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Cultural Hermeneutics: The Concept of Imagination in the Phenomenological Approaches of Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade

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Mais pourtant notre être même, en sa profondeur, en sa solitude dernière devant Dieu, n'est-il point soumis à un seul et même appel? Et je sais que je peux prier avec vous.
[HENRY CORBIN to Louis Massignon, October 23, 1936, in *Textes choisis: Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet, Cahier de l'Herne (Paris: Ed. de l'Herne 1981)]

Two original personalities, Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade, have revived a positive notion of the imagination, understood not merely as fantasy but as the scene of an encounter with other worlds. In their own respective works they both recovered a metaphysics of the imagination that, despite superficial resemblances, differs significantly from a Romantic conception. The aim of this article is to uncover the implicit intentions expressed in their approaches and thus to try to answer whether it is possible today to envisage an underlying, common spiritual path shared perhaps not only by Eliade and Corbin, but by all human experience as it participates in the questions that humankind has asked itself.

What both Eliade and Corbin have in common, I shall claim, is a special method of reading texts, a method close to poetic experience, arising from a mode of perception that calls for participation and is, finally, the perception of an overall unity that cannot be captured by either dogma or positive investigation. I shall claim that this particular way they share of reading texts is a complete methodology that enables the interpreter to grasp the essence of all other creative experiences and at the same time to give body to new creations. Such an approach com-

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binés poetic and mystical ecstasy with scholarly investigation and commands two closely related interests: religion and literature (i.e., creativity and the method of understanding creativity through creation).

I hope that this article will help to introduce the readers of this *Journal* to ideas that will merit their further attention and that it will lead to a series of new works in three directions: a more elaborate research into Eliade's philosophical insights and religious ontology;¹ a larger number of studies on Corbin; and finally, a broader and more collaborative method of criticism for all the humanities.² As we shall see, this common approach to reading texts is made possible by a common understanding of the status of the imagination. Briefly stated, both scholars' understanding of the imagination involves the following themes. The imagination, far from being the mere fantasy we usually take it to be, is the active and creative scene of encounters with other worlds through which understanding is achieved. Therefore, it becomes a real presence, bearing the status of an essence perpetually capable of receiving ideas and giving them body. Imagination thus appears as both a means of knowledge and a modality of being, and in that sense it bears a philosophical (existential) dimension. The imagination is thus a mediation, an intermediary world, which objectivizes itself in the physical one. This intermediary world, as it has been treated by both Eliade and Corbin, is capable of achieving a harmonious fusion between philosophy, theology, history, poetry, and all other creative endeavors. Such a synthesis suggests a homology between all kinds of esotericism, whether religious, philosophical, or poetic, for they are all concerned with the problem of inner meaning. The major question that arises then is how, and by what means, are we capable of understanding and interpreting that inner meaning. And the answer is that we are capable of doing so by a peculiar method of investigation which we may designate as a phenomenological hermeneutics.

As a creative method, and thus an imaginative method, attempting to illuminate areas hidden to "objective" analysis, such a hermeneutics involves a sympathetic participation in distant experiences and events.

¹ None of Eliade's critics have conceived a correlation between his methodology and the philosophical phenomenology implied. Compare Douglas Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion: Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions: Religion and Reason* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978). Allen deals with Eliade's religious phenomenology and not with the philosophical phenomenology per se.

² Compare David M. Rasmussen, "Between Autonomy and Sociality," in *Cultural Hermeneutics* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 31–32: "The meaning of culture can be grasped only when a common interchange of ideas and interpretation is possible. A body of critical cultural theory is needed which incorporates not only the praxis of human culture but its telos as well."

Thus, I claim that such a method is both an artistic science and a scientific art, adequate to all humanistic inquiry, without which the inner meaning of a poem, a play, or a novel, as well as the inner meaning of any religious experience, could never be understood. The central postulate of this type of approach is the belief that to everything that is apparent, literal, external, or exoteric there corresponds something hidden, spiritual or esoteric, which can be called the former's essence. Such an essence can be reached, as in philosophical phenomenology, by an intuitive vision, which requires a special method characterized by openness, reception, reexperience, suspension of judgment (the phenomenological *époché*), and sympathetic participation as a mode of feeling. Only then can the invisible world and the mystery of existence be grasped and acknowledged, understood and explained.

