

Temple and Contemplation

Henry Corbin



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ISLAMIC TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

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Temple and Contemplation

Henry Corbin

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Books by Henry Corbin available in English translation

Avicenna and the Visionary Recital (Bollingen Series. LXVI), translated by W. R. Trask, New York, 1960; reprinted Spring Books. Dallas, 1980 (paperback edition).

Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn 'Arabī (Bollingen Series, XCI), translated by Ralph Manheim, Princeton University Press, 1969, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.

Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī'ite Iran (Bollingen Series, XCI:2), translated by N. Pearson, Princeton University Press, 1977.

The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism, translated by N. Pearson, Shambhala Publications Inc., Boulder and London, 1978.

Cyclical Time and Ismailī Gnosis (Islamic Texts and Contexts), translated by R. Manheim and J. Morris, Kegan Paul International and Islamic Publications, London, 1983.

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This volume brings together five lectures which were originally delivered at different sessions of the famous *Eranos* Conferences in Ascona, Switzerland. Henry Corbin himself had outlined the plan for this book, whose title suggests that these diverse studies converge on a common spiritual centre.

The last three studies explicitly ask us to reflect on the role of the heavenly Temple, or the archetype of the Temple, in the spiritual traditions of the Religions of the Book. No other work of Henry Corbin brings out more clearly the hermeneutic correspondences among spiritual visions belonging to those religions—religions which differ in their outward aspect, but whose inner dimension (the *bāṭin*) reveals many comparable forms and structures.

Thus it is that the “astral” religion of the Sabians, far from being a simple natural worship of the Heavens and their Spheres, is on the contrary one which sees in this universe the threshold beyond which there begins the world of the Angels; and the “celestial temple of the mediating Angels” must lead one beyond toward the invisible and unknowable God. The temple of the Imamate, for the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* and other Ismaili authors, likewise has this mediating function. Each Angel of the esoteric Heavens, each Prophet in the Cycles of metahistory, is like a buttress or wall of that Temple, with the Imam of the Resurrection crowning and completing that structure. But this “spiritual form” of the Temple is not simply the esoteric aspect of the Cosmos, any more than the Imam is a simple reality external to the heart of his true follower. The Temple becomes the inner form of the person, and “the ritual celebrated by man in the temple of his being is his own metamorphosis, the bringing to birth

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within himself of that Form of himself which conforms to the angelic archetype" (p. 169).

This was how Henry Corbin came to interpret the remarkable theosophy of the Temple created by the Shiite philosopher Qāḍī Saʿīd Qummī. There the Temple of the Kaaba is "brought back" to its invisible archetypes. It leads one back to a hierarchy of worlds and heterogeneous times, passing from the most dense to more and more subtle ones. For the "House of God" has an inner correspondence with the Throne of divine Unity, which is the pure noetic, intelligible Temple.

Now if this Shiite hermeneutics is thereby able to ascend beyond the Temple visible to our physical eyes, which is only the crypt of the true Temple present in the Imaginal world, so it also makes possible a comparative hermeneutics of Images of the Temple. It is this same hermeneutics, moving in an ascent from the sensible form to the world of the revealed Divinity, which permits and justifies the correlations and correspondences among the different manifestations of a single and unique *Imago Templi*. In this last study, whose very scope demands our appreciation, Henry Corbin brings out the intimate inner homology between Jewish mysticism (centered around the notion of the *shekhinah*), and Hellenistic Judaism, as well as the spirituality of Qumrān and the Christian theology of the Temple.

The two essays that open this collection might wrongly appear "out of place" in the perspective that has just been mentioned. Henry Corbin gave them their place precisely to point out that Shiite hermeneutics necessarily leads to a theosophy of the Temple—just as the Temple itself has no meaning, if we do not have a method and ontology that can lead us there.

The "science of the Balance" is in fact a general theory of *ta'wīl*, of spiritual exegesis, which interprets numbers and dimensions, and which makes possible the construction of remarkable "diagrams" in which intelligible proportions become visible and imaginal forms descend into the visible world. For the function of this hermeneutics is not to set up mere abstract concepts in opposition to the sensible, material reality, but rather to make a visionary reality manifest to the eyes of the soul, as a *visible reality* giving a subtle body to the theophanic reality. Like the Temple which comes to be present in the soul, so also Haydar Amulī's diagrams express the structures of the divine Names, of Propheticology and of Imam-

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ology by safeguarding them from abstraction. They arrange those structures according to a pure space in which they are no longer subject to the limitations of discourse, but are instead grasped all together as a single symbolic pleroma, the simultaneous manifestation of the Unknowable at the centre of the diagram.

Without such a *ta'wīl* the spiritual theology of the Temple would be impossible. With it, the visible domain is no longer limited to the physical universe, and the intelligible world is not reduced to a few names and abstract ideas. Thanks to it, the world of the Soul and that of the Intelligences come to possess their own Earth, their own Heaven, time and space.

Finally, just as the Imaginal world, being the pure space of symbols, lies beyond the sensible space of material bodies, so likewise colours lead beyond to their subtle being, to a supra-sensible light. "Light is the Angel of colour", as the spiritual Temple is the angelic form of the material Temple. Hence the Imaginal world is not simply made up of living numerical or geometric dimensions expressing the structures of the divine worlds; for those worlds are not without-tone and colour. Since they raise the visible world up to their own level, thereby making themselves accessible to the eyes of the soul, so they too are adorned with spiritual colours.

Now one can understand why Henry Corbin wished to link "Temple" and "Contemplation": the theory of visionary perception allows for the emergence of the Temple, but the processes of visionary knowing are themselves based on the eternal presence of the *Imago Templi*. Their union in man's spiritual organism is active contemplation: "When man is thus, man is truly the Temple" (p. 387).

Christian Jambet
Translated by James W. Morris

*All is mere ashes and dust —
all, except the Temple within us.
It is ours, and with us for ever.*
VLADIMIR MAXIMOV

I

The Realism and Symbolism of Colours in Shiite Cosmology

According to the “Book of the Red Hyacinth”
by Shaykh Muḥammad Karīm-Khān Kirmānī (d. 1870)

PROLOGUE

Various aspects of the phenomenon of colour have been discussed in both Islamic philosophy and theosophy. Several years ago, I myself was able to make a study of it, taking as my guide one of the greatest masters of Iranian spirituality: the fourteenth-century ‘Alāuddawlah Simnānī. I was thereby led to the heart of a physiology of the subtle body, whose every centre is both defined as a “prophet of your being”, and characterized by a colour, an *aura*, visionary perception of which reveals to the mystic the degree of his advancement upon the spiritual Way.*¹

There is, moreover, a long Hermetic tradition in Islam, whose testimony makes one ask what perception of colour and colour phenomena it was that enabled alchemists to interpret them in the way they did. Thus, with regard to both subtle physiology and alchemy, one is faced with a question which is essentially one of phenomenology: in what does the *phenomenon* of colour consist for our authors? How is one to understand correctly what they say about it, when their interpretation seeks to “preserve its appearance”, that is, to explain it in accordance with what they perceive?

* *Translator's note*: Where an English translation of a work by Corbin exists, the reference is to this translation. Not all his works, however, have been translated.

¹ Cf. my book, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Shambhala Publications, Boulder & London 1978). For more detailed information regarding the psycho-cosmic constitution of the organs or subtle centres (the *latifah*), see my *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, III, book IV (Paris, Gallimard, 1971–1972; new edition, 1978), pp. 330 ff.

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The best way to answer this question was to have recourse to a treatise, if one could be found, in which our authors would themselves provide an answer. I was able to find such a treatise—of recent date, certainly, but this, far from detracting from its value, actually increased its scope. The work stems from a school of Iranian Shiism, the Shaykhi school, derived from Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsā'ī (d. 1826), notable for its intention to preserve in its integrity the theosophical tradition of the Imams of Shiism. This treatise is the work of Shaykh Muḥammad Karīm-Khān Kirmānī (d. 1870), who was second in succession to Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsā'ī and whose work, like that of other shaykhs of the same school, is evidence of a tremendous fertility, comprising as it does about three hundred titles.² Muḥ. Karīm-Khān Kirmānī was a kind of universal genius whose interest extended to all branches of learning, like the masters of our own Renaissance; and he was thereby led to write on scientific questions which he consistently envisaged from a theosophical point of view. His theory of colours has already given us occasion to speak of him as a sort of Iranian Goethe, in the same way that the theory of our mystics concerning visions of coloured light led me to evoke the “physiological colours” of Goethe’s *Farbenlehre*.³

The treatise which I propose to analyse and briefly comment upon was written in Arabic in 1851, and was provoked by the question of a tiresome person whose indiscretion our shaykh does not hesitate to condemn. It was written very rapidly, in two days, and comprises about sixty pages. I have used a photocopy of the autograph manuscript. It is, to be sure, an occasional piece, but because of the author’s extensive and intimate grasp of the subject, it is also remarkably concentrated. It is one of many unedited works, and is entitled *Risālat al-yāqūt al-ḥamrā*, the “Book of the red hyacinth” (the allusion being to the precious stone of that name). We shall have more than one occasion to make it clear that the title was not chosen at random.⁴ It is divided into two books of more or less equal length. The first book, comprising eight chapters, deals with the concept and the reality of colour. Book II, which contains nine chapters, is concerned more particularly with the colour red, with its “descent from

² On the life and work of Muḥammad Karīm-Khān Kirmānī, see *En Islam iranien* . . . , op. cit., IV, book VI (The Shaykhi School).

