12:100); knowledge (*‘ilm* appears 33 times, including two direct references to Joseph as *‘alim*, Q12:55, 68); protection (*hifz*, *walaya*—Q12:12, 55, 63, 64, 65, 81); recognition and gnosis (*‘irfan*—Q12:58, 62). Thus, he is “tinged” with divinity. His knowledge (*‘a-l-m*) is exemplified by his mastery of *ta’wil* (interpretation), which extends beyond dreams to the unfolding of his own life, culminating in the realization of his childhood vision at Q12:4 when the sun, the moon, and the stars bow before him. His sovereignty is represented through various terms for divine power (*m-l-k* x7, *m-k-n* x2, *s-l-t* [Q12:40], *w-l-y* [Q12:101]), and he is even referred to by the divine name *‘Aziz* (“Mighty”) ²¹ twice (Q12:78, 88). When, in Q12:100, Joseph is seated on the throne (*‘arsh*), in explicit imitation of God, and his father and brothers bow before him, it echoes the Day of the Covenant (Q7:172), where all souls acknowledge their *rabb* (Lord). This final scene also

²¹ It is not without significance here that this Arabic word means Mighty in relation to God and “dear or beloved” when addressed to others.

introduces a profound role reversal: Jacob, the *rabb* of his family, bows before his son, who has now assumed the role of both *lord* and *father*, mirroring the divine sustainer (*rabbikum*) of Q7:172. Though the Quran insists that God *neither begets nor is begotten* (Q112:2), the semantic field of *rabb* includes meanings of sustaining, protecting, nourishing, educating, and guiding, subtly evoking fatherhood. This moment of recognition (*‘irfan*), akin to the gestural equivalent of uttering *bala* (“Yea, verily”) in Q7:172, mirrors the exchange of identity between Majnun and Layla.

There is much more that can be said, and the interested reader is referred to my earlier study for more details (Lawson 2024). Here, we simply highlight the *double-helix* operation of *bikaya*: all comes from the Day of A-Last and ultimately returns to the divine presence to which it alludes, metaphorized, amphibolized and isomorphized through Joseph’s enthronement. Notably, Sura 12 contains no reference to laws, rituals, or eschatological consequences—what Corbin would call the markers of “positive religion.” There is no mention of heaven or hell, nor of prophetic missions, except that Joseph, in line with the above imitation of God, both receives and sends messengers (*r-s-l*, Q12:45, 50). This absence suggests that the true law guiding the narrative is not juridical but ontological and eschatological—the soul’s imperative to return home to its divine origin. Joseph’s story thus functions as an icon in motion, simultaneously oriented toward the future and the past: toward the future, as the the Abrahamic lineage continues through Joseph, the embodiment of imagination and the master of *ta’wil*²²; and toward the past, not as historical chronology, but as an eternal moment, the originary Day of A-Last. As Ruzbehan Baqli so aptly expresses:

In all the things that we admire for their beauty there is the influx of that primordial Beauty. This is because each atom of being possesses a soul that it receives from the divine Operation (*fi’l-e Haqq*), a soul which governs it according to the corresponding Attribute and the theophany of the Essence—most especially in things that we admire for their beauty [...]. The closer we are to the source of Beauty, the closer we are to the Covenant of Love [*pacte d’amour*] (*‘ahd-i ‘ishq*). (Baqli 1981: 34, trans. from Corbin’s French in C3: 89)

²² Ibn ‘Arabi is strangely critical of Joseph’s ability in *ta’wil*—just as he is critical of Noah and Aisha elsewhere—and does not seem to acknowledge any “isomorphic resonance” here with the Day of the Covenant, at least in the *Fusus* (Ibn ‘Arabi 1966: I.99–106).

4.15 CONCLUSION

Metaphor is the bridge to Reality

Each atom of divinity wears a garment, establishing a reciprocal relationship in which tenor becomes the vehicle, and the vehicle becomes the tenor—each conditioning the other. As recently elucidated for the Hebrew tradition (Wolfson 2024), metaphor is the garment of imagination, creating an interconnected system of nested “Chinese boxes” where pervasive metaphoricity structures meaning itself, forming a metaphor for consciousness. When Corbin describes the scene of the “pleroma” in Q7:172 as the dominant fact of Islamic consciousness, what could he mean? As this discussion unfolds, it becomes evident that all phenomena—all created things—participate in metaphoricity. This is strikingly resonant with McLuhan’s assertion above that all words in any language are metaphors and aligns with the Quranic declaration that God speaks to humanity through metaphors (Q24:35). The Arabic term *mathal*, which Corbin translates as *symbol*, may in fact be more accurately rendered as *metaphor*, particularly within his philosophical framework. Unlike static symbols, metaphors are inherently dynamic, signaling transformation. Corbin himself explicitly acknowledges this dynamism in his discussion of Nasiruddin Tusi (d. 1274), noting that metaphor, in its etymological sense, signifies “transferral” and “sublimation,” as seen in the transition from “love in the metaphorical sense” to “love in the true sense” (Corbin 1980a: 238).

