

Divination as Divine Revelation: some thoughts on Ibn Arabi's understanding of Imagination

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“In order to know the proper way of acting in the world and living out our human embodiment, we must know what the world signifies to us. In order to know the significance of things, we must know our own nature and our proper destiny”.¹

In the Platonic and Sufi traditions, self-knowledge is the key to spiritual knowledge, thus self-knowledge leads to a mode of being in the world in which practical action stems from a profound understanding of its own underlying principles. All forms of divination reveal ways in which the ‘path of good fortune’ may be followed through the choice of ‘right’ action, which appears to be already known on some hidden, inner, unconscious or divine level, but which is continually up for negotiation as the querent refers to the symbolic image, text or spiritual authority for guidance.² In this article I want to explore the question of divinatory interpretation in relation to the crucial role given to the imagination by the Sufi master Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240), drawing on the insightful commentaries of William Chittick on the Shaykh’s extensive treatise the *Futuhat al-Makkiya*³ and the pioneering comparative studies of the 20th century French Islamicist Henry Corbin.⁴

First of all, let’s consider the nature of divination. Traditionally, it refers to a method of discovering the will or knowledge of the gods in relation to human affairs, as in oracles, omen-reading or dream-interpretation. In the case of specific oracle-sites, the *theoros* or querent would travel to the oracle to put a question to the *hermeios* or priest/ess, whose answer would then be interpreted according to the context and intentionality of the querent. In this sense, the divination would ‘create’ the future through indicating the choices to be made which would influence the flow of events. The source of the prophetic utterance would be understood to be a god or spirit-being (*daimon*) who revealed the message directly to the priest/ess whilst she or he was possessed—in a state of trance or altered consciousness—in order to receive the divine influx. Now modern diviners would rarely attribute their insights to gods or spirits (unless they were mediums), but they may claim clairvoyant abilities, and would almost certainly acknowledge that the ‘truth’ that arises from interpreting a tarot card or a horoscope symbol is irrational, in the sense that it depends on the imaginative leap of metaphorical association, not rational deduction. From this association, they may make literal inferences concerning practical action and events, but the act of symbolisation, of connecting meaning with image with life-event, is unique and unrepeatable, arising from the desire of the moment and immune to empirical or quantifiable investigation. This kind of insight has always been seen as the province of revelation in the theological sense, although the ‘exoteric’ monotheistic

¹ William Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2007), 73

² I am not talking here about the popular definition of divination as ‘foretelling the future’, which reduces revelatory insight to a fate-bound level of determinism, implying the abnegation of free choice and denying individuals’ responsibility in creating their own life path.

³ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn ‘Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (IW) (SUNY Press, 1994); *Science of the Cosmos* (SC), *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (SPK) (SUNY Press, 1989)

⁴ In particular, Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Princeton University Press, 1969) and *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam* (Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Association, 1999)

traditions have firmly upheld that their particular forms of revelation are legitimate, whilst those of the pagan diviners rely on the false spiritual authority of deceitful demons.

For Plato and his followers, the true diviner must be in a state of 'divine frenzy' or inspired madness, able to attain to a 'second sight', a hotline to a realm of being which transcends yet embraces the human modality of time, cause and effect, and the subject-object divide. The problem with post-Enlightenment philosophy has been the inability of a rational discourse divorced from theology to investigate such a form of knowing on its own terms, without reducing it to the absurd or fantastical in the face of a sharp-edged Apollonine analysis. Diviners today are faced with the same prejudice regarding legitimate forms of knowledge, as Geoffrey Cornelius observes:

The approach of much modern philosophy ... is coloured by the unstated assumption that divination is a product of particular times and cultures, or a result of defective thinking belonging to an earlier historical phase in the development of knowledge, and therefore offering little that bears directly on fundamental philosophical problems.⁵

Another problem for the contemporary diviner lies in the lack of a theoretical language in which to express what they do, a language in which the revelatory experience can remain true to itself and not buy out to a materially-based pseudo-scientific, psychological or cognitive explanation. Henry Corbin would see this problem as a result of the banishing of the ontological reality of the imaginal world, or *mundus imaginalis* in Western metaphysical philosophy since the Renaissance, and the resulting polarisation of spirit and matter. When the symbolic image becomes alienated from its spiritual underpinnings, it is forced to find justification within a literal paradigm which can only disparage its claim to any kind of 'truth' beyond mere subjectivity. The imagination, then, is reduced to mere fantasy with no authority for transmitting knowledge of the Real (as Ibn' Arabi terms the primal, spiritual ground of being). I would suggest that in order for divination to state its own authority, to find an authentic voice, the model given us by the Platonists is a convincing one—namely, that central to the cultivation of wisdom is the development of a mode of perception that is neither purely spiritual nor purely rational, but both simultaneously.

