

The Prophetic Function of Beauty

And so it is that a hermeneutic ability to see through and re-interpret what we take to be the obvious facts about others and ourselves can transform our perceptions and our mode of presence in the world. This difficult work of becoming conscious is most important perhaps with regard to those we love. Corbin has written a great deal about the meaning of human love. Imaginative prayer and love, which have much in common, are the supreme means through which we have direct contact with the divine. The relationships among the persons involved are complex and call for some careful deliberation. For in this scheme there are several entities actively engaged – the lower soul of the two lovers, the pacified souls of each, the Angels of each, and indeed, Love itself. Making this account more complex is the fact that Corbin's mystical Islamic sources do not distinguish between two forms of love that Christians have come to consider separate: the love we call eros and the love known since the times of the New Testament as agape.

In the mystical theology that Corbin describes for us, the vision of the Angel is a revelation of divine Love and Beauty. The beauty of the Divine can only manifest in the form of creatures. Whenever we encounter a being of beauty we are seeing the Beauty of the transcendent Lord. Human and divine beauty are not opposed. Corbin wants to avoid any hint of an ascetical Christian moralism that would deny divine meaning to human love or to the sensuous beauties of creation. The experience of love is profoundly sacramental. It is the sacred occasion where Flesh is made holy and the means by which the opposition between Spirit and Matter is abolished. He says,

In place of the negative connection that we habitually understand between Christian asceticism and the Greek consciousness of beauty, it is necessary to speak here of a valorization that confers a prophetic function on beauty.¹

Beauty is the essential divine attribute and human love leads to the vision of the unique Lord who is the Angel. Such a love is purified of all merely carnal, possessive instincts, all utilitarian ends, all obsessions and neurotic “needs.” Such a chaste love is an ecstasy before the revelation of divine beauty in a being of beauty, a *theophany*. At the limit of this experience of love is the experience of Divine Unity: The Divine being is simultaneously the Loved, the Lover and the Love itself.²

The phenomenon of theophany should be clearly distinguished from that of incarnation. Corbin rejects the Christian theology of the Incarnation, which places God in Christ, once and for all, in historical time. The dogma of the Incarnation has fatally obscured the true relation between Spirit and Matter and effected a schism between them which has had profoundly destructive consequences for Western societies. The Christ that Corbin would have us imagine is the Christ of the Cross of Light as described in the apocryphal Acts of John. The true Christ is the Angel Christos, the same figure who is the Angel Holy Spirit whose image is unique for each of us. But the “image” of the Divine is no phantasm - it is the appearance of that which is truly real. Rather than a dualist opposition between Spirit and Matter, this theology posits what the great medieval Persian mystic Ruzbihan Baqli calls *iltibas*, or “ambiguity,” for which Corbin uses the Latin term *amphibole*.³

¹ Corbin, 1972, 16.

² For what follows, see Corbin 1972, esp. Livre III.

³ Carl Ernst says that Corbin's translation of *iltibas* as “ambiguity” does not do justice to the rich nuances of the word. It suggests “clothing with divinity” as well as “covering up” and “confusion.” See Ernst, 1985, 149, n. 36.

The Latin suggests a motion in both directions, and Corbin uses it to imply affinities with *symbole*, whose root meaning is to “throw together.” Both terms stand opposed to their opposite, the *diabolic*, which acts to separate and “throw apart.”⁴ There is no theophany without a moment of *amphibole*. If we can accept this we will need neither the safety of “literal faith” nor the seeming certainty of sensory facts. The spiritual and the material are mutually interdependent, and the *amphibole* that characterizes all of creation is nothing other than the interpenetration of the sensible and the supra-sensible. The mystical verification of prophetic religion requires the perception of the prophetic meaning of beauty. Beauty is the essential divine attribute and God is the source and reality of love. The sacrament of love can be profaned, and the union of Matter and Spirit in the beauty of Flesh destroyed both by sexual self-indulgence and the ascetic rejection of the divine origin of human beauty.