Phenomenology takes as its central value the concrete human experience but at the same time grants equal rights to reason. In the classical sense, phenomenology is a return to the things themselves, to immediate experience as it is perceived intuitively on a prescientific ground. This process is usually understood as a peculiar type of interpretation, a regressive analysis, a demythologization, which leads to general synthesis, as it recovers the fullness and richness of the living experience. The term "hermeneutics" stands for a certain conception of philosophy and its typical method. In its broadest sense, hermeneutics means interpretation and the theory of interpretation. It is the art of making obscure expressions clear and understandable.³ In a more philosophical sense hermeneutics involves an imaginative variation that appeals to ontology, and it is directed toward the phenomenon of understanding and its perception, in its scientific and nonscientific modes. The task of phenomenological hermeneutics therefore consists in restoring the initial meaning and understanding of the essence of a living experience through a process of reconstruction of the initial historical and existential situations. As Gadamer pointed out, to be open for and involved in a dialogue that projects you beyond your time implies the power of the free imagination. "It is imagination (*Phantasie*) that is the decisive function of the scholar."⁴ Corbin and Eliade pursue this insight even further in their recovery of the imagination as an intermediary world between sense and intellect, and thus they make a distinctive and essential contribution to the development of a comprehensive phenomenological hermeneutics.

³ Compare Heidegger, *Being and Time*. For him, truth is at the same time closure and disclosure.

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 12.

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Henry Corbin, who was the first to translate Heidegger into French, was also the first to introduce Iranian Islamic philosophy in France. These two achievements exemplify his conception of philosophy. As Corbin himself puts it, a philosopher displays his quest on a variety of fronts only if philosophy does not limit itself to too narrow a concept of rationality. Otherwise, philosophy has nothing to do with wisdom.⁵ Corbin states that what he sought and found in Heidegger he also sought and found in Irano-Islamic metaphysics. Indeed, he claims that it would have been more difficult for him to translate Suhrawardī, Ibn ʿArabī and Mullā Sadrā Shīrāzī, if he had not been exposed to Heidegger. Corbin, just like Eliade, believes that his research work encompasses all philosophical and religious studies, and he recalls that the form that the esotericism took in Islam, as a prophetic religion, helped him better to understand the Christian spirituality of his own tradition. "There are too many things of which I should never have become aware if not for my familiarity with the spiritual world of Iran."⁶ For his own part, Eliade would claim the same thing about the Christian tradition and Mahayana Buddhism.

In the preface to his book *La philosophie iranienne Islamique*, Corbin explains his phenomenological methodology as follows: "Our point of view remains metaphysical. There are metaphysical worlds with their ontological structures... that undergo dramatic adventures, without which the human terrestrial destiny remains incomprehensible. It is this that belongs to certain individuals or to certain communities not to invent, but to unveil, to perceive and to tell."⁷ For Corbin, the phenomenon of the Holy Book engendered a single spiritual discipline within the branches of the religions of the book: a creative hermeneutics whose task is to discover, to understand, to interpret, and to communicate the essence of that book's meaning. Therefore, for Corbin the task of the hermeneut is analogous to that of the philosopher. In fact, they are, and should be considered, inseparable. According to Corbin, interpretation, from a phenomenological point of view, "consists of letting the object show itself such as it shows itself to those to whom and by whom it shows itself."⁸ This implies that only the world of the imagination allows a hermeneutics that takes the spiritual

⁵ Compare Henry Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohrawardi: Entretien avec Philippe Nemo," in *Textes choisis: Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet, Cahier de l'Herne (Paris: Ed. de l'Herne, 1981), p. 24.

⁶ Henry Corbin, *The Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Bollingen Series 91 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 78. See also Henry Corbin, "Quiétude et inquiétude de l'âme dans le soufisme de Ruzbehan Baqli de Shiraz," in *La philosophie iranienne Islamique* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1981).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12; my translation.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25; my translation.

meaning for the literal one and vice versa. (For him, the concept of the imagination becomes a rediscovery of something that was lost and forgotten). The specificity of the phenomenon can be grasped only from a subjective point of view—that to whom it appeared initially. Therefore, in order to understand, the interpreter must let himself live, through his imagination, the situation of his object, its space and time. Hence, history would be perceived as an imaginative scenario, arranging in a meaningful way the totality of events from which meaning is given and extended. Imagination thus partakes of the real. Understanding arises out of a creative imaginative process of interpretation (historical, religious, philosophical, literary, etc.), and in that sense, all interpretation is an imaginative process which is meaningful and real. It is in this light that both Corbin and Eliade understand that phenomenology authorized them to free themselves from mere historicism.

Corbin, for his part, claims that his research originated in his analysis of Heidegger, which showed the ontological roots of historical science, emphasizing that there is a historicity (*historicité*) “deeper” and more “primitive” than the history of external events. Hence, Corbin talks about his refusal to let himself be bound by or confined within the historicity and causality of history. For, if there is a meaning in history, that meaning does not lie within the history of external events, but within the secret, occult, esoteric, and ontological roots of history.⁹ Corbin thus opposes historical and what he calls “gnostic” consciousness because there is a time different from that of history, a time which is real and sacred, which consists of events belonging to the invisible world and which take place within the soul, within the “creativity of the heart” (*himma*). Hence, Corbin comes to designate sacred history by the term Hiero-History¹⁰ (*Hiéro-Histoire*), which concerns not the external events but the esoteric hidden behind the exoteric.

