

THE STRANGER AND THEOPHANY

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Every existing thing is a manifestation of God. Such is the fundamental proposition of speculative philosophy in the land of Islam. It posits the radical transcendence of divine unity as the principle of instauration. Intelligence cannot comprehend it; imagination cannot represent it; and speech cannot express it. But theophany contradicts this divine evasion through the revelation it unveils. The name responds to the veiled essence as it hides and reveals it at the same time. Therefore, the name introduces a split in God between the unnamed and the named, between the retreat of the absolute one and the abundant gift of its various faces.

Unlike Christianity — which considers the unique event of the Word made flesh the achievement of the history of theophanies and thus reconciles God with his creation through incarnation — speculative Islam rejects the incarnation of the divine Word and insists that the Word manifest itself. Since no figure of the Word, of the revealed God, can exhaust its activity, in the space opened by the denial of incarnation, theophanic mediations multiply themselves to infinity in a time open to the void of an always renewed future. I would like to see in this metaphysical postulation something other than a cultural determination, namely the very singularity of spiritual Islam. It is a way of perceiving what exists and conferring on it, without delay, the strange power of reflecting divine operations. The existing thing loses the status of simple extended substance in order to gain the authority of a visibility granted to the divine in the purely sensible. Theophany is the determinate existing thing itself when the absolute does not absent itself from it but offers itself in the mode of a paradoxical presence.

Strangeness, if we understand it as a mode of being or, even more profoundly, as a movement of perdition and effacement, an exile at work in the depths of the existing, appears to designate the exact opposite of theophany. The latter is about reconciliation, while strangeness is about division, distance, obliteration and the suffering of bodies and souls that have watched the shores of their homeland disappear. Theophany,

however, bears within itself the radical strangeness of its principle, which it struggles to vanquish without ever being able to do so. In the Age of Theophanies, of which the speculative philosophy of Islam expresses the truth, strangeness does not stop positing an elsewhere. This internal suffering, however, is abated in the heart of revelation. The One mirrors and contemplates itself in the event of the sensible. But perhaps it is here that the Age of Theophanies reaches its twilight, that manifestation is hollowed out and trembles, that the existing gently ceases to be the *apparent* in order to become nothing, the apparition of nothing.

1. THE EXILE OF DIVINE UNITY

Our starting point will be what Ismaili philosophy tells us of the original instauration of the universe and its foundation in the *one*. How can we preserve divine unity while taking into account the multiplicity of existing things that come from God? The question of their primordial instauration will be posed in arithmological terms. Thus, Nasir-e Khosraw adopts a Pythagorean model: according to a remark attributed to the Greek sage, “the order of the world rests on an arithmetic structure.” The one is the artisan of the world, “who made the multiplied world appear from out of his own unicity.”¹ The world is the multiplication of the one, by virtue of the generative power of this one. The apparition of the spatial and temporal universe manifests the creative power of the one in what the Pythagoreans called the dyad. The latter is the product of an arithmetic configuration that provides the law of theophany: each numerical series constitutive of an instaured existing thing [*existant instauré*] carries within itself the immanent presence of the one that generates it.

At the same time, the manifestation of the divine one in the multiplicity of existing things is preceded by the solitary affirmation of the one, which is excepted from the numerical series it engenders, in order to function as the series’ paradoxical foundation. The multiplicity of the world manifests itself out of the one. But the one, writes Nasir-e Khosraw, is not “lacking,” it is without want, in such a way that it has absolutely no need for numbers. Even if no number existed, the one would be no less real for that. Inversely, all the numbers need the one in order to exist. Such is the paradox of the one: without it no multiplicity can effectively appear, but the one itself does not have to manifest itself in any numeric instauration. By its very essence, the one is solitary, detached, monadic. It is one and real by itself. The one is pure number, the absolute one.

There is thus a certain disequilibrium, an absence of reciprocity between the one and the chain of numbers, which fundamentally disjoins the absolute one (which has no need whatsoever for the sum of existing things) from instaured existing things (whose essential characteristic is a lack in being, or what philosophers, following al-Farabi, call the *possibility* of being). The Pythagorean model allows us to conceive, on the one hand, the real that is beyond being [*être*] (the disjoined one); and on the other beings [*étant*], summoned to manifest this disjoined unity through an

instauration in which an abyss opens between the manifested one (configured in the multiples which are its apparitions) and the absolute one. The one Nasir-e Khosraw refers to here is the very one that Plato introduces at the stage of the first hypothesis of *Parmenides*: it declares itself only to withdraw immediately from being through a break with the dyad that it installs in being. The existent *and being* are inaugurated with the dyad, which is the one instaured in a number with which the multiple begins. But *they are not* the primordial instaurator, which should rather be thought as what we called the paradoxical one, since it is one by virtue of *not being* one, by always being in retreat from all numeration that would capture it in a multiple numeric chain.