³ Cf. *The Man of Light* . . . , op. cit., pp. 139 ff.

⁴ On this treatise, see my report in *Annuaire* of the Section des Sciences religieuses de l’École pratique des Hautes-Études, 1972–1973.

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the world of archetypes", and with a hermeneutics of this colour linked directly with the esoteric hermeneutics of the Koran. This last is particularly original, rich in presuppositions and consequences.

In order to appreciate our author's point of view—which he realizes is probably unique—we should take stock of the research that has been done into the theory of colour in Islamic philosophy. Let me say at once that this research is still very limited.⁵ Our assessment would lead us to consider the various theories proposed by Aristotle on the subject, as well as what was known about it by Islamic philosophers, notably by Fārābī, Avicenna, Ibn al-Haytham, and so on. It would appear that the greatest advance was made by the philosopher Avempace (= Ibn Bājjah, twelfth century A.D.), who was perhaps the "best leader" of the Andalusian philosophical school. Because his optical doctrine contradicted generally accepted ideas, it was examined at length by Averroes, who found it *valde difficilis*, very difficult to understand in the terms put forward by Avempace, for these went so far as to propose that colour exists here and now *in potentia* in darkness.⁶ But however interesting these studies may be—as are those of Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham), whose treatise, translated into Latin, had considerable influence in the West, as well as that of his commentator Kamāluddīn Fārsī (d. 1320 A.D.)—there is still a basic divergence, possibly an abyss, between the statements of these philosopher-opticians and those of a theosophist like Muḥ. Karīm-Khān Kirmānī. The latter was himself perfectly aware of this, and never misses an opportunity of showing how beside the point were the philosophers' speculations in this field.

Before going further, we should specify three points fundamental to our shaykh's colour theory:

5 The best and most recent study of this question is Helmut Gärtje's 'Zur Farbenlehre in der muslimischen Philosophie', in *Der Islam*, 43/3 (Berlin 1967), pp. 280–301. The starting-point of this study is actually a reference in Goethe's *Farbenlehre* to the theory of colour in Avempace and Averroes.

6 Avempace's theory regarding the relationship between light and colour marks a break with the thesis, commonly held, that the effect of light on a transparent medium can be produced only in so far as the latter is transparent in actuality. For Avempace, light is already a sort of colour (*aliquis color*); any effect produced by the colour on the transparent medium is equivalent precisely to the actualization of this transparency as such. If light is necessary for the perception of colours, it is because colours already exist *in potentia* in the darkness, and because light actualises them in the sense that the colours then suscite the transparent medium. Cf. H. Gärtje, op. cit., pp. 293 ff. On Avempace (Ibn Bājjah), cf. my *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, I, pp. 317 ff. A work by Avempace has recently been discovered which contains a chapter important for his theory of colours: *Kitāb al-Nafs* (The Book of the Soul), ed. M. S. H. al-Ma'sūmī (*Majallat al-Majma' al-'Arabī*, 33–35) (Damascus, 1958–1960); M. S. Hasan al-Ma'sūmī, *Ibn Bājjah's 'Ilm al-Nafs*, English trans. (Karachi 1961).

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1. It is important to make a clear distinction between the existence (*wujūd*) and the manifestation (*zuhūr*) of colour. It was failure to make this distinction that nullified the labours of the philosophers. Colour may *exist*, yet not be *manifested*. One must therefore determine the relationship between light and colour.

2. This relationship cannot be established on the level merely of the physical conditions of our world. Although our author's attitude may appear to be one of rigorous, even extreme, Platonism, it is in fact nourished by the whole substance of Shiite theosophy. A verse of the Koran (15:21) is both its *leitmotiv* and its explanation: "There are no things whose treasures (*khazā'in*) do not exist alongside Us. We make them descend only in determined proportions." For our author and his colleagues, the Koranic concept of "treasures" here signifies nothing less than *archetypes*. All the phenomena of our terrestrial world, including the phenomenon of colour, are to be explained by a "descent of archetypes" from superior worlds.

3. As a corollary to this, the notion of "composite" (*murakkab*) applies to all levels of the universe, including those universes that are supra-sensible. Consequently, the phenomenon of colour extends equally to the totality of these universes, so that a hermeneutic of colour would employ not an abstract symbolism, but a symbolics founded on an integral spiritual realism.

1. *On a concept of colour encompassing the totality of universes.* In the course of the first two chapters of Book I of his treatise, our shaykh undertakes a critical examination of the views of the philosophers concerning the phenomenon of colour; we will note only his conclusions. According to him, that which makes up the essence and the reality of colour has eluded the most famous of the philosophers: these wise men have gone astray in their researches. Avicenna notably, in his *Shifā'*, got no further than the idea—and this with much hesitation—that colour possesses a certain existence *in potentia*; but after a lengthy development of this idea, he confesses wearily that what constitutes the essence of colour is beyond his grasp. In a general sense our shaykh rejects the usual postulate of the philosophers: that in all cases where colour exists, it must be visible.

To this physics, which confuses the existence of colour with its manifestation, our shaykh opposes another physics based on the idea of "subtle matter", the *latīfah*, whose implicit link with Simnānī's subtle physiology

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is easily discernible.⁷ There is a subtle component, a *latīfah*, which disposes the nature of beings and objects into three categories. 1. That in which the subtle component predominates. The object is then a source of light that is not only manifest and visible of itself, but in addition manifests and renders visible other objects by virtue of its intrinsic nature. 2. That in which the *latīfah*, the subtle component, is equal with the other components. In this case, the object, although manifest and visible of itself, even in darkness, is powerless to manifest other objects and make them visible. By way of example he cites red light (one could no doubt think of cases of what we call phosphorescence). 3. That, finally, in which the *latīfah*, the subtle component, is less predominant than the other components. In this instance, the object is not even visible of itself; it needs to be manifested by another object in which the *latīfah*, the subtle element, does predominate.

According to our author, this last eventuality does not mean that bodies do not possess colour in themselves; it means that their colours, in order to manifest themselves—that is to say, in order to be not only illuminated but illuminating—have need of a light that will bring them to fulfilment. Yet fulfilment concerns the *manifestation* of the colours, not their actual existence; for colour is an integral part of the body's very nature. In other words, it is wrong to think, like certain philosophers, that a body as such is deprived of colour, because the fact of its being what it is presupposes a “descent of archetypes”; and part of this descent is the descent of the colour which is proper to the body in question. Its colour in this world is not merely the result of the conditions which prevail in this world, but corresponds to what it is here and now in other worlds that, ontologically speaking, precede this one; it simply happens not to be manifest in this world. So much is this the case that, in agreement with the Koranic verse (6:1), “He has established Darkness *and* Light”, it must be said that Darkness is not purely and simply the absence of manifestation, for it entails a manifestation of its own—which is, precisely, its manifestation as Darkness. If colours are invisible to us in the Darkness, it is due to their

7 Cf. the references in note 1 above. The modalities of each of these *latīfahs* confer their particular modes of the colours which in their turn communicate the modalities to the imaginative perception. Each *latīfah* is an independent act of coloured light, which actualizes the *imaginat* transparent medium. For the theosopher, the realm of sensible perception, with which the philosopher-opticians are exclusively concerned, is only one realm among others, the level of which is determined precisely with reference to the gradations of *latīfahs* which themselves determine the scale of the levels of being.

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weakness or the paucity of their subtle element, their *latīfah*; it is not due to a basic non-existence of colour (one could, on the other hand, recall the “black light” of certain subterranean caves).

In the end, therefore, one may justifiably speak of a “manifestation *in potentia*”, but not of an “existence *in potentia*”; for colour, even if invisible, is present here and now. We can see, then, what distinguishes our theosophical shaykh both from philosophers such as Fārābī (for whom “colours do not exist in themselves”, but are due to the action of the light-source on surfaces) and from all the philosopher-opticians who went so far as to admit that colour possesses a certain potentiality of existence.⁸ “All these great men”, he says, “remained in a state of perplexity. They had no knowledge of the meaning and concept of colour. When they did write about it, it was in a conjectural fashion and without arriving at any definite conclusion.”

