



***Cosmic Dervish***

Shahna Lax, 2004

31.5" x 17.75"

Etched copper with fretwork exposed to acid rain;  
framed in rough fir

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# Towards A Science of Gnosis: Intimations of An Imaginal Theory of Knowledge

Kiley Laughlin

## Abstract

The publication of *The Red Book* (2009) has provided a better appreciation of C.G. Jung's use of the imagination while exploring the unconscious. The imagination seems to have its own way of knowing that informs Jung's active imagination, Henry Corbin's *mundus imaginalis*, and the Islamic notion of *ta'wil*. Jung's notion of a collective unconscious coincides in a number of ways with the *mundus imaginalis*. Corbin's rendering of the *mundus imaginalis* and Jung's collective unconscious seem to intimate a return to the root metaphors of human experience. All of these ideas suggest that image is essential to the formation of knowledge.

## Key Words

Gnosis, *mundus imaginalis*, *ta'wil*, active imagination,  
collective unconscious, epistemology

## Introduction

The primary goal of this essay is to examine and compare the Islamic idea of *ta'wil* and C.G. Jung's active imagination method as alternative ways of knowing. Furthermore, I deemed it necessary to explore a number of other ideas associated with the works of both the C.G. Jung and scholar of religious history Henry Corbin, so as to amplify the main topics of this essay, which are as follows:

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Henry Corbin's *mundus imaginalis*, Jung's confrontation with the unconscious and active imagination as *ta'wil*. Lastly, I will conclude the essay by providing commentary on the idea of gnosis and its relationship to the archetypal imagination.

Two topics of interest—Jung's confrontation with the unconscious and Corbin's *mundus imaginalis*—in particular warrant some introductory remarks. While discussing Jung's confrontation with the unconscious I am referring to the series of psychological experiences he recorded in *The Red Book* (2009) and chapter six of his autobiography. For Corbin's idea of a *mundus imaginalis* I rely heavily on material drawn from his essay of the same name (1972). In that essay, Corbin defined the *mundus imaginalis* as a mode of perception and an order of reality associated with what Muslim mystics designated as the “eighth climate.” Corbin intentionally chose the Latin term *mundus imaginalis* in order to distinguish it from the imaginary, a word that people too often associate with the unreal. Corbin extrapolated the idea of the *mundus imaginalis* from the Arabic word *alam al-mithal* which translates as “the world of the image.” In this context, the term image is intended to convey a more general understanding and does not denote a pure visual experience but subsumes a wide range of psychosomatic and suprasensory states.

The collective unconscious, in my own words, can best be understood as a psychic repository of the basic patterns of human experience. Jung defined the concept several times throughout his work and I have selected the following definitions as the most apropos given the scope of this paper. According to Jung:

The concept of the unconscious is for me an *exclusively psychological concept*, and not a philosophical concept in the metaphysical sense. In my view, the unconscious is a psychological boundary-concept which covers all those psychic contents or processes which are not conscious, i.e., *not related to the ego in a perceptible way*. (1923/1959, p. 283)

And also

The collective unconscious is a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not, like the latter, owe its existence to personal experience and consequently is not a personal acquisition. (1936/1959, CW9i, para. 88)

Jung did not invent the idea of a collective unconscious but reformulated the idea into a depth psychological theory. The idea of a collective soul at the time was not a novel one and its history can be traced back to a number of philosophies and cultural movements to include eighteenth century Romanticism, the Renaissance, and Neo-Platonism. In fact, Jung accredited the ideas of Carl Gustav Carus and Eduard Von Hartmann as central to his own rendering of the unconscious (Shamdasani, 2003, p. 165). The philosophy of Immanuel Kant also significantly influenced Jung's notion of an a priori unconscious and he equated it with Kant's idea of a negative borderline concept (i.e., thing-in-itself), that is to say, something that does not physically exist but nonetheless can be indirectly inferred as a result of objectifying psychological experience (Jung as cited in Shamdasani, p. 237). It was this aspect of Jung's conceptual hypothesis that led him to view the unconscious as 1) distinct from consciousness, and 2) autonomous. Thus, an understanding of these main theoretical points of Jung's concept of an unconscious is essential while discussing his confrontation episode.