The amphibolic structure of creation is the result of the fact that every creature is both God and Not-God. At each stage in the hierarchy of creation, when the creatures contemplate the Light that gives them life, they are both different from and identical to that glory. In order to see, they must be other than God, and yet it is from God that they have their very being – for they are nothing, they have nothing, in themselves. This is their radical poverty. In so far as they are viewed in their difference from God they seem self-subsistent, and so they run the risk of becoming idols which are Veils of the divinity. And yet they are the organs by which God contemplates Himself, and so are not other than He. This tension between the vision of creatures as self-subsistent Idols and as Icons of the Divine Light is known as the Test of the Veils. This spiritual challenge requires that we not become trapped by the self-subsistent and literal face of any being, that we not idolize it but rather see in it the Face of God. Sym-bolic vision depends on the knowledge that both invisible and visible are one; amphibolic perception sees with both eyes, the eyes of flesh *and* the eyes of fire; dia-bolic vision throws apart the spiritual and the material and sees only idols everywhere.

Though all creatures shine with Beauty, it is in the human form that this divine glory is most manifest. We are created in the image of God. The secret is to neither turn away from human beauty, nor to turn towards it. It is possible to learn to live in the tension, the ambiguity between the visible and the invisible. It is possible not to betray the dignity of the human creature and yet to acknowledge, and experience through it, its theophanic essence. The lover is caught in perpetual oscillation between the sensible, visible beauty, and the invisible of the visible that draws us onward.

The more general problem, in traditional philosophical terms, is the relationship between an apophatic and a cataphatic approach to God. It is not a question of sacrificing one or the other. It is in the tension between them that the soul finds its paradoxical tranquility. Corbin says that it is the theophanic vision that makes it possible to taste the savour and the tranquility of divine love in human love. It is not a question of perception at the level of the sensible world, but of imaginative sensations at the level of the intermediary world of the *mundus imaginalis*. This explains the *amphibole* of the human image which both *is* and *is not* a sensory image. The sensory experience of the visible and the audible has a double meaning, since it reveals the invisible and the inaudible. This is the theophanic function of the beauty of creation. The beauty of creatures is always apprehended in a form appropriate to the heart of one’s own love. The secret of theophanic perception is that it corresponds to the spiritual capacity of the visionary. This seeming multiplicity of the Divine Face may contradict the dogma of the Unity of the Divine, but it is the very revelation of the esoteric unity. God can never be an Object, but is rather the active Subject of the acts of spiritual perception

⁴ For example see Evdokimov, 1990.

by which the creatures come to know Him. This is the grand paradox of monotheism: the multiplicity of the One and the identity of the Many.

The supreme paradox is that ultimate unity can only be attained by means of the intimate duality of love. The esoteric unity can only be understood, lived and realized in the experience of love. It is human love which gives access to this, because human love is the only experience that can, at its limit, make present the unity of love, lover and beloved.

This vision of the prophetic meaning of love and beauty stands in total opposition to those ascetics for whom human love is a trap and an obstacle to the experience of the divine. Such an asceticism is a complete inversion of the real meaning of the dia-bolic since to view beauty and love as obstacles to the divine is truly to throw apart the visible and the invisible. For Corbin here lies the originality of Iranian Sufism. It expresses an individual ethic, both heroic and secret, a spiritual chivalry based upon the knowledge that it is only through human love that it is possible to read the outlines of divine love. One must become initiated into a spiritual hermeneutics, an exegesis of human love that reveals it as a prophetic text. And because Beauty is the source of this text, its discovery is a prophetic action. The lover is thus the partner of the prophet. The message of beauty is a prophetic message: it is an invitation to pass from the human figure who is the literal text, the place of sensory love, to the truth of love, the esoteric meaning of this text. The Beloved is metamorphosed by the adoration of the Lover, whose love is not a temptation to be overcome but a call to a sublimation of this love, which grants access to the esoteric unity of Love, Lover and Beloved. This partnership between the prophet and the lover provides the context for the idea of the bond of chivalry between the human being and the Angel, which is, Corbin says, *the ethical category par excellence*.