By contrast, here is a first premiss postulated by our shaykh, the importance of which is evident throughout the rest of the treatise: “The truth is”, he says, “that every composite possesses a colour in itself, whether that composite is one of the bodies manifest in *time* in this world (*ajsām zhāhirah zamānīyah*), or the subtle bodies of the *imaginal* world of the *barzakh* (the intermediary world, *ajsām mithālīyah barzakhīyah*), or the bodies of the sempiternal world of the Soul (the *Malakūt*, *ajsām dahrīyah nafsānīyah*), or is one of the composites of the *Jabarūt* (*murakkabāt jabarūtīyah*). The gradations of colour differ according to the differences of the composites: if the composite belongs to the subtle world (*latīf*), the colour is likewise subtle; if it belongs to the world of density and opacity (*kathīf*), the colour is likewise opaque.”

It is important to stress the originality and audacity of this premise, for they typify the position of the theosophist when compared with that of the philosopher:

a. The banal dualism between spirit and flesh disappears. Along with

⁸ In contrast to Fārābī, Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen) adopts an intermediate position: colour “is born between the eye and the light”, and he concedes that it may possess real existence. In this connection his commentator, Kamāluddīn Fārsī (d. 720/1320), defines the relationship between light and colour, and makes colour conditional upon light, although conceding that colour possesses existence *in potentia*. Cf. H. Gärtje, op. cit., p. 300. For Muḥ. Karīm-Khān Kirmānī, however, the relationship between *wujūd* and *ẓuhūr* is not one between potential existence and actual existence. These are the hesitations of the philosopher-opticians to which he alludes in order to go beyond them.

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the idea of a composite, the idea of the body is progressively sublimated until it comes to denote a body belonging to superior universes: there are the subtle bodies of the intermediary *mundus imaginalis*, perceived not by the senses but by the active Imagination; there are the subtle bodies of the world of Souls of the *Malakūt*; there are even bodies belonging to the world of the Intelligences of the *Jabarūt*. This world-structure conforms perfectly to that found in Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī, in whose writings the idea of the body is ultimately sublimated to that of a “divine body” (*jism ilāhī*). The structure conforms equally to the physics and the metaphysics of the Resurrection to be found in Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsā’ī, from whom our author is spiritually descended, and in whose writings the differentiation between the two *jasad* and the two *jism* ultimately links up with the theory of the *okhēma* (Gk. ὀχημα), the *currus subtilis* of the soul, of the Neoplatonist Proclus.⁹

b. This spiritualization of the idea of the body derives from a concept of *tajarrud* (a state separate from matter, Greek χωρισμός), which represents a break with the spirituality which the Islamic philosophers had inherited from the Greek philosophers. Yet it is thanks to this break that such a sublimation is possible. The concept of *tajarrud* has always created difficulties for the strict theologians of Islam, for whom it can only actually refer to the creative Principle, not to any of the beings deriving from it. We are thus presented with the paradox of a theosophist like Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsā’ī taking the side, against the theologian Majlisī, of those philosophers who do not attribute the *tajarrud* to any created thing.¹⁰ Even the cherubic Intelligences of the *Jabarūt* are composed of a matter and a form, of an existence and a quiddity or essence: Light is their being, their “matter”, and Mercy (*Rahmah*) is their dimension of shadow, their quiddity. All beings, on whatever level, are composed of this Light and this Mercy.

c. Thus, more than a theory is needed. We need a phenomenology of colours which will “unveil” (*kashf*) to us, at every level both sensible and

9 On the whole of this doctrine, see my book, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Bollingen Series XCI:2, Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 90–96. (*Translator’s note*: this is a translation of the 1960 Buchet-Chastel edition, not the 1979 revised edition to which Corbin refers and of which no translation exists. However, this does not affect the references to it either here or below.)

10 See *En Islam iranien* . . . , op. cit., IV, general index, s.v. *tajarrud*.

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supra-sensible, the mode of reality of colours; which will account for both their existence and their manifestation. Our shaykh could not find such a phenomenology either in Aristotle or in the philosophers whom Aristotle inspired. On account of this, the line he takes is an extension of traditional Shiite theosophy.

d. We can now divine the significance of what we observed a moment ago. The phenomenon of colour is not limited to our sensible world. Indeed, in this world it simply betokens the archetypes that are here active. It is certainly in order to speak of the symbolism of colour; nevertheless, this must be understood not purely in terms of a language of signs, but in the sense that colours “symbolize with each other”, in the same way as their state in this world symbolizes with their state in other, supra-sensible universes. Symbolism will here possess the quality of a visionary realism.

In support of this realism, our shaykh adduces a group of Koranic verses (chapter II) of which the most important is the verse, quoted above, referring to “treasures” or “archetypes”. All these verses are called upon to witness that colours are in fact objectively real: they are neither imaginary nor a purely subjective impression resulting from an admixture of the element of Air with the light-rays. Were the latter the case, the colours would belong not to the bodies but to the light-rays. In a way, the Koranic verses are called upon to witness against Newton.¹¹ Finally, our shaykh refers to a long conversation between the sixth Imam, the Imam Ja‘far al-Šādiq (d. 765 A.D.) and his disciple and *famulus* Mufaḍḍal al-Ju‘fi (chapter III). This conversation is really the equivalent of a treatise *De sensu et sensato*, that is to say a treatise on the faculty of sensible perception and its object. For each faculty there is a corresponding object, and *vice versa*. Between the two—between the sense and the sensible object—there are mediators, as, for example, the light which makes colour manifest. Our shaykh invites us to meditate on each of the terms used by the Imam Ja‘far, who speaks of light as that which *manifests* colour, not that which produces it and makes it *exist*. It is not the object that needs complementing, but our visual faculty. Light performs this task, but light is neither a

¹¹ Essentially, these verses are 30:22: “The diversity of your languages and your colours”; 35:27: “In the mountains there are white paths and red paths”; 16:13: “That which He has multiplied for you on earth in different colours”; 18:31: “They [the inhabitants of Paradise] are clothed in green garments” (cf. 76:21); 3:106: “On the day of the Resurrection there will be white faces and black faces”, etc.

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realization nor a fulfilment of the existence of colour; it is the cause of the *manifestation* of colour, not of its *existence*.

All that has just been said refers to the lights of this world; but there are many traditions (*ḥadīth* and *akhbār*) concerning the existence of colours in the supra-sensible worlds: *ḥadīth* about the coloured lights of the cosmic Throne (of which we will say more below), an account of the Prophet's vision of his God, all the Koranic verses on the joys of Paradise—which, contrary to the claims of a prudish apologetic, are not of the material sensible order, but of the *imaginal* order—and so on. In short, colours exist in all the worlds; and in the face of this thesis the sum of the labours of the philosophers, as of the scholastic theologians of the *Kalām* (the *Mutakallimūn*), is seen to be sadly negative. The fact is that they did not know how to bridge the gap between the Illumination of the revealed Book and their own opinions (ash'arites, mu'tazilites, *falāsifah*). Already Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī was maintaining that, of all the schools of Islamic thought, only the Shiites had succeeded in bridging this gap. For by following the teaching of their Imams which unveiled the esoteric and the exoteric, the hidden interior and the visible exterior, they had learned to understand, to "save the phenomena". The phenomenon in this case is that of colour; and to preserve it in all its integrity, philosophy is not enough. What is needed is a divine wisdom, a *theosophia*.

2. *On the true relationship between light and colour.* Light and colour are different things, light being the cause not of the existence but of the manifestation of colour, and colour being manifested on all levels of the universes, sensible as well as supra-sensible. How, then, should one understand the true relationship between them? The answer to this question is given in a second proposition put forward by our author, and he leads us towards it by deploying his theory of archetypes and of their mode of action.

He begins by stating (chapter IV) that certain bodies whose composition is qualitatively different can display the same colour; the colour may become more or less intense, but it remains *this* particular colour. Thus, colour is not something produced in the way the philosophers say it is. According to them, if the qualitative modality (*kayfiyah*) of one body were contrary to that of another, its colour would likewise have to be contrary to that of the other. This, however, is not the case. Let each of us, he says,

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have recourse to his own innate intelligence (*ḡiṭrah*), and reject the ready-made opinions which he hears being formulated around him. He will at once discover that the object of his vision or contemplation requires two things: first, a light which is the product of a light-source, and second, a colour which belongs essentially to the qualitative modality of the object in question. Anyone who doubts the differentiation between these two things and declares that where there is no light, colour itself does not exist, is like a man who says that if no-one looks at the sky, the sky does not exist, or that if no-one looks at the shadow of a person in the sun, the shadow quite simply does not exist. Similarly, one would be correct in saying that brightness is something which happens to a colour and makes it bright; one might even pay more attention to the brightness than to the colour, or *vice versa*. But the fact remains that even if brightness manifests colour, it does not cause it to exist (*inna'l-barīq yuḡḡhiru'l-lawn wa-lā yūḡḡduh*).

This being said, our shaykh formulates five premisses which every investigator should take to heart (chapter V).