We are presented with a first schism or, more precisely, a separation that is not posed in the reciprocal terms of an opposition between the pure one and the multiple one, that is, between the instaurating principle (which only receives the name of the one in that it is first and anterior to all position or emanation) and the instaured one immanent to the dyad. The one does not simply precede the dyad, rather it divides itself into a pure and a multiple one, which Nasir-e Khosraw designates respectively as *wahdat* (unity) and *wâhid* (one). *Unity* anticipates the *one*, which is then the synonym for the *multiple one*: the instaured one that is always the multiple one.

Therefore, the source of the exile that affects all existing things, the source of the absence that opens in the most radiant epiphany is the original disjunction of the one. As soon as the one configures itself, it recognizes in advance of itself a principle that withdraws itself from its own existence by absenting its unicity from all relation or connection with the instaured. The first stranger is the one itself, as stranger to its own real, if this real is withdrawn from the name Allah, which is always a secondary affirmation. It is the one in contact with the multiple and conquered by the multiplicity that emanates from it, even though it is pure of all multiplicity. *Wahdat*, the paradoxical one, posits the divine one as a radical strangeness in relation to itself in such a way that we cannot even speak of the unity *of* God, but only of the unity anterior to God of which it is the unity.

This withdrawal of the principle is the object of Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani's long meditations at the beginning of his *Rahat al-'aql*.² The principle is referred to through the third person pronoun "Him," which indicates its strangeness. "Being (*'aysâ*) exits him," since "being" does not attach itself to what is authentically first. Being is always in accord with the instaured, while to think the principle as the source of infinite instauration is to deliver it not only from beings but also from being. Of course, in order to reach this radical thesis, Kirmani needs to think being according to Aristotle's ten categories.

The trauma of his dialectical reasoning is that being is either substance or accident. But if the principle were substance, it would have to be either a body or a non-body. As a body, the principle would possess a divisible essence. But if it were not a body, it would be a potentiality (like the soul) or an actuality (like reason). As potentiality, it would necessitate an instaurating

instance; but as an actuality, it would still not be fully delivered from all dependence. In fact, if the principle were actualized in an other than itself, it would need this other to complete it, therefore this other would be anterior to it. If it were actualized in its own essence, as a result of the very capacity of this essence, the principle would have multiple relations with differentiated significations. There would be in its essence a minimal difference between actual being and actualized being. The crux of the argument is the following: substance never fails to share in or be shared, so it necessarily conjoins itself to the multiple. The principle, on the other hand, is beyond all sharing, be it passively suffered or actively offered.

This is why we should understand the principle as that “which is elevated beyond what possesses a specific nature (*al-naw’iyya*).” The paradoxical one is in no sense a species or a substance, not even a species consisting of one single individual. It does not coincide with any essence, since it is itself not constituted by its own essence. Therefore, the principle is not accessible through any attribution. It is impossible to confer on it even the most insignificant predicate. Nor is it a subject, if by subject we mean the support of predication. The principle, the paradoxical one, is the cause of instauration only to the degree that it is pure real, without predicate, preceding all positing, even if we try to represent it as equal to itself, $A=A$. It is an A that retreats from equality with itself.

This fugitive outside of all predication confirms the given of Koranic revelation: the principle is ineffable. This is why the most infinite perfection fails to name it. It is altogether beyond the opposition between deficiency and perfection: the principle is prior to both *esse* and *ens perfectum*. We can therefore call it paradoxical, since it avoids all oppositions, situating itself there where judgment does not expect it, where no *doxa* grasps it, if *doxa* judges in contradictory terms, either choosing one or thinking the two together: opposed and similar, form and matter, and so on.³

The negative path leads to the paradoxical one by withdrawing being from it, but without supposing that it is not, if it is true that it is not — neither due to a thing, nor according to a thing, nor in a thing, nor through a thing, nor for a thing, and neither with something. It is a matter of a negativity that is situated beyond being and the negation of being. In order for the affirmation of the one to succeed in its pure negativity, it must reach the degree of the instaured, which is the degree of stable being (*wujūd thâbit*). This, however, is the infinite instability of the instauring principle.