Within such a representation of the world, the symbol plays an essential part, for it is perceived as the cipher of the mysterious, and as such it can never be completely explained; on the contrary, it is subject to new and endless interpretations. It is only the imagination, grasped as the embodiment of the theophanic perception, that is able to change sensible data into symbols, and exterior events into symbolic histories. Hence the indissoluble relationship between the visible, the revealed

⁹ Compare Henry Corbin, *La théologie dialectique et l'histoire* (Paris: Bovin, 1933–34), *En Islam Iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), and *Heidegger—qu'est-ce que la métaphysique—suivi d'extraits sur l'être et le temps et d'une conférence sur Holderlin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938).

¹⁰ Corbin makes use of the word “soul” in an ambivalent way: the soul as the irreducible experience of the subject and the experience that a culture does out of a dimension of human reality.

(*zāhir*), and the invisible, the hidden (*batin*). In that respect Corbin applies the concept of Ibn 'Arabi's mystical theosophy, for whom visible states can never be the causes of other phenomena, for what acts is the invisible, the hidden,¹¹ the immaterial. Truth concerns inner being and esoteric events, which of course correspond to a certain subjective state and therefore should be investigated accordingly. For Corbin, what leads to this meaning is hermeneutics, which thus turns out to be a kind of method, a key capable of opening every particular lock.

Thus, imagination functions directly as a faculty of knowledge, and as the function that assimilates knowledge. However, the ontological status of the imaginative world is neither a place nor a nonplace but, as Corbin calls it, is "le pays du non-ou"¹² settled between the sensible world and the intelligible one. He thus suggests that the hiatus between the pure intelligible and the sensible worlds must be filled by the imagination as an intermediary. Hence, Corbin deals with the imagination not in the usual sense of the word: neither with fantasy, nor with a faculty that produces images identified with the unreal. He deals rather with a basic function of perceiving and understanding through the imagination. Displaying Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics of the active imagination and of the *mundus imaginalis*, Corbin describes the latter as a world that is no longer the empirical world of sense perception but that is neither yet the world of the intellectual intuition of pure intelligibilities. It is a world settled "between the universe that can be apprehended by pure intellectual perception . . . and the universe perceptible to senses"; it is "an intermediate world, the world of Ideas-Images, of archetypal figures, of subtle substances, of immaterial matter."¹³

In other words the imagination becomes the capacity to transmute sensory perceptions and to create new forms of spirituality which manifest themselves in physical form. The creative imagination, seen thus as an organ of the transmutation of the sensible, gives a new status to the image, as it is understood at the level of sense perception. The invisible realities descend to the reality of the image and can again transcend the image's reality and return to the level of ideas. Perceived as such, the imagination is a projection of the inner soul upon the out-

¹¹ Compare the most profoundly characteristic idea of occultism (*ghayba*) or absence of the *Imam*, within the Shi'ite esotericism, with Eliade's interpretation and understanding of *Deus Otiosus*.

¹² See Henry Corbin, *Corps spirituel et terre céleste: De l'Iran Mazdeen à l'Iran Shi'ite* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1979), *Sohrawardi d'Alp (1191): Fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (ishraqi)* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1939), *Sohrawardi al-Maqtul: Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques de Sihabaddin Yahya Sohrawardi* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1952), and "De l'immaterialité de l'imagination et du monde imaginaire," in *La philosophie iranienne Islamique* (n. 6 above).

¹³ Henry Corbin, *The Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, p. 3.

side world; it anticipates all sense perceptions and transmutes them into symbols. "The imagination accomplishes at every instant a 'new creation' and...the image is the recurrence of creation...Without imaginative presence...there would be no manifest existence, that is, no theophany, or in other words, no Creation."¹⁴ In that sense, and only in that sense, for Corbin, as well as for Eliade, the imagination acquires a magical potency for creation, becoming the archetype for creative action. "We wish to stress," says Corbin, "the notion of the image as a body (a magical body, a mental body), in which are incarnated the thought and the will of the soul. The Imagination is a creative magical potency which, giving birth to the sensible world, produces the spirit in forms and colours."¹⁵

Thus, we are entitled to talk about a science of the imagination, and both Corbin and Eliade refer to it as such. In that respect I can justify the statement I made in the introduction to this article, that the special method that both Eliade and Corbin make use of can be designated as a scientific art and an artistic science, as it mediates between creation and the material and makes knowledge in its sensory or perceptive representation intelligible. Hence, the phenomenological approach, as used by Corbin and Eliade, fulfills in its own way the program of Greek science, which is to save the phenomena (*"sauver les phénomènes"*). The technique of understanding, Corbin points out, practiced by the theosophes of Shī'ism, Duodeciman Shī'ism, and Ismailian gnosis in their esoteric hermeneutics of the Koran is the famous technique of making the apparent occult and the occult manifest. This technique is implied by the word *ta'wīl*, which means "carrying back of a thing to its principle," a symbol to what it symbolizes. "The *ta'wīl* is essentially symbolic understanding, the transmutation of everything visible into symbols, the intuition of an essence or person in an image which partakes neither of universal logic nor of sense perception, and which is the only means of signifying what is to be signified."¹⁶