1. There is a difference between the mode of being of the archetype which produces the signature (the *mu'aththir*, vestigium; cf. the notion of *signatura* in Paracelsus), and the signature that it imprints (*athar*, *mu'aththar*). The world above is exempt from the limitations that condition the world below (*ḡudūd al-dānī*). The archetype remains "henadic" (*aḡadī*) in the sense that this technical term possesses in Proclus. It is the Unific, the Unificent, of all that is unique; it is not itself a unity constituted among other unities, that is to say, a signature among the signatures which its archetypal activity constitutes into so many unities. It is the first and last explanation because it is not itself explicable by any other thing; and it is more epiphanic than all its epiphanies. Such is the meaning of the invocation attributed to the third Imam, the Imam Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī: "Could there be another than You in possession of an epiphany which you did not possess, so that this Other would be that-which-manifests-you when you were hidden; or could you have need of a pointer to indicate You, so that the signatures provided the means of approaching You?" No indeed; the light that *enables one to see* is the sufficient cause of the light which *is seen*, precisely because it makes the latter visible, not the other way round. It is the colour's archetype which is its principle, not *vice versa*. The archetype manifests itself in the signature, and the concept of this latter is the manifested archetype. This, again, is suggested by the mystical invocation:

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"No light is visible in things except Your light; no sound is perceptible in things except Your sound."

2. Our author refers to a parallelism as familiar in Islamic theosophy as in our Western theosophical traditions (notably that of Paracelsus and his disciples): the parallelism between the *Liber mundi* and the *Liber revelatus*, between the great Book of the world and the Book of sacred revelation. Indeed, the fundamental phenomenon is the same for all prophetic religions, and hence for all prophetic philosophies: it is the "phenomenon of the Book of sacred revelation". As the two books are simply two versions of the same book, it is possible to apply to both of them the same hermeneutics (*ta'wīl*): in the end we shall see, with some astonishment, the colour red undergo an esoteric hermeneutic whose phases reproduce exactly the phases of the esoteric hermeneutics of the Koran. Nevertheless, even here our shaykh asks us to consider a difference between the epiphany of being, or ontological epiphany (*zuhūr kawnī*), and scriptural epiphany (*zuhūr shar'ī*)—between, that is to say, the phenomenon of being and that of the sacred Book. This difference derives from the fact that primary Manifestation, which is the manifestation of being, does not possess an opposite, for non-being is pure negativity; non-being is not merely the opposite of being, otherwise both being and non-being would have to be included within a genus common to both of them. Thus, the manifestation of being is so all-inclusive that, as we observed a short while back, it embraces both Light and Darkness simultaneously: the phenomenon of being manifests both apparition and occultation, visibility and invisibility. It is the total signature, the signature *without absence*. As for the phenomenon of the sacred Book, which is as it were a signature begotten on a signature (the phenomenon of the Book begotten on that of being), it consists of the manifestation of what is exoteric, but at the same time it is the occultation of what is esoteric, an esoteric which, as such, remains hidden. We are no longer dealing with an all-inclusive manifestation *without absence*, as in the case of the primary manifestation of being; we are dealing with a manifestation which includes an *absence*, because beneath the revealed appearance (the exoteric) lies the sense which remains concealed (the esoteric), and because you start off by *being absent* from this esoteric, just as it remains absent from you. In other words, the phenomenon of being reveals to us both apparition and occultation: it renders them *present* to us. The phenomenon of the Book reveals occultation to us

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as an *absence*, a veiling. How, then, is one to go beyond this *absence*, to cross the threshold of the esoteric?

3. The investigator should now have his attention drawn to a third point: the conditions of Manifestation *a parte subjecti*. For there may exist between you and other things a screen which is none other than yourself, your own body; or there may be an obstacle emanating from the thing itself. In the first of these cases, your cognizant soul is immured within the secrecy of your body, which constitutes a screen between your soul and sounds, scents and colours. The soul's gates must be opened to these things. Yet is it simply a question of the faculties of sense? For to which things, ultimately, should the soul's gates be opened?

4. They should be opened to precisely those things which you cannot perceive until the obstacle that prevents you from doing so is removed (conditions of Manifestation *a parte objecti*). At this point, our shaykh refers once again to his theory of the *latīfah* or subtle components, whose disposal of things into three categories we have already glanced at. Now it is the subtle component, the *latīfah*, which is the actual signature, the signature of the henadic archetype. If this subtle component predominates in an object, or at any rate is equal to the other components of that object, then there occurs that manifestation or epiphany (*zuhūr*) which is actually the *expansion*, the unfolding (*inbisāl*) of the Image-archetype (*al-mithāl al-ʿālā*), the superior *Imago* projected into the self-ness (*huwīyah*) or individuality which is its receptacle. We shall see later how this *Imago* is the personal lord (*rabb*) of a being, and in what way it is decisive for the phenomenon of colour. Thus, all obstacles must be simultaneously removed from both object and subject in order for "absence to withdraw". This is why it is not just any sound that can be heard, or any colour that can be seen, and so on. Our physics would express this in terms of waves and vibrations; our shaykh, with his purely qualitative physics, speaks of the *latīfah*, the subtle element in a being or a thing. The degree to which the *latīfah* is present does not depend on the physical conditions; rather, it is the *latīfah* which determines the state of these conditions, and is itself the work, the *signatura* or *vestigium* of the archetype.

5. This introduces the fifth premiss that the investigator must take to heart. Either the *latīfah* is too weak and the object remains occulted, *absent*, so long as this *latīfah* is not strengthened; or else the *latīfah*, the subtle

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aspect of a thing, is sufficiently strong in itself, and occultation ceases without anything else being required.

The application of these five fundamental premisses has still to be demonstrated, and this is done by showing us the archetype in action—that is to say, the activity of the world above as it imprints its signatures on the world below. What is colour? It is a qualitative modality which comprises, among other things (*min sha'ni-hā*), the capacity of being made manifest to sight. The application of the five principles noted above enables us to affirm that an object is manifest only in so far as the superior agent produces its own signature in that object (*al-'ālī al-mu'aththir*). Only the activity of the archetype repulses the *absence* accompanying the manifestation of which we spoke above in relation to the phenomenon of the Book, and which applies equally in the case of the phenomenon of colour. For the veil to be lifted, the *absence* to withdraw, and for what had been occulted to be de-occulted, the *latīfah* needs to be intensified, elevated, kindled; and this is brought about by the same superior agent that imprints the signature. Such intensification of the *latīfah* consists so entirely in the withdrawal of the absence that our author explains it in terms of the remoteness of the archetype being succeeded by its greater proximity. In every case, and in whatever situation they occur, it is the archetypal principle that nourishes and substantiates its signatures, that is to say, the multiple lights—whether these are manifested to the fleshly eyes of terrestrial beings or to the *imaginal* eyes of the intermediary world of the *barzakh*, to the pure gaze of the Souls of the *Malakūt* or to the Intelligences of the *Jabarūt*. All is due to the superabundance of the Manifestation of the archetype or superior agent, which produces its signatures in the mirrors constituted by the receptivities of beings and objects in their various states.

This is true for the phenomenon of colour in so far as colour is in the position of being manifested to sight. When closest to its Principle, it is at its most manifest, and is given the name of light and brilliance (*daw'*). When, on the other hand, it is furthest away from its Principle, it certainly exists, but in a non-manifest state: it is occulted, as the esoteric sense of the Book is occulted in the phenomenon of the sacred Book. It is this that permits us to define the *true relationship between light and colour*, which our shaykh does in advancing a second proposition that he formulates in two

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ways, both of them equally representative of the spirit of Shiite theosophy.

1. Light is the subtle aspect of colour (*laṭīf al-lawn*) or colour in its subtle state. It is, *eo ipso*, the strong aspect of colour (*qawīy al-lawn*) or colour in its strong state, whereas colour is light in an opaque (*kathīf*) state, thicker and more dense. Needless to say, both light and colour proceed from the same genus, otherwise there could be no interaction between them: light would not be able to receive the “tincture” of colour (*ṣibgh*, *tinctura* in the alchemical sense) any more than it is able to assume the “tincture” of scent; and correspondingly colour would not be capable of reinforcement by light. In point of fact, light contains the hidden secret of colour; but unless two things are in the same “field”, one cannot act on the other. A mediating element is needed between sight and the object of vision; and it is the idea of this mediating element that brings the author to the second way of formulating his proposition. He announces it with a warning: “Firmly grasp what I tell you, for it is extremely subtle. Study it thoroughly in order to perceive its truth. Divine exception apart, no other philosopher or wise man will have opened your eyes to what I say here.”

