

Imaginal

It is the world situated midway between
the world of purely intelligible realities and
the world of sense perception;
the world that I have called the *imaginal* world
(*alam al-mithal, mundus imaginalis*) in order
to avoid any confusion with
what is commonly designated *imaginary*.

Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*¹

Cogito, ergo sum. In René Descartes' well-known formulation, thinking becomes the premise of being. In other words, thought is set as the *a priori* condition of any individual existence, as if it would come *before* life itself. Yet one could challenge the extent of validity of this axiom and ask: *is thinking still possible while no one exists?* This assumption seems to be at the base of Averroes' notion of a 'separate intellect'. Elaborated in a set of commentaries to Aristotle's writings on the soul, this intellect bears the attribution of 'separate' as it is completely detached from any individual mind. Averroes' intellect is an autonomous one, not to be mistaken for any 'subjective' kind of intellection. At the same time, the fact that it is not individual does not imply a transcendence of it: in other words, the separate intellect

is not 'divine', nor is it a Platonic repository of universals. On the contrary, the 'objectivity' of the separate intellect is quite an immanent one: not by chance Averroes often refers to it by the name of *material* intellect. This 'materiality' is explained by the capacity of the intellect to receive images, and by its disposition to be literally *in-formed* by them, to 'reshape' its 'matter' in a corresponding form. The material intellect is not only able to receive images, but also to *cast* them: such 'projective' ability goes by the name of *agent* intellect. Averroes' separate mind is therefore some sort of emplacement that makes of images a device of physical mediation. One of the most common metaphors for it is in fact the *diaphanous*, a transparent medium that, like a glass window of a gothic cathedral, withholds and manifests light in its own

matter and provides an objective embodiment to what would otherwise be invisible and ‘immaterial’.²

Averroes’ Islamic culture was to develop, in the Middle Ages, serious advancements in the study of optics. The notion of an invisible domain, not ‘above’ but in-between immanent existence was already present as a spiritual notion. In his extensive studies of Islamic and Iranian culture, Henry Corbin named this domain as *the imaginal*. Starkly in contrast with the ‘imaginary’, the imaginal is not fantastic or unreal, it is instead endowed with an own ‘real’ existence. Corbin describes it as “the world situated midway between the world of purely intelligible realities and the world of sense perception”—the imaginal does not depend on one or the other, but is attributed by Corbin an autonomy of its own.

The images that appear in such a domain are bridges between the two worlds, they constitute a *medium* between the transcendent one of intelligible realities and the mundane one of sense perception. Establishing the imaginal as a third, autonomous domain makes of these images not mere representations of one of the two worlds they connect; rather, they work more or less as a compass does: by ‘orienting’ themselves, they actually articulate both worlds as the ‘poles’ of this orientation. The mediacy that these images convey is therefore a *constructed* one: it is only by an active imagination, and not a mere reception, that images can ‘project’ their poles. The mundane world of perception and the transcendent one of pure intellection act—in Corbin’s words—as “two mirrors (*specula*) facing each other,”³ and the image is what materialises in their double speculation. This architecture puts the three ‘worlds’ (the mundane, the celestial, and the imaginal in-between)⁴ in connection

with each other, but at the same time it does not affirm the primacy of one above the others. The imaginal is a domain in which images are both ‘naturally born’ and ‘artificially built’, and where the difference between the two is annihilated. The image that ‘lives’ in such a domain is a *tókos*, both a ‘natural offspring’ as much as a ‘technical affair’.

The imaginal can then be described as an architectonic domain, since it accommodates mediation not just as a transcendental form—as an *a priori* form to the ‘content’ of the mediation itself—but as a constructed one. It must not therefore be mistaken for a *tabula rasa*: images ‘populate’ the imaginal, they constitute its very ‘environment’ and, at the same time, they *make room* in it—they form a ‘constellation’. The ‘life’ of these images, their activity, could perhaps be compared to the art of gardening: a collection of species that does not grow ‘in the desert’, but that instead is the result of a meaningful selection and of a careful disposition of the same species that proliferate outside of its boundaries, in the wildness. The *imaginal* is the space of this ‘gardening’ [see: *Gardening* p. 147–148].

1 Henry Corbin, ‘The *Imago Templi* in Confrontation with Secular Norms’, in *Temple and Contemplation*, KPI, 1986; p. 265.

2 My understanding of the diaphanous and of Averroes’ “separate intellect” is largely based on the work of Emanuele Coccia, *La Trasparenza delle Immagini: Averroè e l’averroismo*, Bruno Mondadori, 2005.

3 Corbin; p. 267.

4 Respectively the *Imago Mundi*, the *Imago Caeli*, and the *Imago Templi*, in Corbin’s words.