Beginning from such a broader comparative hermeneutics,¹⁷ Corbin insisted on the restoration of a certain idea of theology, which was to be achieved only by the cooperation of all hermeneutics,¹⁸ as practiced in the religions of the book. For, according to him, it was in those reli-

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 244.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁷ See Henry Corbin, "Une hermeneutique spirituelle comparée," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 33 (1965): 71-176.

¹⁸ See the theological origins of hermeneutics as used in philosophy. For the problem of pluralism in interpretation, see also David Tracy, "Creativity in the Interpretation of Religion: The Question of Radical Pluralism," *New Literary History* 35, no. 2 (Winter 1984): 289-309.

gions that hermeneutics developed as a spontaneous exegesis, responsible for all further interpretations. This type of approach proceeds in two ways: the first way consists of becoming a witness of the event, living the event as one of its contemporaries, and thus letting oneself be transformed by the active and creative imagination;¹⁹ the second way consists in making the event one's contemporary, as if it were taking place here and now. To cite Suhrawardi, that would mean to "read the Koran as if it were written just for you." Such an endless dialectic, enacted on two levels of time—past and present—and between different modes of being, is therefore capable of making the past live through the present, and the present through the past, being perpetually open for the future and renewed by new interpretations.²⁰ Meaning grows out of creative interpretation, within one's active and creative imagination, perceived as an intermediary world between that which is a source of knowledge and that which, at the same time, remains unknown. Hence the importance given to the valorization of the imagination for all spiritual experience. In order to understand one needs imagination; only then is one able to recreate life, world, and experience within its initial unity of meaning.

Corbin, therefore, has the merit of making intelligible the objective and real existence of the imagination as an intermediary world; a world of ideas-images, of archetypal figures, of subtle bodies. And the place where, due to the active imagination, the unknown becomes perceptible is precisely the soul,²¹ organ par excellence of the subtle world. Such an active and creative imagination, proper to Ibn 'Arabī and to all mystics and mysticism close to him, to poets and to all artists, joins that imagination which played such an important role for the occidental philosophers of the Renaissance, in which Eliade has maintained continuing interest.

Much like Corbin, Eliade began his scholarly career as a philosopher. Between 1925 and 1926 he published an article on Kierkegaard that turned out to be the first article written on Kierkegaard in Romania. Reading Kierkegaard (as well as other phenomenologists) and writing on him was not a "caprice" or a fashionable intellectual curiosity. Rather, it arose from a deep concern with metaphysics, with being and existence. Fifty years later, Eliade noted in his diary: "Pour moi la

¹⁹ The essence of Corbin's phenomenological approach consists in imagining the other, in being for a moment the other, from within.

²⁰ See also David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981), p. 103: "I can never repeat the classics to understand them. I must interpret them. Only then, as Kierkegaard insisted, do I really 'repeat' them."

²¹ Compare the concept of the *himma*, the creativeness of the heart in esoteric Islam, with the heart where the Upanishads situate the presence of the *atman*, who is "a cave."

première fois que je lis le texte integral de l'opuscule de Kierkegaard *The point of view of my work as an author*. Ce qu'il dit de sa 'duplicité': auteur d'oeuvres esthétiques et morales en apparence, mais en réalité auteur exclusivement religieux. . . . Si j'écrivais un jour une interprétation similaire de mes livres, je pourrais montrer qu'il existe une unité fondamentale de tous mes ouvrages; que l'oeuvre scientifique illustre ma conception philosophique, à savoir qu'il existe un sens profond et significatif de tout ce qu'on appelle 'religion naturelle' et que ce sens interesse directement l'homme moderne."²² As a philosophy student, Eliade wrote his master's thesis on Renaissance philosophers – Marsilio Ficino, Pico de la Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno.²³ Eliade's Romanian mentor, Nae Ionescu, was a professor of logic, metaphysics, and history of metaphysics, and one can easily recognize his influence in Eliade's methodology and conceptions.²⁴ For Ionescu philosophy is but an effort to reach a personal way of thinking; it is an act of life, a living gesture, personal, subjective, and close to the poetic perception of the world of life in its intuitive forms. In other words, philosophy means the interpretation of sensible reality and its adaptation to the needs of one's personality, through a process of spiritual projection over the entire universe. The doctrinal element in Ionescu's thought, however, is his Socratic method of teaching. His rule was that all students were to speak from experience, spontaneously and intuitively. It was this turn to experience which provided the basis for philosophizing. Readers of Ionescu will recognize in the few writings he left the concept of the "second reflection" that attempts to return to a unified and primitive first-person experience of the world. (Although Eliade had some differences with Ionescu, they arose from Eliade's dissatisfaction with the theological inexactness of Ionescu's method and with his political orientation.)