2. “Light”, says our shaykh, “is the spirituality [the spiritual element or *angel*] of colour (*rūḥānīyat al-lawn*), that is to say, colour in the spiritual state or spiritualized (*lawn mutarawwaḥ*), while colour is the corporeity (the corporeal element or *jasadānīyah*) of light, that is to say, light in a materialized state (*daw’ mutajassad*).” We must remember here that the notion of “body” is not limited to the notion of the physical body of this world. The shaykh continues: “Both light and colour are two things from the point of view of the individual and the species, but a single thing from the point of view of genus (*jins*). Analogous to their relationship is *that of spirit and body*, for spirit and body are two things according to one point of view, but one and the same according to another.” (Our alchemists, of whom the shaykh was one, speak of the spirit as “light in fusion”, and of the body as “light solidified”.) Nothing could be clearer: spirit and body, light and colour, are distinct yet inseparable one from the other, the one being manifested by the other. Light is mediated by colour, and *vice versa*; and it is thus mediated that they enter our field of vision. Later on we will see this relationship expressed as the relationship between *rabb* and *marbūb*: lord and vassal imply and mediate each other.

That is why Muḥ. Kārim-Khān Kirmānī rejects any hypothesis put forward by the philosophers conducive to the idea of a pure light that is

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without colour. "All light is manifested colour, whether it be the brilliance of celestial luminaries or that of fire. Where would you look for the idea of a light to illumine crystal, without that light being itself a colour?" Whether one speaks of the whiteness of moonlight or the yellow of sunlight, lamplight and firelight, a certain colour is always involved; and it is this that causes the hue in a sapphire-coloured garment to vary according to whether one looks at it by daylight or lamplight (it turns from blue to green, like the enamelled cupolas of the mosques of Isfahan). Hence there can no more be light without a colour than there can be spirit manifested without a body either physical, or subtle and spiritual. Light, without any doubt, is closer to the Principle. And here the author uses the term *ḥikāyah*, a term loaded with meaning and connoting both a *story* and an *imitation*—which is the case with the parable, the cryptography of all mystical narrations. Light is the supreme *ḥikāyah* of the Principle, whereas colour is further removed from it. Here again, proximity to and distance from the archetype are invoked in order to explain the gradation of colours. Without light, colour is certainly there, but it is inert and inanimate, like a body without its spirit. The author puts forward a comparison: the Sky (the subtle mass of the Sphere animated by the *Anima caelestis*) is a body, as the Earth is a body. Nevertheless, the Sky, because of the proximity of the Principle, is alive, mobile and conscious, while the Earth, because of its remoteness from the Principle, is inanimate, immobile and unconscious. In the same way, the closer a colour is to the Principle, the more it is manifest unaided, like the *blue* of Saturn, the *white* of Jupiter, the *red* of Mars, the *yellow* of the Sun, and so on. When it is remote from the Principle it needs to be assisted by an excess of light falling on it, just as the Earth, in order to live, needs the celestial vital spirit (*rūḥ ḥayawānīyah falakīyah*).

3. *How every composite, whether it belongs to the sensible or to the supra-sensible world, has a colour.* Now that he has given us an explanation of colours in terms of the activity (proximity or distance) of their respective archetypes, and has defined the relationship between light and colour as a relationship between spirit and body, our author can proceed to his original purpose: the elaboration of a phenomenology and thence of a hermeneutics of colour which accounts for and "preserves the phenomenon" of colour at all levels of the entire hierarchy of worlds.

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We have seen the importance of the concept of the signature (*athar*, vestigium). We must now analyse this concept; and this analysis will lead us to a third proposition: a signature acquires reality only when it occurs in terms of one of the four possible modalities. The author arrives at this proposition by means of a physics of the Elements which appears to be peculiar to himself.

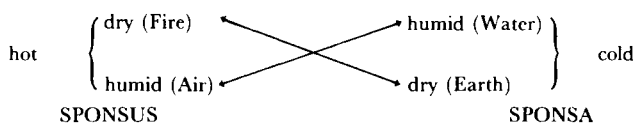
It should be noted that the principle which allows our shaykh to deduce the four elementary qualities—that is to say, the quadruple modality under which a signature may occur (chapter VI)—should be dependent on a metaphysical consideration: the movement whereby a signature severs itself from the action of that which gives it existence. Now, the very idea of movement implies the idea of the production of heat and dryness. One can thus consider the signature in relation to the movement which gives it existence, in which case the qualitative modality is that of *hot* and *dry*. Or one can consider it in itself, in its dimension of passivity with regard to the active agent, in which case the qualitative modality is that of *cold* and *dry*. Because heat and dryness are contiguous to the superior dimension which is the active agent, they move of their own accord in an *upwards* direction, whereas cold and dryness move of their own accord downwards.

Our shaykh clearly means to distinguish himself from the classical physicists who have discussed the Elements and the elemental qualities. He refuses to see the first two elemental qualities as united in the idea of a *dryness* that is common to both of them. The dryness of the element of Fire, which dryness is by nature fiery, is totally different from the dryness of the element of Earth, which dryness is by nature earthly. Fiery nature, which is hot and dry, is characterized by an extreme suppleness and an unrestricted tendency to assume all forms; earthly nature, which is cold and dry, is characterized by a hostility towards new forms, by a resistance to metamorphoses (“Fire is seventy thousand times more supple than Earth, seven hundred times quicker than Water to assume a form”). Classical physics concerning the Elements considered the humid modality as the most apt to acquire and conserve form. If, therefore, Fire is now said to possess this aptitude *par excellence*, we must invert classical physics and declare Fire to be *humidity* (*fa’l-nār raṭbah*), which is precisely the paradox that the alchemists opposed to the logic of peripatetic physics. Moreover, a Koranic verse (21:30) says: “We made all living things by means of Water”, and certain *ḥadīth* state that “Water is the first thing that God

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created". Now, as we have just seen, Fire is the first thing (hot and dry) that emerges at the initial stage, when the signature separates from the archetype. Consequently, if one considers it from the point of view of its flexibility and subtlety, its promptness to assume form (the metamorphoses of its flames), and the fact that it is the principle and the life of all living things, one might say that *Fire is Water*. If one considers it with reference to the fact that it is the first to emanate from the movement which imparts existence, it is Fire. (Fire is humidity, Fire is Water: these are paradoxes familiar to the alchemists.)

Thus, we have two opposite terms: hot and dry here correspond to the masculine, cold and dry to the feminine. But by means of what mediating dialectic may we proceed from one to the other, uniting the two so as to produce a *quaternity*? At this point, like a true alchemist, our author resorts to the hermeneutic of a Koranic verse which transfers to the physics of the Elements a disposition made by the Prophet with regard to conjugal matters. The verse in question is 4:35, and it prescribes that in the case of a possible disagreement between husband and wife, two arbiters should be chosen, one from the family of the husband and one from that of the wife. This is precisely what happens in the physics of the Elements. The arbiter chosen from the husband's side (Fire, hot and dry) will be what is hot and humid (Air); the arbiter chosen from the side of the wife (Earth, cold and dry) will be what is cold and humid (Water). The reconciliatory quality of what is hot and humid and what is cold and humid is here quite obvious.¹² When husband and wife are reconciled, there is stability and perfect equilibrium. Earth, which is feminine, prevents Fire, which is masculine, from ascending, because Earth is suspended from Fire. Fire, which is masculine, prevents Earth, the feminine, from descending, because Fire is suspended from Earth. The result is the perfect nuptial union of Fire and Earth.



It is interesting to note here how far our shaykh takes this nuptial imagery. What happens in the case of Fire (the husband) and Earth (the

¹² The diagram below is intended to illustrate this more clearly.

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wife) is the same as what happens in the case of the love between Zayd and Zaynab. In both cases we have a pair. For the pair to be perfect, the two partners who constitute it must become *four*. Zayd is not in fact one of the partners in a couple until his isolated state is shattered, and until the shadow of Zaynab has fallen upon him and he is in the shadow of Zaynab. The same is true of Zaynab, until the shadow of Zayd falls on her. What makes two partners not simply two isolated terms but two partners of a couple is precisely the aspect that is added to each of them, the event which doubles each of them, as was the case with both Zayd and Zaynab. It is in this way that the two terms, in forming a pair, become four, since the being of each as it is for the other is added to the being of each as it is in and for itself. Here Muḥ. Karīm-Khān Kirmānī offers us a kind of intuition which anticipates the idea of quaternity as it is expounded by C. G. Jung. Fire is Zayd; in order for him to form a pair with the Earth-Zaynab, the element Air must mediate. Earth is Zaynab; to form a pair with the Fire-Zayd, the element Water must mediate. In each case, the mediator doubles the partner by adding to him or her an existence which is his or her existence *for the other*. As Water corresponds to the *spousality* of Zaynab, so Air corresponds to the *spousality* of Zayd. One could thus say that the element Air is in some way the *Animus* of Zaynab or the element Earth, while Water is the *Anima* of Zayd or the element Fire.

Without pushing these instructive analogies any further, we can conclude that our shaykh has now completed the analysis which will allow him to put forward his third proposition: that a signature, whatever it may be, only acquires reality thanks to the four qualitative modalities known in current physics as Fire, Air, Water and Earth, in order of their increasing distance from the Principle. One might say that these four elemental modalities with their respective colours are the *ḥikāyah*, the imitation, the history, the parable, of the archetypal world. But on the level of Earth, the remoteness is so great that the superior world only manifests itself to Earth by veiling itself in it.