The interior pilgrimage is replete with the torments of “having and not-having.” The relationship between human, physical love and divine love is subtle and easily misread. Corbin and his mystical sources tell us that the lover must be purified of all sensual weakness in order to be firm in the path towards spiritual love. Any *purely* carnal appetite must be eliminated. Yet it is not a question of opposing this with a brutal and negative “monastic asceticism.” The dangers of idolatry are very real, but to transmute the idolatry of physical need into the iconic act of mutual giving we cannot turn away from the lover entirely. But we are needy creatures and hold tightly to the human lover. Idolatry may take the form of carnal obsession and the blind appetites of the lower soul. Or it may manifest as a childish dependency on a person who we cannot release into their own freedom. The impersonal matter of the carnal body is to be transmuted into *flesh*, through which alone a personal presence, human *or* divine can manifest. The soul can find its Orient in the perpetual motion of having and not having that is the ambiguity of love. Corbin says that the sensory and the suprasensory are but correlative aspects of one and the same *Eros*, and it is the path of mystic love to transform the lower into the higher.

This mystical vision of the meaning of human love, stirring as it is, applies only to certain intense forms of human love. It has no obvious connection to those less passionate forms of human care and compassion which are so much a part of our everyday lives. Corbin’s vision of love is of divine Eros. But there are other forms of love, other ways of seeing the human beauty in another person, which are more grounded in care and compassion and moral obligation than in romantic passion. These forms of love are what Christianity calls agape. I think the two are complementary, not contradictory, but they are very different. It seems to me that we can accept Corbin’s vision but

expand its range. All beings of light, all human beings, contain the spark of Divine beauty, and so this vision applies to every human encounter and not just to the intensities of the love that Corbin portrays. And agape is not a lower form of eros, but a different manifestation of the Face of the Lord. The experience of the caring, active love for another can help us to guard against the dangers that erotic love brings in its wake. Corbin does warn of these, but it is hard to hear his cautions if we are in thrall to the myth of romantic love.

Denis de Rougemont set forth a typology of love that is helpful in this context. In his now classic work, *Love in the Western World*, first published in 1939, de Rougemont proposed a thesis about the rise of romantic love in Western culture which has been both controversial and widely influential.⁵ He regarded the development of typically Western attitudes to love and to God to be the result of a tension between the ‘divine delirium’ of the Greek eros, and the active, incarnate love, or agape of the New Testament. It is worth quoting at length a passage which touches on the elements most pertinent to a critical view of Corbin’s account of love. De Rougemont writes,

Eros is complete Desire, luminous aspiration, the primitive religious soaring carried to its loftiest pitch, to the extreme exigency of purity, which is also the extreme exigency of Unity. But absolute unity must be the negation of the present human being in his suffering multiplicity. The supreme soaring of desire ends in non-desire. The erotic process introduces into life an element foreign to the diastole and systole of sexual attraction – a desire that never relapses, that nothing can satisfy, that even rejects and flees the temptation to obtain its fulfillment in the world, because its demand is to embrace no less than the All. It is infinite transcendence, man’s rise to his God. And this rise is without return.⁶

The one-way flight of transcendence is characteristically combined with powerful dualisms between spirit and matter, God and the Devil, Light and Darkness in the cultures that gave rise to the basic religion of Europe. These “Eastern” religions, among them Manicheism which is central in de Rougemont’s story, tend to emphasize the flight from this world and a “unitive” form of mysticism in which the individual seeks impersonal immersion, and so effectively annihilation, in the divine.

In the West this Erotic passion became entangled with the archetypal figures of Woman, giving rise to the troubadours, to Arthurian romance and to the ideal of romantic love which is so characteristic of Western culture from the 12th century on. In the West

Eros has taken the guise of Woman, and symbolizes both the other world and the nostalgia which makes us despise earthly joys. But the symbol is ambiguous, since it tends to mingle sexual attraction with *eternal* desire. [The figure of Woman] stirred up a yearning for what lies beyond embodied forms. Although she was beautiful and desirable for herself, it was her nature to vanish.⁷

The idealization of Woman and the unstable erotic passion of romantic love are incompatible with lasting and mature relationships between actual men and women. De Rougemont argues that it is this tension which provides much of the frenzied energy of the modern West.

⁵ de Rougemont, 1983.

⁶ Ibid., 61-62.

⁷ Ibid., 63-4.