The paradoxical one is the unstable one. Superior in this respect to zero, which will engender for the Moderns, the sequence of numbers when it is counted for one by the one, the unstable one is a stranger to all counting for one. We cannot pursue here all the consequences of such an assumption of the paradoxical one by Ismaili thought. It will suffice to point out that the one is not the term through which the existent affirms itself as a quiescent totality, but rather that through which all that is instaured now carries in itself the trace of a negation and, therefore,

the frequency of a first instability which the existent reveals all the while negating it by its own totalization. It is this disjunction, never reconciled, and never thought in terms of a contradiction, that incites a decisive strangeness in the real. The concept of *instauration* will be forged in order to think the unthinkable: the passage, which is not a mediation, between the paradoxical one and the one through which the possibility of the two and of the entire chain of numbers inaugurates itself.

If it is possible to call theophany the total one that will be instaured, followed by the whole hierarchy of beings, we must agree that theophany manifests the instability of the principle which shimmers at its heart, as if the figure or the intelligible could never master the excess of instauration in the mirror of the instaured. There is a radical strangeness at the heart of the most ordered immanence. It is at this point that the double negation of the principle becomes manifest not as a dialectical reconciliation, but rather as a negation by which the principle bars and affects itself with a hyper-essential nothingness beyond being and nothingness, beyond affirmation and negation. We are dealing with an originary disorder similar to the one Schelling attempted to grasp in the fundamental past to which he bears witness at the origin of the Ages of the World.

The double negation interprets *tawhîd* [unity of God] in the following terms: there is no divinity if it is not God. The first negation can be isolated as “there is no divinity,” which corresponds to the negation of being, to the ceaselessly renewed withdrawal of the principle. At the same time, the infinite attestation of negativity is corrected by the second negation, “if it is not God,” in which the instauration of the first instaured affirms itself. But, in its turn, the second negation leads us back to the first without the possibility of terminating the movement of rhythmic oscillation between the two negations. There is no negation of negation, only a process of negativity in which the principle withdraws itself and makes itself a stranger. Between the first and the second negation the pure instance of instauration produces itself, since the second negation designates the possibility of the affirmation of the first instaured. In the medieval language of Kirmani, it is the first Intelligence. Between the pure One and the total or multiple One arises the reign of freedom, which is the instability and hyper-essential exile of the principle.

2. THE THEOPHANIC ORDER

We must now consider the effect of instauration, the first Intelligence, who in Ismaili thought occupies the position of the first theophany, and who rules the whole regime of epiphanies that emanate from it. We discover “the perfect in activity” (“*al-kâmil fî'l-fîT*”), “that which is free in itself with regard to the other than itself.”⁴ The total existent expresses in its fundamental liberty the disordered liberty of the principle under the integral face of order. This is how we understand the power of theophany: in its perfectly harmonious beauty resides the trace of the infinite principle,

but in such a way as if the mirror that the theophany holds up to the principle were the opposite of what its beauty reflects. To the vibration of the principle, to its indefinite pulse of negativity, corresponds in the instaurated an architecture without the blemish of affirmation.

This apogee of divine architectonics is the limit through which order constructs itself below the ineffable disorder. Theophany offers to the soul who contemplates it a face that is always more complete, from which emanates the beauty that takes hold of even the most distant sensible. Still, this order exists as if it were threatened from the inside by infinity, to which it opposes its limit that is not yet finitude, but the total infinity from which finitude springs. The dehiscence which instaurates itself between the principle and the first instaurated, between the pure one and its theophany, is the minimal distance, always effaced and changing, which subsists between a savage infinite and an infinite that henceforth counts itself as one. The counting for one, against which the principle rebelled, begins with the theophany. This counting itself is posterior to the operation, to the instaurating activity. Theophany manifests itself in the posited world that corresponds to the universe of the prophecy and its work. It is on the level of the first Intelligence, the harmony of the multiple One, that “the world of religion, from the point of view of the composition of the *Natiq*” appears.

With the expression “*al-natiq*” Ismaili theosophy designates the “speaking” in an absolute sense, the prophet as integral subject of the set of divine revelations carried by the vehicle of speech. In prophetic speech we are dealing with the manifestation of the divine Word, making itself homologue to the first Intelligence as it descends, according to the successive cycles of the major prophets, who are charged with the task of giving the Book and a law to the human community of their times: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammad. According to Fatimid Ismailism, which reverses the doctrine of the Ismailism of Alamût, the eternal prophet (exemplifying itself in the series of Major Prophets) is located at the level of the first Intelligence. He is the integral theophany, in a symbolic relationship with the first Intelligence, the total existent or the multiple One. It would be appropriate to resume this subsumption of the totality of divine figures under the heading of prophecy. We must, however, insist on the ambivalence of its signification: while the prophet resumes the creation, the Book gathers the totality of signs that otherwise manifest God below him in his creations. The beauty of women, the splendor of the trees, the majesty of mountains, the power of the animal kingdom, the lights of cities, the moderation of princes, the obedience of men, the most insignificant leaf of grass, are all icons of the divine.