Eliade's Indian mentor, Surendranath Dasgupta, also had a *penché* toward philosophy. With him Eliade studied post-Shankarian Vedanta and the philosophy of Samkhya. Already at that time, Eliade perceived the resemblance between Heidegger's thought and the Hindi philosophy. Thus his interest in India was not limited to Indian culture in general but included Indian philosophy and mysticism in particular. For Eliade, philosophy, metaphysics, philosophy of religion, and

²² Mircea Eliade, *Fragments d'un journal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 1:400.

²³ Compare Eliade's philosophy with Bruno's, who acknowledged the authenticity of religious paganism. Compare also Suhrawardi, who, through a synthesis of Plato and Zarathustra, anticipated Marsilio Ficino.

²⁴ See Nae Ionescu, *Convorbiri* (Freising, 1951), *Metafizica* (Bucharest: Imprimăria Națională, 1942), and *Roza Vinturilor* (Bucharest: Editura Cultura Națională, 1936). Compare Nae Ionescu and phenomenologists such as Gaston Berger, Gabriel Marcel.

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orientalism were the expressions of a single quest: the unity of the spirit, the presence of the transcendent within human experience. Thus, for Eliade there is no contradiction between his vocation as an Orientalist and his passion for Renaissance philosophers, for philosophy in general or for history of religions, nor was there a contradiction between these and his vocation as a writer of fiction. Eliade says:

L'orientalisme n'était qu'une nouvelle version de la Renaissance, la découverte de nouvelles sources et le retour à des sources abandonnées, oubliées. J'étais peut être sans le savoir, à la recherche d'un nouvel humanisme plus large, plus audacieux que l'humanisme de la Renaissance trop dépendent des modèles du classicisme méditerranéen. . . . la vraie leçon de la Renaissance: l'élargissement de l'horizon culturel et la situation de l'homme reconstruite dans une perspective plus vaste. Qu'y a-t-il, à première vue, de plus éloigné de la Florence de Marsilio Ficino que Calcutta ou Rishikesh? Et, cependant, je me trouvais là-bas, parce que je revais retrouver le modèle d'un "homme universel."²⁵

After returning to Romania, he published his most insightful and provocative philosophical essays²⁶ and also participated in the meetings of the avant-garde group, Criterion (1933–34). That group was the first in Romania to deal with Heidegger and Kierkegaard, with experience and existence.

Showing a marked resemblance to Corbin's views on the subject, Eliade recalls that it was not possible to understand man's specific mode of being in the world without some preliminary familiarity with archaic experiences of religion. His understanding of his own Christian tradition became possible through his Indian experience.²⁷ There are, of course, also significant differences between Eliade and Corbin: Eliade does not share Corbin's zeal for the religions of the book nor for the "spiritual chivalry" of the esoteric traditions behind the written traditions of the text; rather, Eliade focuses on the archaic and primal religions.

Hence, in his attempt to find meaning and to understand the unity of the human spirit, Eliade assumed a method of synchronical readings, bringing together different meanings from different cultures and times: the Indo-European, pre-Indian, Oceanic, Central-Asian, and Australian cultures. This particular method is, I am claiming, essen-

²⁵ Eliade, p. 247. For a comparison between yoga and existential philosophy, see also p. 209.

²⁶ See Mircea Eliade, *Fragmentarium* (Bucharest: Ed. Fundatia Regala pentru Literatura si Arta, 1943), *Oceanografie* (Bucharest: Ed. Cultura Poporului, 1934), *Soliloquii* (Bucharest: Ed. Cartea cu Semne, 1932). We hope to see these books published soon in the English translation of Mac L. Ricketts.

²⁷ Compare Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 19 ff.

tially philosophical²⁸ because it is concerned with essence, experience, and meaning. I suggest that such a method — this broad cultural hermeneutics — should be used in all types of humanistic inquiry, aiming to a total comprehension of culture and civilization, of creativity and its meaning. In that respect, the irreducible place of interpretation²⁹ is always linked to the construction of the imagination and imaginative process.