It is this that enables our shaykh to say: "The degrees of light are three in number, whereas the degree of darkness is unique. Hence, the sources of light are three, while the sources of colour are four." It must be noted that the source of colour is by no means reduced to the action of Darkness conquering light. Because the sources of colour are four, they include also those of light. The four sources correspond to the modalities described

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above; and it is the intervention of the terrestrial element that alone is responsible for the visibility of colour in this world, since, without the element Earth, the colours of the other three elements remain invisible to us. That is why the shaykh vigorously denies the opinion of the philosophers for whom the scale of colours is situated in the interval contained between white and black. This is not the case at all. The shaykh enumerates the stages of greyness and dullness whereby one proceeds from white to black: they have nothing to do with the phenomenon of colour. Colours, therefore, must have other sources. The theme will be taken up again in connection with the four pillars of coloured light which support the cosmic Throne of Mercy. For the moment, the author confines himself to naming them: the primordial sources of colours in our world are *white*, *yellow*, *red* and *black*.

We have made considerable progress. We now know that the phenomenon of colour is due to the activity of the world above, to the activity of the archetypes. We have seen how the range of colours is determined by the four modalities which are designated as the four Elements. A further step will establish this more specifically by showing us how, contrary to what was held by ordinary physics to be the case, all transparent bodies—for example, the Elements in their simple state—possess light and colour; but that this colour, while *existing*, is invisible to our fleshly eyes as long as these bodies do not become dense. As for the colour that is manifested at the level of the sensible world, it corresponds to the colour already possessed by these bodies at the supra-sensible level.

The totality of modes of perception actually revolves around three axes (chapter VII). a) There is perception by penetration and impression. Unfortunately, the forms of the world above are not such that they can imprint themselves on the organs of the lower world—that is, the apparatus of the sensible faculties. b) There is perception by embodiment (*iḥālah*); such is the perception that can be had of the imprinted signature by that which imprints it, but not vice versa. c) There can be perception by unitive union (*ittiḥād*); such is the perception that a being has of itself. But the world above is not “itself” the world below; thus, perception of the world above by the world below is not possible except by means of a manifestation (*zuhūr*) of the former, that is to say, by means of a theophany or hierophany. In this way, we are led to conceive of a perception of colour deriving from a perception which is theophanic or hierophanic.

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Nothing, however, is perceptible to our vision unless it has acquired the *tinctura* of Earth.

The celestial Spheres, for example, are transparent, and that is why they are invisible. If the stars set in the Spheres are visible to us, it is because they are a sort of condensation of sidereal matter, in the same way that water becomes visible to us when it turns foamy. Equally, the transparency of Fire, Air and Water in their elemental state makes them invisible to us, and the same applies even to Earth in the case of glass and crystal. Our shaykh is thus able to formulate a fourth proposition: "So long as these transparent and diaphanous (*shāffah, shāfīf*) bodies remain in their subtle (*laṭīf*) state, their colours and lights are not perceptible to our senses, for they too are in a subtle state. But this does not in the least mean that they do not possess colour and light. How could this be the case, when it is precisely light and colour which are the manifestation of the world above in the world below, and when the closer a thing is to the Principle, the more intense is its manifestation and its light, and the more vigorous its colour? This is why light and colour in transparent bodies are more intense and vigorous [than in opaque bodies]. Nevertheless, the force and intensity of their colour are not perceptible to our sight. But lack of visibility is not due to the fact that light and colour do not exist; it is due rather to the proximity of the Principle." We had been told from the start that we must distinguish between the existence of colour and its manifestation; we now learn that the invisibility of colour may be due not to its absence or to its obscuration but, on the contrary, to its extreme intensity. The same is true of all reality which is subtle and transparent; and, as we have already noted, it is here that the theosopher's perception differs from everything that the philosopher-optician could envisage.

To follow this up is to go beyond the banal proposition current among the philosophers: that it is light which makes colour manifest itself. Henceforth we must recognize two things: firstly, that it is colour which makes light manifest itself, for it is by means of colour that light becomes visible, in the same way as the spirit is made manifest by the body; and secondly, that the relation between light and colour is the same as that between spirit and body. In a formula reminiscent of Suhrawardī's *Ishrāq*, the shaykh specifies: "Light is the Orient made visible (*al-mashriq al-marṭy*), it is the manifestation of the Principle (the theophany) *tinctured* by something which possesses density and which is therefore the cause of its visibility."

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The shaykh has already outlined the gradations of this visibility: that of red light, of yellow light, and of white light. "In short," he concludes, "so long as the transparent body stays transparent, it may possess a light and a colour, but both are invisible to us. It is the earthly *tinctura* that accords it a form of manifestation (*mazhar*) accessible to us." The shaykh cites by way of example the case of gold and silver in their molten state, glass, crystal, and so on.

A further step has to be taken (chapter VIII) in order to consolidate what has been indicated from the start. If even a transparent body has a light and a colour, then all composites, all bodies, whether of the sensible or of the supra-sensible world, must also possess a light and a colour. Here the theosopher enters a field of exploration in which the philosophers, the *falāsifah*, were unable to find their way.

What is more, our shaykh's manner of proceeding here assumes a remarkable character, for his phenomenology of colour links up with the highest mystical speculations of an Ibn 'Arabī. He is no longer concerned with the signature as presenting the quadruple, qualitative modality previously analysed. He is concerned with it as a structure composed of two "dimensions" or aspects (*jihāt*): one dimension "from the side of its Lord" (its *rabb*), and one dimension "from its own side", or in other words a divine and lordly dimension or condition (*rubūbiyah*), and a human dimension or condition, as the vessel of its divine lord (*marbūbiyah*). It is this relationship which, as we have just seen, puts light and colour in a position that permits each to be mediated and manifested by the other. Thus what is in question is the pair or the bi-unity of *rabb* and *marbūb*; and the idea of bi-unity is of fundamental importance in the mystical doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī. The lord who is the *rabb* is not the hidden unknowable deity, the *Absconditum*, not the terrifying, transcendent and all-powerful God. He is the God created in faith and revealed in the love of each being; between this lord and the being to whom he reveals himself as such, a solidarity is established which renders them interdependent in the manner of lord and vassal, companions in destiny who cannot do without each other. From now on, the relationship between this personal God and his faithful vassal is a chivalric one.

Ibn 'Arabī expressed this bond admirably and often, saying for example: "If he has given us life and existence through his being, I, too, give him life through knowing him in my heart." This same reciprocity of roles

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is expressed, no less admirably, by one of our own Western mystics, Angelus Silesius, when he says: "God does not live without me; I know that God cannot for one moment live without me. If I become nothing, he too must give up his life."¹³ It is an extraordinary intuition, one that tells us that God's every death is necessarily preceded by the death of man; but it is equally extraordinary that the phenomenology of colour should here take us to the heart of the solidarity which makes the divine lord and his earthly knight, the *rabb* and the *marbūb*, responsible for each other, precisely because light and colour are in a similar relationship to one another.

Our shaykh explains this as follows. The signature's lordly dimension—elsewhere called the imperishable Face or inner Imam of a being (the theme will reappear at the end of this study)—is precisely the Image-archetype, the *Imago* which, as we were told earlier, is the signature projected into the concrete individuality that is its receptacle. This *Imago* is the dimension of the signature which is "towards its lord", its "lordly dimension"—that is to say, the manifestation of this lord by means of the *Imago* to the concrete individual, and by the individual to others. Its "dimension towards itself"—human and vassal—is that of its occultation, for it is only manifested through its lord (as in the invocation quoted above: "Could another than You possess a manifestation which was not Yours?").

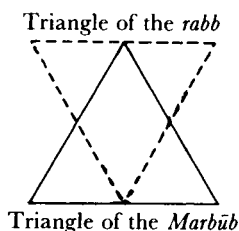
What does this mutual solidarity have to do, ultimately, with the phenomenon of colour? Briefly, in the absence of light, colour would not be manifested but would remain in an inert state, like a corpse. But the process works both ways; for, as we have seen, without colour light would not be manifest to us precisely because of the excessive intensity of its manifestation. In the same way the *marbūb*, the vassal or knight, is maintained in being by his *rabb* or feudal lord; yet the latter would be unknown and invisible without his vassal, because his lordly condition would not be manifested, as the spirit would not be manifested without the body, or light without colour. The consequences of this are far-reaching: the world of colours, according to this analysis, is part and parcel of an entire service of mystical chivalry, of which the *rabb-marbūb* relationship is the type *par excellence*. We will see an example of this shortly.

Our shaykh explains himself here by means of a diagram that is to be

¹³ Cf. my book, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Bollingen Series XCI, Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 129.

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found in another of his books—significantly enough, one analogous to it figures among the diagrams in a work by Robert Fludd, the great seventeenth-century English doctor and alchemist, who was also a Rosicrucian.¹⁴ The relationship between *rabb* and *marbūb*, between lord and knight, light and colour, can be illustrated by two interpenetrating spheres or more clearly still, in the world of surfaces, by two interpenetrating triangles.