Everything expresses something intelligible and partakes of the Word. In this sense, beginning with what incites love, everything is the sensible mirror of the one. In its controlled multiplicity, it draws the limit where the unlimited makes itself seen. Every single thing is a good infinity. Each body is a total fragment of the total architecture. If, according to Leibniz, every garden carries within it an infinity of gardens, according to Kirmani every sensible thing carries in it the infinity

of collected expressions of Intelligence. Inversely, however, the prophet and his law distribute themselves according to all the clarity of the sky and the earth, in the shadows of the rocks and under every leaf or every being of flesh. Literal religion and its principles have no other truth than their incessant reference to the sparkling colors of the real that spring forth even to the weakest sensibilities. Nothing opposes here the world and the Book, nothing that would strike the desirable multiplicities with nullity.⁵

We are speaking here in terms of homologation or symbolization, but it would be more correct, more faithful to Kirmani, to join as tightly as possible the two versions of the procession that begins with the primordial instauration, with the liberty of the divine imperative, and which by default translates this divine imperative into different degrees of matter and non-being. We do not have, on the one hand, the procession of Intelligence, and on the other its translation into the world of prophecy. The prophecy is the first theophany, because it is Intelligence itself as it makes itself seen in the world of creation. At the same time the imperative world (*'alam al-amr*) has its revealing mirror in the created world (*'alam al-khalq*). There is no succession between the two apparitions, of the intelligible and of the human, and in the face of the perfect human, the apparition of the totality of colors and bodies of beauty.

The imperative world unfolds itself in the following manner: the instauration gives rise, as an act of pure freedom, to the first Intelligence. From this proceeds, on the one hand, the Intelligence that subsists in potentiality (matter and form); on the other hand, the second Intelligence that subsists in actuality. From the Intelligence subsisting in potentiality proceeds the world of nature with its stars and skies, as well as all the existing things that they contain. From the second Intelligence proceed the Angels in charge of the world of nature. These two processions converge in the emanative process from which man, understood as perfection, is born. Lastly, the perfect man operates, on the one hand, the emanation of nature “with its skies, which contain the numerous things whose being comes from matter and form,” and on the other hand, the angels in charge of these creations. Such is the hierarchy of the angelic world, as it moves from the limit of the second Intelligence to the most profound depths of nature, centered on the pivot or the pole which is the perfect man.

The created world offers a schema in full accordance with what we have just summarized. We know that the world of religion (*sharī'a*) — understood in a very general sense, since we are dealing with the revealed Word, the Apparent in its integrality, and not only with divine commandments — corresponds to the first Intelligence, like the theophany corresponds to what it epiphanizes. From this world of religion proceeds the Imam that subsists in potentiality, which is the Holy Book itself, and which corresponds to the Intelligence in potentiality since the Book in its apparent meaning is the manifestation in potentiality of its hidden meaning that is the threshold of its effective reality. From the other side proceeds the Imam subsisting in actuality,

as the figure of *Asâs*, the “foundation” of the imamate, which makes itself visible at the decisive moment of the Mohammedan revelation in the guise of Alî ibn Abî Tâlib. From the Book, or the Imam in potentiality, proceeds the *sharî'a*, understood here in the strict sense of theoretical and practical obedience. From *Asâs* proceed the heptades of Imams, the guardians and interpreters of the *sharî'a*. It is clear that the Imam is in a second position, subordinate to that of the Prophet (contrary to the theology of Alamût, which disposes the hierarchy according to the order: Resurrector, Imam, prophet). This theophany of the second Intelligence proceeds to the clarification of the Book. It is the Book in actuality, fully elucidated. Man proceeds from the two dimensions of the Imam, from the Book in its apparent meaning and the Book in its hidden meaning, corresponding to its archetype in the world of the Imperative. Man gathers in himself the expressions of the totality of the Book. He is the manifested Book, the apparent as well as the hidden, and he draws his meaning from the Imam, the archetype of man. Finally, from man proceed the practice of literal religion and the hermeneutics of the hidden meaning, which express the essence of the fidelity to the primordial covenant between Adam and his Lord.