According to Eliade there are no means of understanding history but through its imaginative recreations.³⁰ Following his statement, I claim that there are no other means of understanding any creation whatever but through imaginative recreations. In that sense, rediscovery of meaning is precisely hermeneutical, imaginative, active, and creative. Following Corbin's and Eliade's method of reading texts one may thus conclude that hermeneutics is a humanistic discipline par excellence, starting from and interpreting essence from the very archaic mentalities to the global and synthetic generalizations. True meaning is multiple and polyvalent, and in order to understand it one has to plunge into a process of imaginative recreations. Eliade observes that even by knowing we do not understand.³¹ For him, the structure of understanding is close to intuition and revelation³² and thus to the poetic, ecstatic, and creative moments of the mind. "Understanding is ecstatic and contemplative, not reductionist and analytical. Understanding is given to us, from somewhere within ourselves or from the outside, but it is not known through thinking,"³³ anymore than phenomenology can be learned from books. Eliade claims that the term "interpretation," while not very precise, implies a "transmutation of the person which receives, interprets and assimilates the revelation."³⁴

²⁸ See, e.g., Etienne Gilson's letter to Mircea Eliade (1953) in Eliade, *Fragments d'un journal*, p. 212: "Je ne doute pas que vous ne soyez cité quelque jour par les historiens de la philosophie comme ayant ouvert des perspectives ignorées jusqu'à vous sur la préhistoire de la métaphysique du temps chez Platon, Plotin et Saint Augustin."

²⁹ Compare William Brede Kristensen, "On the Study of Religious Phenomena," in *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods and Theories of Research*, ed. Jean Jacques Waaldenburg (The Hague: Mouton, 1973). According to him, understanding is approximative, and it is only possible by means of empathy, by means of trying to relive the experience of the other. And this is only possible with the power of the imagination.

³⁰ See Eliade, *Fragments d'un journal*, p. 547: "L'hermeneutique historico-religieuse que tentent certains d'entre nous (Corbin, moi, Ricoeur — et qui encore pour le moment?). Point de départ: une révélation, bien qu'effectuée dans un moment historique bien délimité, est toujours trans-historique, 'universelle' et susceptible d'interprétations personnelles."

³¹ See Eliade, *Soliloquii*, p. 73.

³² Compare Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

³³ Eliade, *Soliloquii*, p. 73. See also Mircea Eliade, "Itinerariu Spiritual IX — Misticismul," in *Cuvânturi*, III 9111, October 30, 1927, "Cuvinte despre o filozofie," in *Gândirea*, VII, 6-7, 1928, both in Archives of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest.

³⁴ Eliade, *Fragments d'un journal*, p. 547.

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Hence, hermeneutical reflection, a result of erudition and exegesis, must always express itself through personal intuition and creative imagination. The ideal condition of understanding would thus be spontaneity—realizing an ontological situation spontaneously, intuitively, and imaginatively through techniques of contemplation proper to the oriental traditions and some philosophical training, which provides access to other realities. “Understanding people’s mythologies and theologies,” claims Eliade, “is understanding their mode of being in the world.”³⁵

For Eliade and for Corbin, religious experience is always existential. Interpretation is not possible without an inner comprehension of that existential experience, and this presupposes a certain kind of living, an imaginative living in participation and subjectivity³⁶ (or as we often call it, in sympathy). For Eliade, any process of understanding operates through living, through certain experiences, and develops on an inner level³⁷ that is esoteric and not exoteric. Hence, such an imaginative process implies living a situation again and again along with all the rest of humanity’s possible existential situations. In such a process phenomena observed should be understood within their own frame of reference, and not ours, although they also speak to us and have meaning for us. Exegesis is possible only through a creative preunderstanding (what Eliade calls intuition) of the entire situation, in a holistic and pluralistic perspective. Thus, the most appropriate attitude through which one can discern the meaning of a human situation and/or experience is not one of objectivity, but one of subjective sympathy and participation. Thus, one of the main aspects—and perhaps one of the most important ones—of Eliade’s phenomenological hermeneutics is represented by the unity between intuition and text,³⁸ when the entire world represents an open text. All exegesis, accordingly, moves from events to essence, from the particular to the general, from simple conclusions to the whole system of meaning. All is linked, everything is connected, nothing remains isolated, and all fragments acquire meaning and content only if integrated within the whole. (Essence is understood as the general, total, and synthetic orientation, fundamental to any perception).³⁹

³⁵ Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth*, p. 156.

³⁶ See Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, 1982), the comparative inductions.

³⁷ Compare Henry Corbin, “L’interiorisation du sens en hermeneutique soufie iranienne,” in *Eranos Jahrbuch* 26 (1957): 58.

³⁸ Compare Adrian Marino, *Hermeneutica lui Mircea Eliade* (Cluj-Napoca: Ed. Dacia, 1980), p. 123.

³⁹ Compare Eliade, *Oceanografie* (n. 26 above), p. 12, and *Fragmentarium* (n. 26 above), p. 156.