### **Henry Corbin's *Mundus Imaginalis***

Henry Corbin (1903-1978) was educated in philosophy at the Catholic Institute in Paris. Corbin began his career as a scholar at the National Library in 1929 where he met Louis Massignon. Massignon, a French scholar of Islam, introduced Corbin to the works of the Muslim mystic and founder of Illuminationist philosophy Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (1155-1191). Suhrawardi's writings, in the tradition of the Persian scholar Ibn Sina (Avicenna), played an essential role in Corbin's postulate of the *mundus imaginalis*. Henry Corbin was a frequent lecturer at the Erano conferences in Ascona, Switzerland, having first attended the annual

conference in 1949. He returned to lecture there nearly every year until his death in 1978 (Cheetham). During his time at Eranos, Corbin collaborated with Jung and thus it is not surprising that we see a Jungian influence in Corbin's work during his middle years.

As noted, Corbin did not coin the term *mundus imaginalis* but abstracted it from the collected works of a long line of Muslim neo-Platonic visionaries to include Avicenna, Suhrawardi, and Mullah Sadra. Not only did Corbin believe the *mundus imaginalis* was a credible idea but was convinced that it was ontologically real. In other words, the *mundus imaginalis* had a genuine mode of existence and its own topology of being. For Corbin, the *mundus imaginalis* was not a concrete thing or place but rather a perspective, that is to say, a way of seeing things. Like Jung, Corbin recognized that reality was not limited to merely what one could tangibly see or touch, but penetrated the totality of one's being. To gain access to the *mundus imaginalis*, one first required an appropriate orientation to esoteric hermeneutics or what is known as *ta'wil* in Islam, which I will further explore later.

One can also discern a clear influence of Corbin's ideas in James Hillman's archetypal psychology which should come as no surprise since Hillman named Henry Corbin "The second immediate father of archetypal psychology" (1983, p. 11). Corbin maintained that the *mundus imaginalis*, as originally conceived by Islamic thinkers, was a phenomenon *sui generis* grounded in the real world. Corbin explained why he selected the term:

Hence I needed to find a good equivalent for the Arabic term '*alm al-mithal*. It would have to designate a world, a mode of being and knowledge which are at the level of the imagination, yet which are far from unreal, since they have a perfect right to be considered as real, as part of a reality *sui generis*. The term *mundus imaginalis* is exactly equivalent as Arabic '*alm al-mithal*. (1998, p. 166)

Furthermore, Corbin, having specialized in Muslim Shi'ite doctrine, highlighted suggestive parallels between Jung's archetypal reality and Islam's notion of an imaginal reality populated by ontologically real beings. According to Hillman

The *mundus imaginalis* offers an ontological mode of locating the archetypes of the psyche as the fundamental structures of the imagination or a fundamentally imaginative phenomena that are transcendent to the world of sense in their value if not their appearance. (1983, p. 12)

Corbin frequently employed technical terms ostensibly gleaned from Jung's lexicon like archetype which refers to humankind's inherited modes of psychic functioning.

### **Jung's Confrontation with the Unconscious**

As early as 1913 Jung began to document a series of personal experiences that he would later call his "confrontation with the unconscious" (1961, pp. 170-199). According to Jung, the images arose from his unconscious and were not merely products of his imagination but demonstrated psychic objectivity (1961, p. 183). Jung subsequently attributed significant value to that period of his life:

The years, of which I have spoken to you, when I pursued the inner images, were the most important time of my life. Everything else is to be derived from this. It began at that time, and the later details hardly matter anymore. My entire life consisted in elaborating what had burst forth from the unconscious and flooded me like an enigmatic stream and threatened to break me. That was the stuff and material for more than only one life. Everything later was merely the outer classification, scientific elaboration, and the integration into life. But the numinous beginning, which contained everything, was then. (2009, p. VII)

It was during those years (1913-1916) that Jung discovered what he would later name active imagination. Therefore, one could say that Jung arrived at his active imagination method as a result of those formative years when he confronted his unconscious and assigned meaning and value to its images.