We have borrowed from the later vocabulary of Ismailism the notions of the imperative world and the created world, since they shed light on the law of correspondence between the universe of the Intelligences and the universe of manifestations or epiphanies. It may appear that the neat order of hierarchies confers on the emanation a clarity impervious to all trembling. But this is not the case at all. The whole edifice culminates in the first Intelligence that receives being from the free instauration of the principle. Kirmani wants the act of instauration to be in itself an act of veiling. The theophany veils what it reveals, in that it sees itself withdraw the clear perception of the instaurating principle. The prophecy and the imamate can certainly make the Word descend into human speech, and can elucidate its statements. But the Word, the imperative, completely veils itself from what it instaures. Comprehension does not pertain to the Intelligences. A perplexing confusion (*hayra*) slides between the truth of the Word and the absolute knowledge of the Intelligence.

Kirmani writes: “The Intelligence, when it is muted by the search for what is anterior to its own essence, does not actualize itself except in perplexing confusion.”⁶ Such is the effect of the separation in which the Intelligence encounters the real of its own essence and the real of the instaurating principle. When it steps outside itself as Intelligence and attempts to grasp the principle, it leads itself astray, losing its adequation to itself, and founders in an ignorance worse than the ordinary lack of knowledge of limited beings: perplexity and confusion (*hayra*) characterize the being-other of Intelligence, its radical estrangement. Furthermore, its eternal homologue, the prophecy, which proceeds from it as the totality of epiphanies now vibrates to the rhythm of hopeless disorientation. The ultimate pole of the quest is that which undoes the quest. The pure one engenders divergence and blindness. As a consequence, each theophanic form simply

shows the real from a partial point of view. Doubtless, it is a *pars totalis* that makes the whole of the existent visible, but the perplexity of theophany that comes to it from the distance of the first Intelligence itself deepens in this manifestation.

This would be the moment for Kirmani to say that no knowledge exceeds the prophecy and the imamate. It is to root the aim of human vision in the source of every valid gaze, the eye of the Intelligence. In this sense, it is to affirm and to found absolute knowledge. Theophany renders itself absolute in this acceptance of a primary limit, the limit of the multiple One. But, in another sense, it is to turn the instaurating imperative into the principle of a disorder that reigns precisely at the heart of order. This is the same disorder that only the later figure of the seventh prophet (in the Qarmatian tradition) or the Resurrector (in the tradition of Alamût) is capable of reducing, thereby offering the absolute theophany, the manifestation of the pure One itself. The sacred history of the heptads of the Imam opens to the future time of this absolute theophany, in the awaiting of which all sensible revelations of the divine, like all souls or all intellects, inherit the interior trembling of the *hayra*.

3. THE BREATH OF THE MERCIFUL

Ibn Arabî's work presents us with an architectonics that obviously differs from Ismaili ontology, in spite of all the similarities we might discover due to the common heritage of Neo-Platonism. Certainly, there is a powerful feeling of perplexity, of an obscuring of intellection at the heart of the theophanic vision, since the divine Essence never lets itself be seen entirely in the manifestation of divine Names without a remainder. But this night of appearance immediately corrects itself in its opposite. The apparition and the veil contradict each other in the form of the manifestation of the one, but this contradiction is overcome, without negativity, by the identity of the effusion that proceeds from the Essence in the movement that Ibn Arabî calls the breath of the Merciful.

Therefore it appears that the ontology that is most appropriate to offer itself as the foundation of a doctrine of theophanies radically excludes all estrangement. Ibn Arabî thinks theophany all the better and he is capable of conceiving the universe as an infinite plurality of the epiphanies of the divine Names, to the extent that he actually constructs the philosophy of Identity required by Islam. We are not concerned here with the question of whether Ibn Arabî was ever really a "philosopher" in the strict sense or if he was essentially a visionary theosophist. At the very least, in his famous work, one of the most commented upon, *Fosûs al-hikam*,⁷ Ibn Arabî, even as he engages in a permanent exegesis of the Koran, lays the foundations of a system. Everything we will rather allusively suggest here relies on this work, which deserves to be placed within the lineage of great philosophies of Identity, from Spinoza to Schelling. We interrogate him as a philosopher, voluntarily leaving aside the otherwise essential dimensions of hermeneutics and visionary revelations.