The source of the energy is the tension between the transcendence of eros and the incarnate immanence of agape. The typically Western attitude as de Rougemont sees it, is based upon the experience of a fundamental abyss between God and man, making unitive mysticisms highly heretical. The orthodox mysticism of the West is *epithalamian*, and the highest human experience of God is conceived as a mystical marriage, based upon the *descent* of grace from above. The basic dynamic of agape is communal, a relationship of individuals. “The symbol of Love is no longer the infinite *passion* of a soul in quest of light, but the *marriage* of Christ and the Church.”⁸ Because of the Incarnation, we are not engaged in a dynamic out of the world, but rather the beginning of a new life *here*, where we can begin to love the other person “as he or she really is.” The passionate love of eros is uncontrolled, a divine influx that explodes the personality and overthrows our will. It is impersonal, both in that it is not in my control, and in that it is not concerned with the other person *as in individual*. It is not “active love.” De Rougemont says, “*To be in love* is not necessarily *to love*. To be in love is a state; to love, an act. A state is suffered or undergone; but an act has to be decided upon.”⁹ Marriage, divine or human, is an instance of active love.

The imperative, ‘Love God and thy neighbor as thyself’, creates structures of active relations. The imperative “Be in love!” would be devoid of meaning; or if it could be obeyed, would deprive man of his freedom.¹⁰

In the later editions of his book de Rougemont stresses that it was never his intention to suggest that passion and marriage are incompatible. He argues for the necessary tension of opposites. Once the tensions have been recognized “there had to be a decision to live out their drama and choose to experience their ever-changing and surprising tension.”¹¹ He proposes that we seek to enact a third form of love, one which helps to reconcile the visions presented by Corbin and Levinas. De Rougemont writes,

If it is true that passion seeks the Inaccessible, and if it is true that the Other as such remains the best-defended mystery in the eyes of a demanding love – could Eros and Agape not join in a paradoxical alliance at the very heart of an accepted marriage? Is not every *Other* the Inaccessible...? This search for the Angel, which is the mystery of the Other, exciting both Eros and Agape – might it not be a third form of love, similar to the mysticisms of spiritual marriage?¹²

This it seems to me applies equally to the marriage bond and to the ethical bond established by the rupture which the call of the other person makes on my life. Both encounters call me out of myself in a responsibility to the other which is the immanent mirror of the chivalric bond with the face of the divine that is the basis of all ethical action.

One further question to consider if we are to adopt Corbin’s Angelic theology is this: When we encounter the mystery and depth of another person, whose Angel are we seeing? In Manichean legend, when, after death, on the Bridge to the other world, the soul meets its Angel in the figure of

⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁹ Ibid., 310.

¹⁰ Ibid., 311.

¹¹ Ibid., 368.

¹² Ibid., 377-78.

a beautiful woman, she says “I am thyself.” De Rougemont disparagingly calls this “mystical narcissism.”¹³ (Elsewhere he wonders what form the Angel of a woman takes.)¹⁴ The Angel Holy Spirit is, as we know, in each case unique. Corbin’s mystic

knows that he is the eye with which God contemplates himself; that he himself, in his being, is the witness by which God witnesses himself, the revelation by which the Hidden Treasure reveals itself to itself.¹⁵

But Corbin and his Islamic spiritual masters are absolved from charges of both implicit narcissism and the annihilation of the person in Divine Union by two facts. The person of the Angel is infinite and iconic – that is, the succession of transcendences never stops. The meeting with the Angel does not set up a closed system where the soul finds itself contemplating its own beauty in a transcendently self-satisfied manner. The lower soul, the soul that seeks such narcissistic pleasure, is in fact annihilated. The true self is open upwards, and forever. Corbin says,

Personal survival cannot ... be thought of as purely and simply prolonging the status of the human condition, the ‘acquired dispositions.’ The latter doubtless concern what we call the ‘personality.’ But...the essential person in its posthumous becoming and in its immortality perhaps immeasurably transcends the ‘personality’ of so-and-so son of so-and-so.¹⁶

Secondly, there is no Union “in general”, for each soul is forever on its way towards its perfect individuation. The next world is full of individuated beings, each one unique. The world of Light is populated with Angelic beings who are the Guides for the beings below. These are the Fravartis, “those who have chosen” to aid in the battle with Ahriman, the Prince of Darkness. Each soul

has its Fravarti. What they announce to earthly beings is...an essentially dual structure that gives to each one a heavenly archetype or Angel, whose earthly counterpart he is.¹⁷

It is this fravarti which gives its true dimension to the person. The human person is only a person by virtue of this celestial dimension, archetypal, angelic, which is the celestial pole without which the terrestrial pole of his human dimension is completely *depolarized* in vagabondage and perdition.¹⁸

This figure of the Holy Spirit, the homologue of the Christ of the Cross of Light, is in no way a mirror of the fallen human self, such as would be the case if this were narcissism. On the contrary, it is the face of the Lord that the soul encounters, without which we are lost.