In that respect, Eliade considers the hermeneutical act as a possibility of mediation between past and present, pointing to the future through a dialectic that imaginatively transforms being and text: being becomes contemporary with the text, and the text becomes contemporary with being. "I feel myself wholly contemporary with all the great political and social reforms or revolutions. I want to recognize myself—in the philosophical sense—in my fellow man,"⁴⁰ says Eliade. The hermeneutical act is possible for him only when it begins by identifying and defining archetypal situations. These translate primordial experiences, and reference to their content involves grasping the essential meanings of all phenomena. The goal of hermeneutics consists, then, in finding and rediscovering meanings, as they are articulated within a coherent vision, making transparent that which is allusive, occult, cryptic, or fragmentary. The deciphering of deep meanings presupposes "hidden," "hermetical" truth and, thus, adequate methods of investigation. Hence, one can easily perceive that what predominates in Eliade's spiritual orientation and methods of investigation is the esoteric rather than the exoteric, the hidden and the occult rather than the visible and the manifest. We see thus that it is this oriental way of thinking, which is much more inclusive and contemplative than the Western one, which has greatly influenced both Eliade⁴¹ and Corbin. Eliade's entire oeuvre—theoretical writings in the history of religions, philosophical essays, fictional writings, autobiographical fragments, and drama—is founded on the basic idea that miracle is unrecognizable. The sacred is disguised under the profane and vice versa. Already in *Oceanografie* Eliade sensed this basic intuition—the mystery of disguise which arises at the bottom of all metaphysics.⁴² "The unrecognizable is the perfect form of divine revelation: the sacred no longer manifests or marks itself present by contrast; it acts directly on mankind by contact and union."⁴³

⁴⁰ Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth* (n. 27 above), pp. 136–37. Compare Corbin.

⁴¹ Compare Allen (n. 1 above). Referring to Eliade's oriental orientation, both in thinking and methodology, see Sergiu Al-Ghorge, *Arhaic si universal* (Bucharest: Ed. Eminescu, 1981); Ioan Petru Culianu, *Mircea Eliade—orizzonte filosofico* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1978); Marino. On oriental influences on Romanian culture, see Franz Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (Paris: Leroux, 1909); *Annales du Musée Guimet*, vol. 24, *La theologie solaire du paganisme romain* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1909). In that respect, cf. the doctrine of light and darkness in ancient Persia (Ahura Mazda, Zarathustra) with the Dacian God, Zalmoxis (Gebelesis). Compare Henry Corbin, *Les motifs Zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi* (Teheran: Ed. du Coudrier, 1946). See also Mircea Eliade, "Le double visage de l'Asie et la tradition orientale de la culture roumaine," *Centre Roumain de Recherche Bulletin* 1 (1951): 40; Lazăr Săineanu, *Influenta orientală asupra limbii și culturii române* (Bucharest, 1900).

⁴² Compare Eliade, *Fragments d'un journal* (n. 22 above), p. 265.

⁴³ Eliade, *Oceanografie*, p. 97. Within Eliade's way of thinking one can distinguish two types of mysticism (cf. Allen [n. 1 above]): the differentiated union, characterized by a mystical achieve-

Thus, this type of phenomenological hermeneutics can offer to all historical and nonhistorical disciplines a meaningful perception of the existential dimension (whether religious, philosophical, poetical, or otherwise) in its intuitive and imaginative aspects. This is the raw material for all types of creative investigation, for all types of creation and creativity. "You participate in the phenomenon you are attempting to decipher, as though you were pouring over a palimpsest of your own genealogy and the past history of your own self. It is your history. And the power of the irrational is certainly lurking there. The historian of religion is motivated by an ambition to know, and therefore also to understand the roots of his culture, of his being."⁴⁴ The imagination, thus placed as a mediator between the sensible and the intelligible, between the senses and the intellect, becomes a ground for knowledge and culminates in the notion of the symbol. That intermediary reality exists precisely because it unveils the modalities of the real: experience and being. It is in this sense that both Eliade and Corbin understand the imagination, which is not the sense of mere fantasy, proper to Romanticism.

To sum up Corbin's and Eliade's approaches, their creative hermeneutics presupposes concrete experience: authentic living, intuition, sympathetic participation, and intense imagination capable of allowing a mental conversion of the historical moment in order to locate the specific project of thinking within the perspective of its own horizon. Their exemplary hermeneutics offers endless possibilities for deciphering mainly because it reveals certain values not evident on the level of immediate experience; it reveals hidden meaning, touching the poetic rather than the objective perception of the world. Such a creative hermeneutics defines its interpretations as the "living sources of a given culture, for, in fact, all culture is made out of a series of interpretations and re-evaluations of myth."⁴⁵ Hermeneutics is therefore called to stimulate a given culture in a creative way and also to stimulate the encounter with other universes and spiritual systems, through a process of transformation and imaginative reconstruction of the sacred.

ment that calls for a union with the ultimate reality and that, however, remains transcendent (thus implying the duality of the usual occidental pattern) and the undifferentiated union, characterized by a fusion within the other. In this second case mystical achievement calls for a total union, a perfect identification with the ultimate reality, and reflects the usual oriental pattern (although some occidental mystics have been inspired by it). These two types of mysticism seem to be harmoniously integrated by Eliade's vision, aiming to unite all the contraries and to achieve the *coincidentia oppositorum*. (Indeed, we can point to a parallel between the concept of "*Deus Absconditus*" and its passage to "*Deus Revelatus*" as described by Corbin, and that of "*Deus Otiosus*" as described by Eliade.)