The main reason I have included a topical section on Jung's confrontation with the unconscious is due to its phenomenological similarity

with Corbin's description of visionary experiences in the *mundus imaginalis*. Does *The Red Book* document Jung's exploration of the *mundus imaginalis*? All things being equal, I think that one could argue that there is sufficient anecdotal evidence, which I will later allude to, to suggest that Jung's confrontation episode was on par with other visionary ontologies such as the *mundus imaginalis*. To be clear, I cannot prove that Jung's confrontation with the unconscious was another subjective representation of the *mundus imaginalis*. I can only posit its possibility by comparing Jung's written account with the documented experiences of other visionary thinkers. In this way, it is difficult to diagnose Jung's confrontation experience without first conducting a brief comparative study as a means of amplification. Since the *mundus imaginalis* is rooted in Islamic tradition, Muhammad, the founder of Islam, seems a model analogue for comparison.

At the age of 40, Muhammad periodically retreated to a cave at the base of a mountain named Jabal Al-Nur located in modern day Saudi Arabia where he would go to meditate. During one of his sojourns there, Muhammad reported that he experienced a vision and heard a voice which ordered him to recite. Muhammad subsequently identified the voice as the angel Gabriel. Upon returning home, Muhammad was shaken by his encounter and it was not without hesitation that he eventually resolved to accept the validity of his visions in the cave (Armstrong, 2002, p. 3). Jung too, at approximately the same age—Jung was 38—had a vision. The vision occurred in 1913 and ostensibly foreshadowed the start of World War I (Jung, 1961, p. 175). Another vision, and a series of vivid dreams, predated the breakout of the war in August 1914. Jung proceeded to write down his visions and fantasies while attempting to translate his attendant emotions into images. Jung further explained the process in his autobiography:

I wrote down the fantasies as well as I could, and made an earnest effort to analyze the psychic conditions under which they had arisen. But I was able to do this only in clumsy language. First I formulated the things as I observed them, usually in "high-flown lan-

guage,” for that corresponds to the style of the archetypes. (1961, p. 178)

In this passage, Jung was alluding to the *prima materia* of his fantasies which would later congeal into *The Red Book*. The cave motif was also present in Jung's first figurative descent into the unconscious:

I was sitting at my desk once more, thinking over my fears. Then I let myself drop. Suddenly it was as though the ground literally gave way beneath my feet, and I plunged down into the dark depths. I could not fend off a feeling of panic. But then, abruptly, at not too great a depth, I landed on my feet in a soft, sticky mass. I felt great relief, although I was apparently in complete darkness. After a while my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, which was rather like a deep twilight. Before me was the entrance to a dark *cave* [italics added], in which stood a dwarf with a leathery skin, as if he were mummified. (1961, p. 179)

The cave in fact is a symbol par excellence of the unconscious, and it is not surprising that both individual's visionary account, not unlike Plato, mentioned a cave. An entire chapter in the Qur'an, Surah 18, employs the cave symbol as its primary motif. Jung was well aware of the archetypal symbolism of Surah 18, having observed that "This entire Surah is taken up with a rebirth mystery. The cave is the place of rebirth, the secret cavity in which one is shut up in order to be incubated and renewed" (para. 240, CW9i, 1940/1950). Jung further suggested that Surah 18 means that:

Anyone who gets into that cave, that is to say into the cave which everyone has in himself, or into the darkness that lies behind consciousness, will find himself involved in an—at first—unconscious process of transformation. By penetrating in to the unconscious he makes a connection with his unconscious contents. This may result in a momentous change of personality in the positive or negative sense. (1940/1950, CW9i, para. 241)

Jung was well aware of the uncanny parallels between his experience and those of other historical visionary figures, to include Muhammad. For instance, in the original transcription notes of *The Red Book* dated Janu-

ary 26, 1924, Carey Baynes wrote the following to Jung:

There were various figures speaking, Elias, Father Philemon, etc. but all appeared to be phases of what you thought ought to be called “the master.” You were sure that the latter was the same who inspired Buddha, Mani, Christ, *Mahomet* [italics added]—all those who may be said to have communed with God. (2009, p. 213)

