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Mundus imaginalis. On some liminal adventures of the imagination

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyze the category of *mundus imaginalis* formulated by Henry Corbin based on Islamic philosophy (*alam al-mithal*). Corbin was inspired by Islamic mystics who recognized the existence of an imaginary sphere mediating between the sensual and the intelligible worlds. For Corbin, who was also influenced by CG. Jung and A. Koyré, *mundus imaginalis* becomes a useful tool for the analysis of imagination (understood as active cognitive power), but also of the modern human condition. A counterpoint expanding reflection on the *mundus imaginalis* is the research of Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, who, using Corbin's analyzes, emphasizes the multi-level and structural nature of both: the power of the imagination and its products. In these interpretations, the following questions seem to be crucial: What does the category of *mundus imaginalis* contribute to the understanding of the essence of imagination and of the human world of imaginations? Which approach to the imagination is associated with the recognition of this category? I will try to answer these questions in the article.

The point of departure for my discussion is the notion of liminality. I will not use it as a category to systematize social or cultural phenomena, as

did, for example, Arnold van Genepp or Victor Turner, or in relation to psychological or existential issues, but in a wider sense: in a metaphysical context. I would like to consider the category of liminality in relation to the power of imagination, understood not as an ability to create fiction, but as an active cognitive power. The notion of *mundus imaginalis*, deeply rooted in Islamic philosophy and introduced to the West by Henry Corbin, is the key to this discussion.

Limen means ‘threshold’ in Latin. This etymology leads us to understand liminality both as transitivity, being between, and as stepping beyond what we have come into, a progress towards the new and the yet unknown. It means suspension, limbo. It includes non-being, lack, nonexistence, indispensably inscribed into the process of transformation, but it also connects non-being and being, what happened in the past and what is to happen in the future. It is a still unfulfilled, incomplete coexistence, a merging of moments that belong to two states, two times, two realities, two ways of existing. Victor Turner employed the notion of liminality in cultural anthropology, arguing: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions” (Turner, 1969, p. 94). Turner’s theses relate to the individual and the communal meanings of rites of passage, but they may also relate to the very widely understood question about the place of humanity in the world. In my paper, I would like to reflect on a liminal experience that becomes embodied in the world of imagination, exploring its significance for modern humans.

When we consider the issue of imagination, we may define a few borderline moments that reveal this threshold status. For instance, we may call borderline or liminal something that exists between the conscious and the unconscious, something that separates the logic of *ratio* from the oneiric order, or something that exists at the point of contact between sensibility and intelligibility. Thinking liminal in the context of imagination may lead us to at least two kinds of analyses. First, epistemological, related, for instance, to questions about the cognitive power of imagination, or about the existence of a logic of imagination, which, in turn, leads us to the problem of its possible structures. Second, ontological, related primarily to the

problem of the ontological status of possible imagination structures and imaginations themselves, which are the product of imagination at work.

These issues are undoubtedly too broad to discuss comprehensively in a short paper. However, I will endeavor to consider their relation to the concept of the Imaginal Realm (Latin: *mundus imaginalis*) originating from Islamic philosophy, interpreted and transferred to Western thought by Henry Corbin. Importantly, Corbin presents Islamic thought to Western readers, but he does not stop there. He also employs it to analyze the situation of modern Western people, which testifies to its universality and timelessness. For Corbin, *mundus imaginalis* becomes an object of interpretation as well as a tool of his own philosophical reflection.

After many years of explorations on Illuminationism (including a six-year stay in Istanbul between 1939 and 1945), Corbin recognized the Imaginal Realm as a central element of Islamic spiritual tradition (cf. Miri, 2013, p. 118). The concept *alam al-mithal* was translated by him as *mundus imaginalis*/the Imaginal Realm. This term is present in the philosophy of Suhrawardi¹, a Persian theosophist active in the 12th century, and his followers from the school of Illuminationism, and later on from Shiah gnosis (cf. Piątak, 2012, p. 22).

The orientalist Łukasz Piątak emphasizes that in order to give full justice to the Latin term introduced by Corbin and its roots in Islamic philosophy, it should be translated “as »imaginal world« or »world of imagination«, and not as »imagined world«, which could suggest its ontological irrealism” (Piątak, 2012, p. 22). Corbin himself also pays attention to this problem, stating that the term “imagination” used by him before he settled on the Latin *mundus imaginalis* is insufficient. “Imagination” relates to presenting the unreal, while what we are dealing with here is insight into a non-empirical sphere of real existence (cf. Corbin, 1964).

Islamic thinkers use the term *alam al-mithal* to describe one of the dimensions of being, existing on the border between the material, human world and the divine, heavenly world. As explained by Piątak: “Suhrawardi equated *alam al-mithal* with the Quranic *barzakh*, which literally means »barrier«, »strait« or »abyss«. According to the Quran, *barzakh* is a barrier that prevents the dead from entering the spiritual world. Crossing this barrier will become possible on the day of universal resurrection and the

¹ Shahab al-Din Yahya ibn Habash Suhrawardi (1155–1191).