This ontic metaphoricity is also connected with Sadrian substantial motion (*haraka jawhariyya*), where transformation is fundamental—raising the question: Is the *Mover* truly *Unmoved*? In this way, Mulla Sadra and Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i overturn classical hylemorphism, allowing thought to escape the “rut of universals.” Without metaphor, imagination itself would be unknowable. This insight may further illuminate the distinctive Imami Shi’i perspective on the incompleteness of the Quran—not merely as a doctrinal or historical claim (Kara 2018), but as an acknowledgment of the necessity for the intervention of the Angel of Imagination, what Wallace Stevens called the *necessary angel*. Corbin’s *Angelus Interpres* thus has an earthly name: Metaphor.

If, as Ibn ‘Arabi teaches, imagination is the widest thing in creation, then metaphor must come a close second. As we saw, Corbin, at times, appears to disparage metaphor. But what emerges is not a critique of the metaphorical process, rather an affirmation of metaphor as the center of

both anagoric and earthly gravity—a river that flows in two directions at once, an ecosystem whose preservation should be our highest concern. Ibn ‘Arabi writes:

Imagination is the widest known thing [*wa al-khayāl awṣa‘ al-ma‘lūmāt*] ... it exercises its properties through its reality over every thing and non-thing. It gives form to absolute nonexistence, the impossible, the Necessary, and possibility; it makes existence nonexistent and nonexistence existent. (Ibn ‘Arabi 1911: I.306, II.17 and 6, translated in Chittick 2014: 33)

This passage evokes two Quran verses: Q7:155, *My mercy encompasses all things* (*wa rahmati wasi‘at kulla shay’*), and Q2:255, the Throne Verse: *His Throne is wider than the Heavens and the Earth* (*wasi‘a kursiyyuhu al-samawat wa’l-ard*). The language suggests that Ibn ‘Arabi sees imagination as analogous to God’s Throne—expansive, all-encompassing, and ontologically generative. If metaphor is ontological motion (*sarayan*, the permeation of being), and if Majnun *becomes* Layla and vice versa, then consciousness and perception themselves are acts of interpenetration and interpretation, embedded in the creative and hidden onto-hermeneutic structure of existence.

Thus the structure of each being is represented as an *unus ambo*, its totality being constituted by its being in its divine creative dimension (*tahaqquq*) and in its creatural dimension (*takhalluq*); neither the *one* that is *two* nor the *two* that are *one* can be lost, for they exist only insofar as they form an essential interdependent whole (*ta‘alluq*). This is not a “dialectic”; it is the foundation of the *unio mystica* as *unio sympathetica*. (Corbin 1981a: 300)

Or perhaps, *unio metaphorica*. Northrop Frye insisted that there is a metaphorical literalism, just as Corbin speaks of spiritual literalism or concrete spirituality. Frye maintained that such metaphorical engagement was the premodern default approach to texts, and this claim is confirmed by the way Corbin’s authors read the Quran. They could not conceive of reading without a metaphorical framework—where metaphor was not a secondary, ornamental feature but the very substance of meaning. The metaphorical meaning *is* the spiritual meaning, and it is meant to be lived (Frye 1991; Happy 2011; Lawson 2025). As we saw earlier, *to read*—especially *to be read to*—also means *to be made ready*. To read a metaphor means to be made ready for the journey it signifies, for movement and

transformation. As the Arabic saying goes: *al-haraka baraka*—movement is blessing. Another ancient Arab saying is even more pertinent: *Metaphor is the bridge to Reality* (*al-majaz qantara al-Haqiqa*)—a phrase curiously absent from Corbin's work despite his deep engagement with Islamic thought.²³ This reverence for travel, literal and metaphorical, permeates the Quran, which contains a wealth of words denoting roads, paths, ways, and highways (Lawson 2017a: 190–191, n. 22 and *passim*). Each metaphor is a molecular iteration—an isomorph—of the grand apophatic theme of transformation, transfiguration, transportation, and translation (*tarjuman*) and, of course, transcendence. It is through metaphor that what might otherwise be a static typological figuration (Alter 2002: 18) is resurrected and made to live. The metaphor generated through us and to us by revelation ultimately situates the self as the center of anagogic gravity, complementing and refining the idea of the individual as center of narrative gravity (Dennett 1992). Anagogic gravity itself is a *coincidentia oppositorum*—a paradoxical pull, perfectly mirroring our river that flows in two directions at once.

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Abbreviations C1, C2, C3, C4 = respectively the four volumes of Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 Vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1971–1973.

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²³ On this venerable aphorism, see Heinrichs (1991: 256–257).

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