¹³ Ibid., 309.

¹⁴ In a letter to Corbin, in Jambet, 1981, 341.

¹⁵ Corbin, 1990, 208.

¹⁶ Corbin, 1960, 116.

¹⁷ Corbin, 1977a, 9-10.

¹⁸ Corbin, 1981b, 203.

It is not in the power of a human being to destroy his celestial Idea; but it is in his power to betray it, to separate himself from it, to have, at the entrance to the Chinvat Bridge, nothing face to face with him but the abominable and demonic caricature of his 'I' delivered over to himself without a heavenly sponsor.¹⁹

But then what of the Otherness of the person in whose face alone we can see the Lord? Corbin tells us that we are seeing their Angel in the only way we can see the Divine – in a form appropriate to the heart of our own love. It is necessary to be open to them. And the bond between us is one of unity in duality – this is the amphibole. But then too there is the third thing, the Love that unites. It is the Love that is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the rapture that sets us outside of social rules and norms. At the summit of human love where the union of the partners occurs, we find the Angelic dimension of two human persons united by the common love that they share. This paradoxical unity in diversity reflects what Christians know as the doctrine of the Trinity.

This is where the Test of the Veils occurs – in the finding and the not-finding, in the acceptance and rejection of responsibility, in the failures and successes of human love of every sort. In this vision where Love and Prophecy are united, the call to love and the call to justice are two faces of the same summons. We succeed and fail in turns, but we cannot refuse the responsibility.

Any search for the Angel is a search for both the divine face and the human. We who are enthralled by these imaginal worlds that Corbin has opened must take care not to turn the Angel into an Idol. It is an easy error to fall prey to. Seeking the Angel for Her own sake before we are spiritually ready can become an escapist and narcissistic endeavor. This is one of the perennial dangers of mysticism, and reminds us why Masters are necessary. Hidden knowledge, esoteric knowledge, is hidden not because only an Elite may know it, but because one must have reached a certain stage of maturity to understand it. Such maturity makes it possible to live in ambiguity. The tension is not easy to bear. Corbin tells us that the Angel is accessible only through a being of beauty whom we love. The Test of the Veil is to see the two faces of the divine simultaneously – neither reducing the Divine to the human, nor effacing the human through the overwhelming power of the Divine. This is the true meaning of the paradox of the Incarnation. The true Incarnation is not the established dogma that once and for all time God became man in the person of Jesus the Christ. The Angel, the figure of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit of the New Testament, makes possible the incarnation *in the flesh* of every one of us every time we love. The Angel provides the possibility of the person, but we must provide the incarnation – this is a job that cannot be done for us. When the Fathers of the early Church were struggling with the hermeneutics of the nascent doctrine of the God-Man they took the wrong path. The truth is more ecumenical, more difficult and more individual. The amphibolic structure of human beings means that we exist most truly in this interworld, poised between counterbalanced idols. On the one hand is the impersonal obsession with the desires of the body or the entrapment of others in the prisons of our own needs. On the other is the figure of an Angel who would save us from the complex and difficult tasks of active love and justice. Either of these idolatries destroys the possibility of knowing and being incarnate flesh. It is the tension that establishes the imaginal world – it is this tension that provides the energy for the simultaneous Descent and Return that constitutes the living reality of Creation. When I love another it is my Angel and theirs which assure that we see and are seen as icons, not idols. If the bond with the Angel is broken, then Flesh becomes matter, love becomes a passion, and the world falls into

¹⁹ Corbin, 1977a, 42.

from *After Prophecy*

chaos.

The bond of active love between two persons is the ethical bond that underlies all others. Because the Angels too must be active for this to occur, it also establishes the incarnate reality of the *imaginal* world. Incarnation is an event of the soul and the exercise of *imaginatio vera* is an ethical act. True imagination is distinguished from fantasy by at least these signs: it frees the ego from obsessive desires; it brings to consciousness projected illusions and so transforms idols; and because of these things it increases our capacity to love, to perceive the iconic face of the beloved.