It seems that the cultural context combined with historical setting co-opts the ego’s experience of the ‘other,’ and in this way, one’s perspective significantly colors the subsequent interpretation of that experience, whether sacred or profane. In Muhammad’s case, he encountered an angel in a cave. For Jung on the other hand, he descended into a phantasmal realm peopled by exotic biblical figures—Elijah and Salome—that best fit his own personal mythology. A verse from the Gnostic book *The Acts of Peter* aptly illustrates this point: “I saw him in such a form as I was able” (as cited in Corbin, 1998, p. 131). In any case, it seems that the spirit of the depths, another term for the unconscious, expresses itself through the contextual mouthpiece of the spirit of the times; not unlike Plato’s idea of anamnesis, of which Jung said “So it is with the individual images: they need a context, and the context is not only a myth but an individual anamnesis” (1941/1959, CW9i, para. 319).

### **Active Imagination as Ta’wil**

Corbin indicated that the word *ta’wil* etymologically means “to bring back the data to their origin, to their archetype, in their *donor*” (1977, p. 53). He added that:

*ta’wil* is preeminently the hermeneutics of symbols, the ex-egesis, the bringing out of hidden spiritual meaning. Without the *ta’wil*, Suhrawardi’s Oriental Theosophy would not exist, nor any spiritual phenomenon in general, namely Shi’ite gnosis, by which the meaning of Islam is transfigured. (1977, p. 53)

The word’s meaning is comparable with the meaning of the word religion, which etymologically indicates a “linking back to the source” (Jung, 1951/1958, CW9i, para. 271). Similarly, Corbin viewed *ta’wil*, like his

Muslim visionary predecessors, as a heirophanic operation. He also considered *ta'wil* to be a hermeneutic technique, a basic means to *see through* the superposition of visionary realms described in Islamic cosmology and doctrine. One might then say that *ta'wil* is a process of seeing with the totality of the soul rather than the liminality of the eyes. Viewed through the lens of Jung's psychology, *ta'wil* bears a striking resemblance to his active imagination method, a type of reverie where "images have a life of their own and that the symbolic events develop according to their own logic" (Jung as cited in Chodorow, 1997, p. 45). It should be noted that Corbin did not employ the term active imagination in exactly the same way as Jung. Corbin viewed *the active Imagination* as an organ of perception whereas Jung presented his method as more of a dialectic process. According to Corbin, "The intermediate world is accessible only to the active Imagination, which is at the same time the founder of its own universe and the transmuter of sensory data into symbols" (1977, p. 84). In this sense, Corbin's active Imagination seems inextricably linked to *ta'wil*. The active imagination:

does not construct something unreal, but unveils the hidden reality; its action is in short, that of *ta'wil*, the spiritual exegesis practiced by all of the spirituals of Islam, whose special quality is that of alchemical meditation: to occultate the apparent, to manifest the hidden. (Corbin, 1977, p. 12)

Jung formulated his active imagination method while suffering from a creative illness which coincided with his confrontation with the unconscious. Jung first alluded to the method, which he initially called spontaneous fantasy, as early as 1916. Of those fantasies, Jung said:

They usually have a more composed and coherent character and often contain much that is obviously significant. Some patients are able to produce fantasies at any time, allowing them to rise up freely simply by eliminating critical attention. Such fantasies can be used, though this particular talent is none too common. The capacity to produce free fantasies can, however, be developed with practice. The training consists first of all in systematic exercises for

eliminating critical attention, thus producing a vacuum in consciousness. (as cited in Chodorow, 1997, p. 50)

Jung's description above marked his first attempt at articulating the method he would later formulate into active imagination. However, it is necessary to point out that as early as childhood, Jung had lucid hypnagogic experiences that were consistent with the characteristics of active imagination (1961, p. 18).