To speak of imaginative reality on its own terms, we must cast aside the myth woven by the astrophysicists, that the world is 'really' a speck of matter in an unimaginably vast void, and enter into the metaphorical vision of the geocentric cosmos, the physical earth being the furthest and densest outreach of divine energy which pours forth from the creator through three dimensions. These three realms of existence are defined by the esoteric traditions as an immaterial divine world, an intermediary cosmic world and a sub-lunar material world. Like layers of an onion, cosmic and spiritual worlds envelope the material one in which we locate ourselves as physical beings, but our soul partakes of all three, mirrored in the microcosm as faculties of knowledge. To know the material world requires the five senses, to know the cosmic world requires the imagination, and to know the spiritual world requires the kind of insight, unveiling or tasting described as revelation—yet all three modes are inextricably linked, with imagination playing a key role as mediator, facilitating the movement from spirit to sense.

⁵ G. Cornelius, 'Hermeneutic Radicality and Divination' (unpublished paper)

The cosmic world then is the world of images, where the immaterial reality of the divine realm is translated into the sense-perceptible, symbolic language of art, music, poetry and myth. It is also the world of the intermediary spirits whose forms can be manifest to inner sight, and whose voices may be heard by the inner ear—indeed Ibn 'Arabi would insist that the spiritual world can *only* be known through its representations in this 'middle ground'. Only known, that is, on condition that the seer has developed the requisite ability to 'see through' literal appearances to their hidden, essential meaning. For this, he or she must cultivate what he calls 'the two eyes' of knowledge in equal measure.

These are the two eyes of Reason and Revelation, sometimes called the 'two lights of the soul', the natural and divine lights, or the two parts of the soul, the lower and higher. Knowledge as reason pursues abstract and theoretical ideas, it demands to know exact relationships between things in either/or contexts, it strives for acute mental vision of underlying forms, it analysis, separates and differentiates, critiques and objectifies. Ibn 'Arabi suggests that this form of knowledge knows God through His comparability and distinction from nature, which we may see as leading to a severing of divinity from the world if pursued relentlessly. Chittick comments:

Excessive stress on rational thought pushes the divine into total transcendence. When this process is not kept in balance with the eye of myth and imagination, rational analysis eventually makes "the hypothesis of God" extraneous to rigorous, critical thinking. We see the process taking place in the mainstream development of Western thought. The end result is a scientific rationality completely oblivious to the *huquq* (spiritual law) of God, the world and the human soul. Excessive dependence on reason leads to agnosticism and atheism.⁶

It is not coincidental that such a process was set in motion at the same time as the earth was displaced at the centre of the cosmos by the Sun, with the resulting disjunction between human beings' *conception* of their new existence on one meandering planet amongst many, and their innate *perception* of themselves still firmly at the centre of a series of concentric spheres. The age-old geocentric view, which embraced the gamut of all natural science and religion, was and still is the foundation for observation of all heavenly phenomena and is based on the evidence of our senses, as we see the Sun and other stars rise and set, and feel the earth solidly under our feet. It is impossible now for us to return to a world where there was no 'other' truth, the truth of a scientific objectivity dependent on measurement and quantification but devoid of poetry, and so we face a much harder task than our forbears to bring the imaginal eye, what Ibn 'Arabi calls 'the eye of revelation', into a single focus with a reason that no longer postulates God as anywhere, let alone beyond the cosmos.

Yet, diviners know that their insights depend on this second sight. This is the eye that sees the world as sacred, the divine as immanent, nature as ensouled. For the eye of imagination, knowledge is never precise and objective, but the manifestation of an unknown essence of things expressed as images to be lived and experienced, or mysterious beings to be encountered. Such revelatory knowledge perceives the *similarity* of God with the world, through occult properties and signatures, signs, analogies and symbols, or countless living entities that partake of His power. The danger of

⁶ SC, 71

such a vision if untempered by a rational apprehension of unity would be an unbridled polytheism and idolisation of things in the world:

For its part, the eye of imagination sees God as immanent, it recognises God's signs and marks in all things. It perceives the universe as the theatre of divine significance, infused with intelligent and intelligible light. It finds God's names and attributes manifest everywhere in the world and the soul, and it describes God in the positive terms supplied by revelation and the natural realm. This is to say that the eye of imagination feeds on myth and symbol, and it sees things not simply as signs and pointers to God, but as the actual presence of the Real. Left to its own devices however, it will divinize the world and its products and fall into *takthir*, the assertion of many gods.⁷

Thus God is distant from the point of view of reason, and present from the point of view of the imagination; the point being that the divine is unchanging, it is the modality of human vision which creates dualistic perspectives. If human beings form 'an exclusive attachment' to either mode of vision as the truth, the rejected mode will become outlawed and even demonised, as can easily be seen in the history of Western religious thought. However, there have always been individuals who have striven to bring both eyes into single focus, from Pythagoras to Ficino to C.G.Jung, and these individuals have been instrumental in articulating new paradigms of knowledge. They have also insisted on the importance of practice in the service of healing, whether through music, astral magic or depth psychology, and it is in this context that we must view divination as an activity that brings revelatory insight into the domain of right action. For Ibn 'Arabi, "knowledge without practice is not true knowledge"⁸, and only knowledge which is fully 'realised' in the world "carries with it the self-evidence of certainty".⁹