The base of the triangle which represents the lordly dimension (indicated here by the dotted line) is above, close to the Principle, while the tip of its cone touches the base of the triangle which represents the human dimension, the lord's vassal. Conversely, the base of the triangle which represents the human dimension (indicated by the continuous line in the diagram) is at the extreme lower limit, while the tip of its cone touches, above, the base of the divine dimension of lordship.

Our shaykh explains, in his turn, what is already to be found in Ibn 'Arabī: the Manifestation (*qiyām al-ẓuhūr*) of the divine or lordly dimension subsists by virtue of the dimension of the soul, or human dimension, for the *rabb* would not be manifested without the *marbūb*, nor light without colour. Equally, the reality (*qiyām al-taḥaqquq*) of the human dimension owes its subsistence to the divine dimension. Without the human dimension, the divine dimension would not be manifested, but without the divine lordly dimension the human dimension would be deprived of reality, as colour without light would remain in the inert state of a body deprived of life. Such is the whole secret of the *Imago* at the heart of man, the sole reality that man may meaningfully invoke as "My God", and towards whom (for that very reason) he is capable of supreme devotion.

¹⁴ On this diagram, which appears in another of our shaykh's works, see my *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* . . . , op. cit., pp. 228–229 (the "triangle of light and the triangle of darkness"). See also Serge Hutin, *Robert Fludd (1574–1637) alchimiste et philosophe rosicrucien* (Paris, "Omnium Littéraire", 1972), pl. X, p. 126.

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This is why the phenomenon of colour leads us back to the famous *ḥadīth* which dominates the horizon of Islamic theosophy, and which is deliberately recalled here by our shaykh: “I was a hidden Treasure. I desired to be known; that is why I created creatures”—that is, creatural limits, so that I might manifest myself to and by these very limits. This is to say that God only manifests himself to created beings by means of these created beings themselves. The parallel is not a difficult one to follow. Light, because of its intensity, would remain invisible if it did not receive the *tinctura* of colours. The divine Treasure would likewise remain concealed—not by darkness, but by its excessive light. This light must take on the *tincture* of created beings, must limit its intensity, if it is to become visible. This is the “theophany within limits” (*al-tajallī fi’l-ḥudūd*), the secret of the *Imago* and hence of the Gnostic profession of faith: *Eum talem vidi qualem capere potui* (I saw him according to my capacity to perceive him).

In order to obtain a complete phenomenology of colour, it only remains to consider its modalities through all the levels of the hidden Treasure’s ladder of theophanies. The limits of this ladder belong to the “human dimension”, their sources being six in number: time, space, *situs*, rank, quantity and quality. They also go by the name of “the six days of Creation”, that is to say, the six limits constitutive of created beings. Among these limits are those which derive from the four qualitative modalities that we analysed earlier. For the creatural dimension of the signature, the qualitative modality which derives from Fire is colour; from Air, sound; from Water, touch; and from Earth, taste. That which is palpable to touch derives from the combination of qualitative modalities which possess something in common.

It follows that light and colour are a qualitative modality which exists in every composite, by virtue of the fiery nature (the element of Fire) that each composite contains. Just as no composite is deprived of this fiery nature (the element of Fire), so no composite is without a certain light. The totality of the lights existing in things derives from this Fire. When the world above projects its *Imago* into the world below, its manifestation in each Nature acquires a *tincture* that corresponds to the nature that is below. Through each Nature, each Element, it manifests itself to one of the faculties of perception, the faculty created by this same Nature (manifestations by colour, sound, scent and so on). This is how the “hidden

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lord", who is allied to his knight, his *marbūb*, is manifested to the organ of created vision: he is manifested through the fiery nature of things, through the elemental Fire that each thing contains. This is so because the light that is the manifestation of this lord through the fiery nature, through the elemental Fire concealed within the signature, is only perceptible to the organ of vision created by that same Fire. "Like alone knows like" is a principle effective both for the theory of coloured photisms in Najmuddīn Kubrā and for Goethe's *Farbenlehre*.¹⁵

If it is true, therefore, that the eye cannot perceive transparent things or lights in a subtle state until they have undergone a certain condensation, then every signature and composite possesses colour and light, regardless of whether it belongs to the material bodies of this world or to the *imaginal* realities of the *barzakh*, to the spiritual forms of the Soul's *Malakūt* or to those of the *Jabarūt* of the cherubic Intelligences. This is why the shaykh, in anticipating the deductions stemming from his consideration of the theme of the cosmic Throne, specifies the scale of colour distributed over seven levels of the universe as follows: 1. The colour of the world of Intelligence is *white*. 2. The colour of the world of Spirit is *yellow*. 3. The colour of the world of Soul is *green*. 4. The colour of the world of Nature is *red*. 5. That of the world of Matter is *ashen*. 6. That of the world of the Image is *dark green*. 7. That of the material body is *black*.

He warns his readers that they will find no mention of all this either in the *Mutakallimūn* or in his writings of the professional philosophers. "You will perceive," he says, "their inability to grasp the question decisively . . . Such is our way. As for their way, I call God to witness that they know only the appearance and the outer aspect of the life of this world; they are unaware of the other world (cf. Koran 30:7)." This other world will be revealed to us in the second part of the "Book of the red hyacinth" by means of an astonishing esoteric hermeneutic of the colour red, preceded by an analysis of the way in which colours are generated in the sensible and supra-sensible worlds.

4. *How colours are generated in the sensible and supra-sensible worlds.* From the point we have reached we can catch a glimpse of the goal envisaged by our shaykh: a goal at which the hermeneutics of the Koran converges in an astonishing way with the hermeneutics of colour in general, and in par-

15 Cf. my book, *Man of Light* . . . , op. cit., index, s.v. Goethe, Najmoddīn Kobrā.

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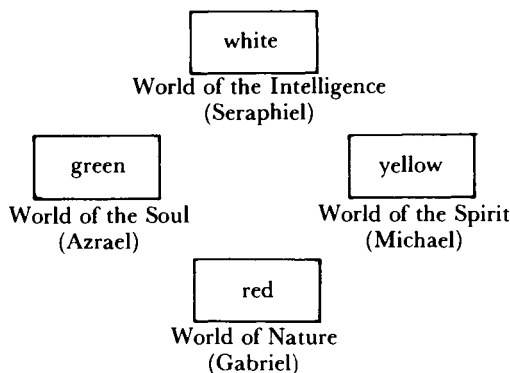
particular with that of the colour red which is the theme of the “Book of the red hyacinth”. Before attaining this goal, however, there is a stage of some difficulty to be gone through. It will include an analysis of the way in which colours are generated, while its recapitulation should make it possible for us to profit from what we have learned up to now. Very briefly, this stage consists of three phases: A. We need a doctrine dealing with the primordial sources of colour; this will be the subject of the discourse on the cosmic Throne of the Merciful One, supported by four pillars of coloured light. B. On the basis of this doctrine, we have to deduce the manner in which colours are generated and distributed in terms of the four fundamental qualitative modalities which we considered earlier. C. When we have reached this point, we will be in a position to confirm the initial proposition, that every composite in both the sensible and the supra-sensible world possesses its own particular colour. To this end, the author returns briefly to the theme of the signature’s double dimension of *rabb* and *marbūb*, lord and knight, light and its colour. This is what makes it possible for us to understand how at each of the seven or eight levels of the universe, there is an *anamnesis* of the colours that we contemplate in this world; and the theory of *anamneses* or correspondences makes possible in its turn a transcendental hermeneutic of the colour red which plumbs what is most esoteric in its esoteric reality. This constitutes our shaykh’s goal, and the consummation of his book.

A. We cannot understand either the significance and source of the colour red, or the qualitative modality of its appearance, its exoteric dimension (*ẓāhir*), without having first acquired an understanding of the sources of the other colours (II, chapter I). As we saw, it is absolutely out of the question for these sources to be limited to black and white; or, rather, between black and white, as between the two extreme terms of Fire and Earth, two fundamental colours must interpose themselves and assume the role of mediators. The general proposition is that in the subtle world of transparent colours, where earthly darkness does not intrude, the sources of colour are four in number: *white*, *yellow*, *red* and *green*. But in our physical, terrestrial world, the four sources are white, yellow, red and *black*; because in this world black replaces the green of the subtle worlds.