One noteworthy similarity between active imagination and *ta'wil* is the idea of personifying. Active imagination tends to personify the inner images in a figurative way so that they may have a life of their own. The anima appears not as an abstract idea, but rather as an archetypal person that one may communicate with; or as Hillman has suggested "Where imagination reigns, personifying happens" (1975, p. 17). Likewise, Corbin said that the *mundus imaginalis* is populated by imaginal beings to include angels. While accessing the *mundus imaginalis*, Suhrawardi even claimed that he spoke with the angel Gabriel, not unlike Muhammad in the cave. Notwithstanding some contextual differences, one could liken an angel to an archetype. In fact, Jung reasoned that "If angels, are anything at all, they are personified transmitters of unconscious contents that are seeking expression" (1938/1954, CW13, para. 108). In the afore-said passage, Jung seemed to be describing the emergence of the archetype per se into a particular conscious manifestation. The chief function of an angel in most theological and metaphysical traditions is that of a messenger, that is to say, a transmitter of knowledge from the unconscious to consciousness. The late Jungian writer Walter Odajnyk offered some similar insights:

From the point of view of Jungian psychology, angels are manifestations of the various characteristics and functions that belong to the transpersonal archetype of the Self or are attributes projected onto it by human beings, e.g., power, protection, intelligence, narcissism, pride, the source of life and death and of good and evil. As messengers, they represent attempts on the part of the Self to convey information to ego consciousness that otherwise would not be understood or apprehended. (2010)

Active imagination, as conceived by Jung, could be interpreted as a form of Western *ta'wil*; and one could argue that the phenomenology of Jung's *mundus archetypus* is another way of describing the visionary experience of the *mundus imaginalis*, albeit viewed within the tradition of medieval alchemy and the more modern framework of analytical psychology. It seems to me then that if Jung were an Imam, he unknowingly acquired an orientation to *ta'wil* as an esoteric hermeneutic thereby discovering a means to access the *mundus imaginalis*. One could therefore speculate that *ta'wil*, not unlike active imagination, is a figurative key to the doors of the intermediate world of Avicennian cosmology: the *mundus imaginalis*. This insight is consistent with Corbin's contention that "The proper organ of access to this intermediate world is not to be found in any sensory faculty, nor in the *virtus intellectualis*, but in the active Imagination" (1998, p. 124). Thus, both *ta'wil* and active imagination could be viewed as a kind of visionary knowledge that enables the subject to engage directly with the interiority of his soul.

Active imagination apparently has the potential to transmute the psyche through the transcendent function, which is what occurs when the tension of polarities produce a new psychic situation. Few people, particularly those with a western orientation, appreciate the meaning of active imagination. Marie Louise Von Franz suggested that not only does active imagination facilitate the individuation process, but allows one to turn his consciousness "towards the events which happen on the middle plane, on the events which evolve within your active imagination" (Von Franz as cited in Raff, 2000, p. 24 ). Von Franz' choice of words—middle plane, events, evolve—seem to describe in depth psychological terms the *mundus imaginalis*.

Both *ta'wil* and active imagination appear to belong to the same epistemological category, that is to say, they both are a type of analogical knowledge. Human beings have the tendency to analogize when confronted with two separate experiences that are cognitively and linguistically related, albeit at an unconscious level. Regarding the importance of analogy, Jung acknowledged that:

Since analogy formation is a law which to a large extent governs the life of the psyche, we may fairly conjecture that our—to all appearances—purely speculative construction is not a new invention, but is prefigured on earlier levels of thought. (1951/1959, CW9ii, para. 414)

Furthermore, Corbin's formulation of the *mundus imaginalis* based on extant depth psychological material may represent an attempt to return to the root metaphors of human experience, which seem equivalent in a roundabout way to Jung's archetypes. When people analogize and compare, they are drawing from a priori patterns of the psyche. These innate dispositions—the river beds of the soul—define the channels of psychic energy that flow into conscious awareness. Thus, the human mind apparently has a natural propensity to link disparate kinds of knowledge via analogy which is not at all different from the process of mythologizing. The imagination operates via similar cognitive and linguistic pathways resulting in the formation of symbols. A symbol, after all, is merely a metaphor, a necessary perspective that arises from the vagaries of the mind. Speaking from the point of view of cognitive science, Douglas Hofstadter described the process more colloquially:

Mature human brains are constantly trying to reduce the complexity of what they perceive, and this means that they are constantly trying to get unfamiliar, complex patterns made of many symbols that have been freshly activated in concert to trigger just one familiar pre-existing symbol (or a very small set of them). (2007, p. 277)

Analogizing enables us to avoid those harsh “either-or” statements which tend to lead to psychic fragmentation and subsequent disorientation. Instead, as with Jung's transcendent function, we may synthesize a *third thing* by analogy. Corbin even suggested that “The cognitive function of imagination provides the foundation for a rigorous analogical knowledge permitting us to evade the dilemma of current rationalism, which gives us only a choice between the two banal dualistic terms of either “matter” or “mind”” (1964/1972, p. 7). In other words, metaphor may serve as an

epistemological bridge allowing the observer to reach a higher order of psychological awareness by employing analogy as a figurative stepping stone. What I am describing resembles Hillman's notion of psychologizing—"the soul's root and native activity" (1975, p. 115). Hillman further articulated that "psychologizing is not satisfied when necessary and sufficient conditions have been met or when, testability has been established. It is satisfied only by its own movement of seeing through" (1975, p. 140).

In order to apprehend the activity concealed behind the phenomena, one must introduce an archetypal idea in order to gaze behind the wizard's curtain just as Moses could only see God through the appearance of the burning bush (Bible, Exodus 3:1-22). The burning bush was not a literal thing, but rather the archetypal means to see beyond the manifest phenomena. Hillman further explained this point: "Without the idea of the unconscious we could not see through behavior into its hidden unknowns. But we do not see the unconscious" (1975, p. 141). Not surprisingly given his influence on Hillman, Jung too alluded to the process of psychologizing: "...looking, psychologically, brings about the activation of the object; it is as if something were emanating from one's spiritual eye that evokes or activates the object of one's vision" (as cited in Chodorow, 1997, p. 7). In other words, the way we see things changes them, and when I use the word "way" I am referring to a psychological mode of perception. The unconscious therefore is not a literal thing, but a metaphor of the imagination. Similarly, Corbin mused that there was an important relationship between metaphor and imagination:

Active Imagination is the *mirror par excellence*, the epiphanic place for the Images of the archetypal world. This is why the theory of the *mundus imaginalis* closely bound up with a theory of imaginative cognition and of the imaginative function, which is a truly central, mediating function, owing both to the median and the mediating position of the *mundus imaginalis*. The imaginative function makes it possible for all the universes to symbolize with each other and, by way of experiment, it enables us to imagine that each substantial reality assumes forms that correspond to each respective universe. (1964/1972, p. 7)

Hillman used a similar image to describe his own technique of

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Hillman used a similar image to describe his own technique of psychologizing:

Glass is the metaphor par excellence for psychic reality: it is itself not visible, appearing only to be its contents, and the contents of the psyche, by which placed within or behind glass, have been moved from palpable reality to metaphorical reality, out of life and into image...Glass is the concrete image of seeing through. (1975, p. 142)

Mirror and glass optimally symbolize the imaginal operation central to quadrant XLV

both Corbin and Hillman's ideas, and one may best understand these ideas as ontological metaphors. Put a different way, one is using a known concrete object to describe a partially unknown ontology based on the object's physical properties. The metaphorical quality symbolizes or indirectly corresponds to two similar ideas: the *mundus imaginalis* and psychologizing. The apostle Paul apparently understood this insight when he proclaimed, "We see through a glass darkly" (Bible, 1 Corinthians 13:12).

In the final analysis, both *ta'wil* and active imagination are ostensibly analogical activities that enable the observer to see through the dichotomy of subject and object by introducing a third thing that mediates the former and the latter. Analogy deepens psychological awareness so that one may access the suprasensory reality hidden within the image. Citing the work of Suhrawardi, Corbin has pointed out that "the encounter with suprasensory reality can come about through a certain way of reading a written text; it can come about from hearing a voice, without the speaker being visible" (1977, p. 123).