⁴⁴ Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth* (n. 27 above), p. 121.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

Hence, all interpretation is a spiritual recreation, a creative individual expression of the universal imagination. The hermeneutical process enlarges itself—in Eliade's and Corbin's approaches—from the analysis of the religious phenomenon to the spiritual, artistic, and philosophical one. I would, furthermore, venture to say that it provides the foundations for a new philosophical anthropology, which can stimulate other ways of thinking. As Eliade rightly claims, "Quand on étudie les religions (Bouddhisme, Zoroastrisme, etc.) on ne fait pas de l'érudition—mais on affronte les problèmes de la philosophie d'aujourd'hui."⁴⁶ I claim that such a method, which is never reductive and which does justice both to being and experience, pointing at the same time to the "wholly other," should be considered and given more attention in the humanities.

Corbin's work finds its meaning in the central question of whether or not it is possible radically to change the direction of modern, Western ways of thinking,⁴⁷ by a transmutation that should come from the heart, so that our perception would then be able to turn itself toward other philosophies and cultures and to rejuvenate our cultural tradition. Paraphrasing Christian Jambet, one may say that one of the most important contributions of Corbin's lies in this project of recovering a way of thinking for which the philosophical question, *Que nous-est-il permis d'espérer?* can be raised from different perspectives. Eliade, on his part, believes that, "at a certain moment, what we do in the realm of art, of science, of philosophy, will have a political effect: alter man's consciousness, breathe a kind of hope into him."⁴⁸ Both Eliade and Corbin address themselves to a certain set of symbolic expressions by which we may better understand ourselves. This indirect path via symbol and through interpretation constitutes the turn to their particular type of phenomenological hermeneutics. Humanity cannot know itself directly; therefore, it must take the path of indirectness, in order to reach its essence. (For the same reason, I claim that a basic indirectness is required in the reading of Corbin and Eliade.) Hence, certain essential truths, expressions of the mystery of human existence, will always remain the source for a philosophical quest and, thus, subject to interpretation. In that way, through imagination, human possibilities for transcendence are made concrete.

Although Corbin used his methodology mainly concerning the religions of the book, while Eliade used his mainly concerning archaic and primitive unwritten traditions, they nevertheless used the same

⁴⁶ Eliade, *Fragments d'un journal* (n. 22 above), p. 502.

⁴⁷ Compare Jambet (n. 5 above).

⁴⁸ Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth*, p. 80.

approach in assimilating a common message, whether of the archaic, protohistorical, oriental, or non-European cultures; a message that undoubtedly expresses our own spirituality and cultural world. What Eliade teaches us to see in the Australian religions, or Corbin in Shī'ite spirituality, is not alien to us, for what they bring to life is but a universal meaning of mankind, an unknown that is still ours, part of our history, culture, and civilization. Beginning with a method of philosophical phenomenology, both Eliade and Corbin send us from one civilization to another, back and forth, therefore reminding us that the true humanistic quest takes place everywhere, and on different planes simultaneously. Both Eliade and Corbin sought to grasp the entire destiny of human life, whether in the essence of its religious roots, its mystical poetry, art, or myth, and by so doing both of them led to what we today call cultural hermeneutics.

In conclusion, it can be said that the essential community between the visible and the invisible, between the occult and the revealed, can be grasped intuitively, as it restored the common ground lying between the physical and the spiritual. That common ground is the imagination which bears both a poetic and a cognitive function. Hence, the imagination becomes a real presence, mediating between different levels of being and experience. Through a multiplicity of meanings and endless possibilities of human existence, the imagination points thus to the unity of the spirit in an all-embracing universal harmony. A methodology suitable for this type of investigation and understanding, thus comprising the deepest insights of reality and of the human condition, would be a total hermeneutics. As such, this method proves to be both an art and a science. Moreover, we can not only apply to the present but can also claim actuality for the ancient spiritualities that both Corbin and Eliade mediated, which have thereby been understood anew. We may then say, together with Einstein, that "to know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms — *this knowledge, this feeling*, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the rank of devoutly religious men."⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Philip Frank, *Einstein: His Life and Times* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 284, trans. from German by George Rosen, ed. and rev. Shuichi Kusaka; my emphasis.