The divine Essence is the absolute real. Revelation begins with its effusion on and in its own names present in the holy Book as so many designations of God's active properties, in as much as he enters into a relation with his creation, which is to say, in as much as he epiphanizes himself, reveals himself in the multiplicity of the kingdoms of the universe. The perfect identity of the one with itself does not contradict the multiple epiphany, rather it envelopes it and unfolds itself in it. Thus the real manifests itself in every created existent and in every idea corresponding to such an existent, even as it hides and withdraws itself from the spontaneous comprehension that we have of it. Acceding to the real is a matter of acceding to its identity, which is the being-identical of the universe and divine identity, where identity presents itself under the heading of *form*. The knot of the identity of the being-identical and the created is the form of the being-identical in the created, by which the created reveals itself as the epiphany of the being-identical. But this identity, designated by the divine name the "Apparent," supposes at the same time the divine name of the "Hidden." Identity is the ontological coincidence of apparition and veiling at the heart of the epiphanic unity in which the unity of the real unfolds under a particular modality.

This is why it is impossible to define the real. It would require consciousness of the infinity of forms of manifestation that populate the universe. Only the assumption in an absolute knowledge of the whole of the revealed God would offer a representation of the hidden real, but such a knowledge only belongs to the divine science that knows itself on the level of divine names, not far below Essence. Identity is not re-negated by this wedge between the plane of Essence and the plane of its names. On the contrary, it carries it in itself as that which authorizes the mirror play essential to its manifestation as identity. Therefore, as Ibn Arabî says, all things are the languages of the real.

The model of the mirror suggests the identity of veiling and revelation: one who contemplates a form in the mirror only perceives its form, but never the naked surface of the mirror itself. In the form, he sees himself in the essential unity of the perceiving subject and the perceived object. Therefore, a double veiling occurs that reduces itself to the same: the Essence epiphanizes itself in a form that reveals it all the better insofar as it occupies the whole field of the gaze that contemplates this form. The more intense this contemplation becomes, the more the mirror is ignored. Thus the intensification of the apparition is proportionate with the withdrawal of its substratum, the mirror of Essence. To see in God means to see God. And the more one sees God, the more the imaginal form unfolds in the creative imagination, exemplifying a divine name beyond which Essence withdraws itself.

The intense form that the gaze of the soul created by its imagination, being first an effect of the imagination of God himself, is certainly an epiphany of the divine. It is God who imagines himself in the mirror. But he only imagines himself in the mode of a perceiving subject, from its singular point of view, and slips away from the grasp that would objectivize him. Being the

whole of the Revealed, the Essence, as it manifests itself and not as it is “in itself,” coincides with what it endows with perception and creative imagination, making itself into the subject of perception. Essence “in itself,” as the real, is therefore not a separate “plane,” a disjointed and first hypostasis, nor a principle floating independently over the names and epiphanies. The in-itself is identical to that in which it veils itself, the personal lord devolved into the subject of vision. In the simultaneity of vision and veiling, identity undergoes the experience of its own self without passion. The in-itself is nothing other than the self, in the multiplicity of subjects who perceive the theophany, which is *ipso facto* its own subject, the self manifesting itself as lord in the unity of the gaze.

This identity is not contradicted by the multiplicity of divine names, which is a prelude to the infinite multiplication of epiphanies. Ibn Arabî, in fact, conceives of the structure of the plane of the divine names in a manner somewhat similar to the way Plato conceives, in the *Sophist*, the structure of the intelligible place. On the one hand, the divine names are infinite in that they engender an infinity of forms. On the other hand, they are connected through the play of the same and the other, being and non-being. Every name, infinitely manifest, possesses its own reality by which it distinguishes itself from the other names. Such is what Ibn Arabî calls the essence of the name. But, in addition, what every name has in common with the others is being the name of Essence. Every name is and is not the other names, as it is the same and the other of names. This is why each name expresses Essence under the particular attribute that it designates, while it also partakes of all the other names.

The real epiphany itself in the singularity of the name and, by the same movement, in the totality of the names. The epiphany will be all the more powerful insofar as the subject of vision manages to grasp the interaction of divine names, the universal in the singular. The limit of vision lies in this conjunction, which remains the horizon of the manifestation, just as the intelligible place, for Plato, is the horizon of the upward dialectical movement. Let us note in the meantime that, for Ibn Arabî, there is no dialectic of names, only an immediate coincidence of the singular and the universal, of the distinction and the indistinct, since he does not situate the plane of names on the level of the exercise of any negativity.

Negation intervenes only in the play of the mirror itself, between the Essence and its revelation, in the mode of a reversal of perspective rather than the work of the negative: the Hidden says “No” when the Apparent says “I” — and the Apparent says “No” when the Hidden says “I.” The name “Hidden” designates Essence itself, as we can gain access to it in the negative way. The name “Apparent” designates the whole of manifestation, which opens the field of theophanies through the divine names. The disjunction that founds identity passes between the subject and its other: if Essence is subject, its epiphany says “No,” in that it veils the Essence it reveals; on the other hand, when the personal Lord of vision affirms itself as subject, the Essence withdraws itself.