## Conclusion

Throughout this essay I have addressed a number of topics central to the thesis of this paper, to include Corbin's *mundus imaginalis*, Jung's confrontation with the unconscious, the active imagination method as conceived by Jung, and the Islamic notion of *ta'wil*; as well as having examined the ways in which knowledge is discovered and subsequently organized by archetypal ideas. I also sought to explore the topics as viewed from the perspective of an epistemology of images—an imaginal way of knowing. Furthermore, I endeavored to show that Jung was not the first person to employ active imagination as a practice, since Islamic mystics were applying the hermeneutics of symbols long before the advent of analytical psychology. What I find most compelling is the ubiquitous presence of the same archetypal patterns in the areas I have discussed. One need not be a trained analyst or scholar to discern similar motifs within visionary experiences to include the topology of the *mundus imaginalis*, Jung's confrontation with the unconscious, Suhrawardi's mystical experiences, and Muhammad's encounter with the angel.

All of these ideas seem to converge on a central one, an idea that encapsulates the nature of knowledge as a whole. I am referring to the idea of gnosis, which Jung studied exhaustively through the lens of Gnosticism between 1918 and 1926 (Jung, 1961, p. 200), and defined it as “a psychological knowledge whose contents derive from the unconscious” (1951/1959, CW9ii, para. 350). The Greek etymological root of the word gnosis translates simply to knowledge, however, what gnosis really amounts to, or so it seems to me, is the ontologization of knowledge. The ontologization of knowledge is a difficult concept to define and in order to do so, I feel it necessary to be clear as I can only hypothesize, and one could just as well say the following: “knowledge is not an abstraction derived in some way from sense-given percepts, but is an ontological 'illumination' or assimilation of such percepts from 'within,' or rather, since we may now say it, from the being above that we are” (Bamford, p. XIX). Jung similarly observed that the psyche has “the spontaneous capacity to produce images independently of sense perception” (1945/1948, CW9i, para. 393). Gnosis is a special kind of knowledge that can transform one’s mode of being. In this vein, Corbin further indicated that gnosis “is knowledge that changes and transforms the knowing subject” (Corbin as cited in Avens, 1984, p. 4). Thus, gnosis, viewed in this light, is tantamount to a mode of knowing that is both subjective and objective. For the observing subject then, gnosis apparently can pull the outside world inward and to push the inside world outward so that the microcosm is equilaterally nested within the macrocosm.

All things considered, gnosis may be best understood as knowledge by presence. Knowledge by presence is not at all different from the philosopher Heidegger's idea of *dasein* or a sense of being present in the world. Being presupposes knowledge, in fact, without an a priori *dasein*; a means of knowing would not be possible. One could say that gnosis is the knowledge of the soul and the imagination may be viewed as the spiritual organ par excellence of the soul of *presence*. One need only turn to Suhrawardi for further explanation:

In the course of human knowledge man must first make his inquiry into his awareness of himself, then proceed from this step to what

is above and beyond himself [the external world]. Thus, we say: the fact that our souls apprehend the reality of themselves does not imply that the apprehension has come to them by a representation. (Suhrawardi as cited in Yazdi, 1992, p. 94)

One could therefore say that first and foremost we simply are—*dasein*; and I think that Descartes' famous dictum would better reflect a more accurate state of affairs if it read: *sum ergo cogito—I am therefore I think*. What is primary then is presence, the very act of being. In this way one could infer that presence is essence. Being presupposes thinking rather than the converse.

I contend that modern man is indeed in search of a soul (1933), and what man has ostensibly forgotten is that his soul was never lost but merely buried beneath “a heap of broken images” (Eliot as cited in Edinger, 1972/1992, p. 47). We—particularly those of us with a western orientation—seldom consider that the world is merely a representation, an image, but that is exactly what it is. One may then conclude that the soul, as it were, requires no representation beyond itself; the soul simply is. An imaginal kind of knowledge may be able to return the soul to its original status as a *first principle*—whether in the form one's own angel, or the anima and animus— by means of active imagination, *ta'wil*, or any other imaginal way of knowing. Knowledge of this order seems to point towards a true science of gnosis.

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***Flight for Life: A Love Song***, Shana Lax, 2014  
 25.5" x 23" - Etched copper with fretwork backed in amber mica;  
 framed in Oregon Madrone