The question of realisation is crucial to the philosophy (and hands-on practice) of divination, because unless meaning is fully 'tasted' it remains speculative and abstract, and can have no truly transformatory power. Ibn 'Arabi draws an important distinction between 'imitative' and 'realised' knowledge, the former being the kind of knowledge that is transmitted to the mind via facts, information and theories, such as history or the sciences, or any kind of received tradition or discipline, the latter signifying knowledge that been experienced, internalised, digested. Such realised knowledge is termed 'intellectual', not in our narrow sense of the word, but in the sense that it reaches to the part of the soul that partakes of the divine mind itself, the deep inner recesses that the Shaykh prefers to call the 'heart'. Through this knowledge, the soul may activate its true potential through coming to reflect on itself through the disciplines of metaphysics, cosmology, spiritual psychology and ethics, each of which contains both theoretical and practical dimensions:

The goal of the intellectual tradition was to help people come to know themselves to that they could achieve human perfection. To do so, one had to actualise both the theoretical intellect, which is the human self inasmuch as it knows all the realities and all the names, and the practical intellect,

⁷ SC, 71-2

⁸ SC, 149

⁹ SPK, 35

which is the human self inasmuch as it knows how to act correctly on the basis of the names taught by God.¹⁰

'Actualising' the theoretical intellect involves engagement with the imagination in a two-way process of allowing the archetypal meaning to enter the image, and allowing the image to point back to its archetype: "imagination follows the authority of that which sense perception gives to it".¹¹ The diviner who works with images such as Tarot will recognise the subtle move of the imagination when it simultaneously "subtilises the sensory object and densifies meaning"¹², allowing a flash of intuitive insight into a situation. But how does the diviner or interpreter have confidence in the truth of such insight? Ibn 'Arabi invites us to 'reflect' and 'consider' the meanings gleaned through the imagination, in order to reach certain knowledge. Reflection is a process of assimilating the data from sense-perception in order to reach a rational conclusion, and is a necessary starting point for interpretation. But precisely because it is a rational activity, reflection may be fallible or mistaken for the proofs of human reason, which in this tradition, are inevitably inadequate in relation to the certainly of revealed knowledge. Indeed one of the gifts of reflection is the realisation that human reason is limited in respect to divine things. For this reason, the matter must be subjected to a further 'consideration', a word whose etymology means 'with the stars' (*con-sidus*). Consideration implies more than mental assessment. It involves looking, gazing, inspecting and investigating—referring the matter back to the divine self-disclosure of the cosmos, to the imagination, to the inner vision, for "no one can have true knowledge unless he knows things through his own essence".¹³ When consideration is applied to reflection, the two eyes are united, images are returned to their archetypes, and the soul is strengthened:

On the level of the soul, imagination comes to know God's self-disclosure by perceiving concretely with an inward vision that combines the spiritual (or suprasensory and the invisible) and the corporeal (or the sensory and visible).¹⁴

May we then equate divinatory insight with revelation? In the sense that revelation is *meaning* discerned through the senses, it would seem obviously so. Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabi claims that such a 'seeing through' can occur at any time, whether asleep or awake, disclosing the 'divine similitudes' in creation:

Revelation is a meaning. When God wants meaning to descend to sense-perception, it has to pass through the Presence of Imagination before it reaches sense-perception. The reality of imagination demands that it gives sensory form to everything that becomes actualised within it ... if the [revelation] arrives at the time of wakefulness, it is called 'imaginalisation' ... that is why revelation begins with imagination.¹⁵

¹⁰ SC, 30

¹¹ *Futuhāt* II.628,27, SPK, 115

¹² *Futuhāt* III.451.2, SPK, 115

¹³ *Futuhāt* I.31.11, SPK, 167

¹⁴ IW, 73

¹⁵ *Futuhāt* II.375.32, IW, 75

It would no doubt be somewhat daunting for most diviners to regard themselves as 'prophetic' in the sense of announcing immutable divine truths for their clients, but few would deny the moments of total conviction when they 'just know' what the image or symbol reveals, a knowledge which is then confirmed by further reflection and consideration with the client. If the Sufi understanding of the imagination as a place of divine theophany and daimonic agency has any relevance at all to contemporary practice, then its implications are certainly considerable, and many will shy away from the dilemma that such a conception poses for the modern mind. However, I will stand by the conviction that unless our dislocated 'eye of reason' can reconnect with its heavenly counterpart in full consciousness and acknowledgement of imagination's power, unless metaphor can regain its authority as pointing to a ground of being ontologically prior to and infinitely wiser than human reason alone, divination will continue to fall between the two stools of pseudo-science and mystic mumbo jumbo however hard it tries to justify its existence.