Generally speaking, the predication of these four sources constitutes one of the great themes of Shiite theosophy, the theme of the Throne of Mercy or of the Merciful One (*‘Arsh al-Raḥmah*, *‘Arsh al-Raḥmān*), which rests on

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four cosmic supports. When the Koranic verse (15:21) states that "There are no things whose treasures (archetypes) do not exist alongside Us" or "with Us" (*‘indanā*), "with Us" is interpreted as signifying the theophany that is accomplished in the creation of the universes.¹⁶ The theme is stated in a *ḥadīth* which is recorded in the great *corpus* of Kulaynī and is attributed to the first Imam: "God created the throne out of four lights: a red light whereby the colour red *becomes red*; a green light whereby the colour green *becomes green*; a yellow light whereby the colour yellow *becomes yellow*; a white light whence *whiteness* is derived." Briefly, this *white* light characterizes the upper right-hand pillar of the Throne; it is the world of the cherubic Intelligences, the summit of the *Jabarūt* typified by the archangel Seraphiel.



The four pillars of the cosmic Throne of Mercy

The *yellow* light characterizes the lower right-hand pillar of the Throne; it is the world of the Spirit (*Rūḥ*) typified by the archangel Michael. The

¹⁶ On the theme of the Throne, see Mullā Sadrā Shīrāzī, *Le Livre des pénétrations métaphysiques (Kitāb al-mashā‘ir)*, Arabic and Persian texts with French translation by H. Corbin (Bibliothèque iranienne, vol. 10; Paris, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1964), p. 167. The *ḥadīth* of the Throne recorded by the Imams and quoted below does not mention the colour blue as being one of the fundamental colours. In this connection, the ancient Arabs distinguished only three fields of colour: blue-green (*akhdar*), red-brown (*ahmar*), and yellow-brown (*asfar*). The other terms relating to colour refer only to degrees of greater or lesser clarity in these fundamental colours. On this point, see Woldietrich Fischer, *Farb- und Formbezeichnungen in der Sprache der alt-arabischen Dichtung* (Wiesbaden 1965) (review by Ewald Wagner in *Der Islam*, 43/3, 1967, pp. 316 ff.). On the other hand, we know that Aristotle in his *Meteora* groups the colours of the rainbow into three classes: purple, green, red-brown. Cf. H. Gätje, op. cit., p. 290. An entire study is called for, comparing the Greek, Arabic and Persian vocabularies that relate to colour.

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green light characterizes the upper left-hand pillar of the Throne; it is the summit of the *Malakūt* or world of the Soul, typified by the archangel Azrael. The *red* light characterizes the lower left-hand pillar of the Throne; this is the world of Nature and is typified by the archangel Gabriel because he is the demiurge of our world. He is the Holy Spirit of the Koran; the philosophers identified him with the Tenth Hierarchic Intelligence or active Intelligence, that for humankind is both the angel of knowledge and the angel of revelation.

This theme has been developed in many ways, a synthesis of which would be a considerable task and one that has not yet been attempted.¹⁷ In the course of previous researches, I was able to ascertain (in the writings, for example, of the seventeenth-century theosophist Qāḍī Saʿīd Qummī) that the theme of the Throne was actually *eo ipso* that of the heavenly Temple, archetype of all temples, and that it is in fact possible to substitute the word *Temple* for *Throne*. In addition, wherever we come across this theme in Islamic theosophy, we are dealing with the same theme as it appears in some form or other in the Jewish Cabbalah, as well as with the theme of the Temple in the tradition of Christian esotericism—I am thinking in particular of the theme of the interiorization of the Temple in the work of the great eighteenth-century mystic Willermoz.¹⁸ In the present case, too, the hermeneutics of colour leads to just such an interiorization.

For the contemplative exploration of the cosmic Throne of Mercy reveals that the four lights typified by the archangelic tetrad are the sources around which the totality of lights revolves, including the lights of the supra-sensible world. They are the absolute and universal lights, from which all partial lights are derived. Each manifestation of these partial lights is a *ḥikāyah* (imitation, story, recital, parable) of the supreme Lights, which are themselves not the result of any intermixture but are primordial “acts of light”. I will merely refer in passing to the question that suggests itself to our author, namely, whether white is a colour like the others or,

¹⁷ Cf. below, the study “The Configuration of the Temple of the Ka’bah as a Secret of Spiritual Life, according to the work of Qāḍī Saʿīd Qummī (1103/1691)”. See also Mullā Ṣadrā, *op. cit.*, pp. 166–167, 218 ff.

¹⁸ I owe my knowledge of this to the very fine unedited document presented by Antoine Faivre in the appendix to his edition of René le Forestier, *La Franc-maçonnerie templière et occultiste aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Paris, Aubier-Montaigne, 1970), pp. 1023–1049.

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properly speaking, not a colour at all. In fact, this question is first suggested in a variant reading of the *ḥadīth* of the Throne quoted above,¹⁹ as well as by the fourth Imam, ‘Alī Zaynal-‘Abidīn, when he says that white light is the “Light of Lights”, while red, yellow and green light are themselves the light of which white is the light. That is why white light can acquire any *tincture*, although no colour can be *tinted* by it. It is therefore the most simple of colours, the most faithful *ḥikāyah* of the supreme world that lies beyond the universes accessible to our contemplation.

B. Now that we know these sources, the archetypes of colour as they exist in the cosmic Throne of Mercy, we have to describe their mode of generation according to the four elemental qualitative modalities analysed earlier. It is clear (II, chapter II) that each of these modalities possesses its own exigency and aptitude. When the light of the Principle manifests itself through one of these modalities, it does so through the colour which is specific to the modality in question. Here we have the conditions necessary for a hermeneutic of colour: each of the four modalities can be a form of manifestation; a particular manifestation is produced according to the colour that is specific to a particular modality. All colour, therefore, is a *phainomenon* that “symbolizes with” the light of its Principle, and the meaning should be interpreted in accordance with this manifestation.

We have seen the four elemental modalities emerge on the level of the world of Nature, itself typified as the lower left-hand pillar of the cosmic Throne of Mercy, whose light is red. It is self-evident, then, that the first modality—Fire—which issues from this Nature will have red as its specific colour. The four constitutive modalities of the world of Nature are thus seen as manifesting, each at one level of this Nature, the four colours of the Throne.

a) *Heat and dryness* in a substance postulate the substance’s stability in

- 19 The text of the *ḥadīth*, as it is recorded by the first Imam, mentions (as distinct from the other colours): “A white light from which whiteness proceeds.” Thus, he does not speak of it as a *tinctura*, as though things were *tinted* by it. This text supports those who hold that *white* is not a colour but the *pole* of all colours, and exempt from the definitions that apply to them; all of them have recourse to it, while it has recourse only to itself. By contrast, the same *ḥadīth* as recorded by one of the other Imams says: “A white light whereby whiteness *becomes white*.” This variant reading supports those who hold that white is a colour in the same class as other colours, that is, that the white object is similarly *tinted* by whiteness. Furthermore, white is a colour in that it is postulated by the elemental Natures or qualities, since it is the colour specific to the element of Water.

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the shadow of its Principle and its orientation towards that Principle, in other words coherence and cohesion, subtlety and ascending motion (*ṣu'ūd*). Its configuration or *Gestalt* is the upright stance: the Arabic letter *alif* (I) in its vertical solitude, or the Pen, or the tall flame, or the cypress tree thrusting straight at the sky-line. All this is the result of the tendencies of a substance's constitutive parts to move towards *one* centre, *one* area of being. When all these properties are united in one substance which is the first to emanate from its *henadic* principle (here the lower left-hand pillar of the Throne), they require this substance to be *red* in colour, because that is what the colour red *is*, at least when we are dealing with the subtle component parts (the *laṭīfah*). If, however, the colour red acquires an extreme intensity in the parts which are dense, these will turn a verdigris green (*zangār*) in colour. (What we call the oxidization of copper or silver, for example, is interpreted here in terms of a rigorously qualitative physics, which posits at the origin of a colour only the state of density or subtlety of its parts, its proximity to or distance from the Principle.)

That, in short, is why the colour of Fire is *red*. Since it is the most subtle of the elements, its colour is equally subtle and is hidden from our eyes of flesh, created out of opaque Earth. This Earth must itself take on the *tincture* of Fire before Fire can be seen by us as red and in a state of density, as we observe it to be in the case of a lump of coal, a candle, or a piece of red-hot iron. And while this may be the only Fire we can see, it is also the Fire that Zoroastrian cosmology denounces as that of Ahriman, because it is a fire that ravages, whereas the subtle Fire of Ormazd neither ravages nor destroys. The significance of this differentiation will become clear to us at the conclusion of our enquiry. Let us observe in passing that it should not surprise us if in Persian miniatures, as in the ritual paintings of the Byzantine Empire down to our Middle Ages, natural tints are not reproduced as the artist may have seen them with his eyes of flesh; what counts above all is the colour's symbolic, hermeneutic, sacramental value.

b) When *heat and humidity* are in a substance, they result in swelling, expansion, the opposite to the effects of dryness. Nevertheless, here too heat demands ascending motion, which is why the figuration or *Gestalt* that typifies such a substance in the world of volumes is the conical form of a pine-cone or, in the world of surfaces, the triangle pointing upwards (\triangle). The internal cohesion that such a substance owes to its heat would postulate, as in the preceding case, the colour red; but its expansiveness