This oscillating structure is quite different from that which we have discovered in Ismailism, in which negation leaves no gap open, but permits the integration of the manifestation in the identity of Essence on the condition of the retreat of Essence: difference is the instrument of identity. It remains that, from our point of view, from the point of expressive singularity, this difference denoted by the “No” translates itself by perplexity and bewilderment. Perplexity is the science whereby we can acquire the real, and the more we center ourselves around the pole of Essence, the confluent of divine names, the more we lose ourselves, as in a sort of hyper-essential decentering through which we arrive negatively to the one. The epiphany of the identity of the names is certainly an experience of estrangement, but can only be proof of the Stranger who is Essence on the condition of being immediately the experience of Identity.

Estrangement is the retreat of the “He” into “I.” “He” and “I” are identical, but “He” is not “I” in the “I.” Identity is not that of the $A=A$, but that of the $A=\text{not-}A$. The “not” of the not- A is not the negation of the A , in the sense of a passion in which it would annihilate itself while awaiting a negation of the negation, but rather in the sense that not- A designates the place of the manifestation of A , the affirmative theophany the condition of which is the identity of the non-identical. This is why Ibn Arabî can write that in being there is neither resemblance nor dissemblance, since the unity of the real dominates over these opposing terms: a thing, he says, is not the opposite of itself, identity is first and last. Each name excludes Essence, but thereby it also excludes its own reality, since it distinguishes itself, as a singular attribute, from the set of names. This exclusion of Essence is crucial. It alone allows for the total effusion of Essence in each point of the reality of the universe. The one named, expressed by the name and its epiphanies, is the one entirely displayed under an attribute and according to precise and determined modes. The identity of the finite and infinite in the doctrine of theophanies does not reserve for the finite any status that would allow it to corrupt the infinite that it expresses. From a certain angle every form is infinite, but the infinity of essence veils itself in the definite infinity of manifestation.

The essences of the created realities are so many eternal essences (*a'yân thâbita*) the ontological status of which has to be carefully determined. In fact, before the divine existentiation would operate in them (according to a simple priority of the real over the created) the essences are, in a certain sense, pure non-beings. But, in another sense, they are beings, since they belong to the plane or degree of being where the archetypes of the sensible existent constitute themselves. The absence of the necessity of being weighs on the essences like a “divine shadow.” Therefore the entire universe, in its essences, is a shadow and a veil.

Ibn Arabî writes that the essences of the existent are not luminous, since they lack in themselves the light of being. They need the act of the breath of the Merciful (*nafas al-rahmân*) to convert them into the act of existing. The shadow does not obscure the divine Essence, only its manifestations, and in its own way it bears witness to the power of time. It appears to me that

Ibn Arabî conceives of time as a successive movement of existentiations that correspond to the actualization of the eternal essences by the breath of the Merciful. This actualization always leaves to its own future an infinity of epiphanies waiting to appear in the sensible.

This is why, certainly, the real only reveals itself to the existent by manifesting itself through its shadow thrown over the universe, which is the sum of the not yet existentiated existent. Theophany is always light and shadow, full illumination of the form willed by the real, according to its eternal imperative, the darkness of latent essence in the divine science. The essences do not epiphanize themselves in the sensible without the mediation of the dimension of the creative imagination, therefore each sensible form is the deposition, before the gaze, of a mirror that reflects the degree of imaginal being. We only insist on this epiphanic function of the imagination, made explicit by Henry Corbin, in order to emphasize the fact that in all imaginal constitution of form a production shows itself that has its source in the divine subject itself.⁸ The imaginal is not the product of a conscious subject separated from the one, but the creative effectivity of the absolute subject, the real, when it proceeds to the *formation* or configuration of epiphanies where the archetypes and the essences pluralize themselves. This is why, as bearer of light and shadow, the universe in its sensible forms is before all an imagination in actuality. Reality is not imaginary but imaginal in that the imagination that is at work here is that of the real, and therefore it is effectuating and realizing imagination as the immediate transition of the universal essence and the sensible particular, as the very scheme of the divine science.

Ibn Arabî can therefore say that all existence is imagination in an imagination. This, however, is not a consent to the triumph of the image over the concept, but a conception of the generation of the forms of perception. It is to offer to the essence of each existent its full epiphanic power and, reciprocally, to decipher, see, and receive each sensible form as an apparition. Imagination is that of the real itself, the names of which give themselves a figure and appearance in the sensible which is not intelligible, if it is not the phenomenon of the imaginal. Without the schematism of the absolute, through which the imaginal proceeds from the plane of divine names, it would be impossible to understand how the sensible apparition is real, and why it is not deprived of its roots in the real. The beauty of forms or, contrarily, their *tremendum* bears witness to the imaginal. They are not the mere plays of our subjective faculties, but substance itself conceived as the absolute real.

Creative imagination determines the infinite plurality of points of view taken in relation to the real, which form so many acts of faith, so many configurations of God, not in his occultation, but in his revelation. The history of religions is the history of truths, and not the history of ignorance and error, since each religion corresponds to a type of faith in which the revealed God configures itself in the guise of a personal lord, drawn under the traits that typify the act of faith. The universe of theophanies is *ipso facto* a multiple iconostasis. Ignorance and fanaticism consist in reducing the hidden real to its own icon in one's adopted faith.

Idolatry is the restriction of Essence. If the faithful accepts the versatile plenitude of epiphanies, which can assume the eminent form of the election of the Beloved, he discloses the real of the restricted universes, and he accedes to the truth of the multiple, the expression of the unity of the divine names. This is why, in Ibn Arabî's thought, love plays the major role of being the epiphanic experience *par excellence*. Love is always singular, but it dissipates the darkness of the apparent by concentrating on the face of the beloved the contemplation of the divine name as it ties itself to all other names. Love is uniting, in that it makes the lover annihilate himself in the real (Ibn Arabî is therefore the brother of Hallâj and is an inspiration for Rûmî), but he annihilates by singularizing singularity as he consecrates the maximal intensity of unity and existence. Love wipes clean the mirror of imaginal forms. It is the maker not of the imaginary but of reality, as it produces the apparition of the *apparent God*, and unveils it to the one who loves, so that he no longer sees around the center of the beloved a chaos of appearances without the underside of the real, but sees the real itself effusing in the universe. Love unites the perfect man, the microcosm, to the world of the Book and to the book of the world, the world of perception around the pole of creative imagination. And it is this perfect man that it carries to the threshold of Essence through an annihilation that annihilates even the very annihilation.

Thus, theophany authorizes the proximity of the real, as it makes it possible to preserve the transcendence of Essence in its multiplicity. Theophany is the immanence of the one in the multiplicity of emanated unities, and it is the proof of the most distant, the ineffable, that only shows itself by ceasing to name itself. The face of a mirror slides between the name and the named real. It is here that the breath of the Merciful authorizes epiphany, and it is in the visible that epiphany unveils by hiding, and manifests the identity of the near and the proof of the distant. The philosophy of identity allows us to *see* multiplicity in the one, the essential unity enveloped by divine names, even if their realities are multiple and varied. According to Ibn Arabî, the primary substance, the real, announces its presence enveloped in each form, while the variety of forms refers to the singular Essence of God. From the inverse point of view, the same identity preserves the alterity of the Essence in its heart, like an infinite source of production. Without the identity of essence and manifestation, the productive alterity of essence and its epiphanies would be ruined and the finite would revert back to the finite.

Translated by Roland Végő

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1. Nâsir-e Khosraw, *La Livre réunissant les deux sagesses* (Teheran-Paris: Iranian Library 3, 1953), 145. Khosraw (1004-1077) wrote all of his poetry, philosophy, and Ismaili theology in Persian.
2. Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani, *Râhat al-'aql*, ed. Kamil Husayn and Mustafa Hilmi (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1952), 39. See also D. de Smet, *La quiétude de l'intellect* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters and Dep. Oosterse Studies, 1995). For the sake of exposition, de Smet separates the ontological hierarchy of the world of prophecy from that of the world of the imamate. We, however, prefer to shed light on the constant correspondence that Kirmani establishes between the two orders.
3. Kirmani, *Râhat al-'aql*, 40-51.
4. *Ibid.*, 63.
5. *Ibid.*, 67-68.
6. *Ibid.*, 72.
7. Ibn'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). See also Osman Yahia, *Histoire et classification de l'oeuvre d'Ibn'Arabî*, vol. 1 (Damascus: Institut Francais de Damas, 1964), 240. Michel Chodkiewicz is right to argue that the works of Ibn'Arabî “wholly embrace the sciences that the ‘men of the Way’ could not ignore without peril” in *Un ocean sans ravage* (Paris: Seuil, 1992). It remains that the *Fosûs* exhibit, in a singular fashion, a speculative tendency which certainly places them within the horizon of prophetic philosophy and, consequently, within that of philosophy in general.
8. Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