Last Judgement” (Corbin, 1964). What we have here, therefore, is not the sphere of imaginations or oneiric visions, but one of the levels of hierarchically structured reality, a world between two other worlds, a passage between the sensible and the intelligible. Corbin describes it as follows: “This is the world which is intermediary between the intelligible world of the beings of pure Light and the sensible world; and the perceiving organ proper to it is the active Imagination. It is the world not of Platonic Ideas (*muthul iflātūniyah*), but of Forms and Images ‘in suspensions’ (*mutul mu’allaqah*). This term means that such forms are not immanent in a material sub-stratum, as the colour red, for example, is immanent in a red body; they possess ‘epiphanic places’ (*mazāhir*) where they manifest themselves like the image ‘in suspension’ in a mirror. This world contains all the richness and variety of the world of sense in a subtle state; it is a world of subsistent and autonomous Forms and Images” (Corbin, 1993, p. 214). Each thing exists in three ways and in three different dimensions – it manifests itself differently in the sensible world, differently in *alam al-mithal*, and differently in the intelligible world (cf. Corbin, 1993, p. 343). *Alam al-mithal* is a third world, endowed with a special ontological status, which is neither exclusively spiritual, nor material. This is a space “in which bodies spiritualize, and the spirit becomes embodied”.²

This trifold scheme may be considered not only from the ontological, but also from the anthropological and epistemological perspectives. In his famous essay *Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal* published in 1964, Corbin argued: “To these three universes correspond three organs of knowledge: the senses, the imagination, and the intellect, a triad to which corresponds the triad of anthropology: body, soul, spirit – a triad that regulates the triple growth of man, extending from this world to the resurrections in the other worlds” (Corbin, 1964).

Let us focus on the epistemological context. Imagination is supposed to be the cognitive power adequate to the intermediate imaginal world. Imagination is understood here in a particular way as an active and creative source of knowledge. This view of imagination is suggested by Corbin’s terms “imaginative consciousness” and “cognitive Imagination” (cf. Corbin, 1964). The imagination that Corbin writes about is not the ability to create fiction and to picture worlds that do not exist, in line with

² “où l’esprit se corporalise et où les corps se spiritualisent” (Wunenburger, 1997, p. 96).

the everyday understanding of this concept. It is a special cognitive faculty, equally significant for our knowledge as sensory perception and intellectual intuition³.

Defining the ontological status of *mundus imaginalis* in more detail, Corbin compares it to reflections suspended in mirrors. A reflection is neither the matter of the mirror, nor the thing that is reflected. A reflection is suspended between these two types of being, it does not exist without them, but is not identical with them (cf. Corbin, 1964). In this metaphor, active imagination would be a mirror, an epiphanic place where images appear. It serves as an intermediary, and therefore has a central role, between sensibility and intellect, completing noesis with what escapes these two powers that bring the reality down to the schemata of binary rationality (cf. Corbin, 1964).

When defining the role of imagination as a cognitive function, Corbin highlights its focus on symbols and their ambiguity. It also enables us to capture the relation between different levels of being: “It is a function that permits all the universes to symbolize with one another (or exist in symbolic relationship with one another) and that leads us to represent to ourselves, experimentally, that the same substantial realities assume forms corresponding respectively to each universe [...]. It is the cognitive function of the Imagination that permits the establishment of a rigorous analogical knowledge, escaping the dilemma of current rationalism, which leaves only a choice between the two terms of banal dualism: either »matter« or »spirit«, a dilemma that the »socialization« of consciousness resolves by substituting a choice that is no less fatal: either »history« or »myth«” (Corbin, 1964). Thinking of the world as something transcending the opposition between matter and form, and of humans as beings able to step beyond the cognitive dualism of perception and thought, leads to broadening the field of reflection, and to noticing the ambiguity that shows through under all the dualisms in which we are accustomed to close reality.

When searching for the sources of Corbin’s concept of imagination, Daniel Proulx points to two thinkers in his interesting study: Alexander Koyré and Carl Gustav Jung (Proulx, 2019, pp. 187–195). When Corbin was a student at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Koyré held lectures on imagination in German speculative mysticism. This course could well have

³ “[...] a faculty that is a cognitive function, a noetic value, as fully real as the faculties of sensory perception or intellectual intuition” (Corbin, 1964).

been the first contact Corbin had with the philosophy of imagination. Koyré showed his students the influence of the mysticism of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance on German idealism. He presented the way in which mysticism influenced the doctrine of imagination as a flexible strength with creative and magical power present in Fichte's and Schelling's philosophy.⁴ Moreover, Koyré employed Paracelsus' division into *phantasia* and *imaginatio*, seen by Proulx as a significant inspiration for Corbin's division into the imagined and the imaginal.

Proulx also highlights the existence of an analogical division, separating the real imagination from the fantastic and stemming from alchemical sources, in the works of Carl Gustav Jung. In his lecture on the treaty *Rosarium philosophorum*, he wrote: "The *imaginatio* is to be understood here as the real and literal power to create images (*Einbildungskraft* = imagination) – the classical use of the word in contrast to *phantasia*, which means a mere "conceit" in the sense of insubstantial thought" (Jung, 1968, p. 219). Fantasy creates fiction, whereas *imaginatio* is an ability endowed with cognitive power. "*Imaginatio* is the active evocation of (inner) images *secundum naturam*, an authentic feat of thought or ideation, which does not spin aimless and groundless fantasies 'into the blue' – does not, that is to say, just play with its objects, but tries to grasp the inner facts and portray them in images true to their nature" (Jung, 1968, p. 219).⁵ Corbin, who stayed in the vicinity of the Eranos group, knew Jung's works and referred to them (cf. Proulx, 2019, pp. 192–193). Without doubt, Jung exerted some influence on Corbin, which is reflected both in the concept of imagination as an active cognitive power, and in *mundus imaginalis* as a sphere to which this active imagination has access.⁶ However, it does not mean that these

⁴ This was the first, but not the last, meeting of Corbin and Koyré, who later cooperated, *inter alia* as the editors of the journal "Recherches Philosophiques" (cf. Proulx, 2019, pp. 187–190).

⁵ This understanding of imagination certainly plays a role in Jung's concept of analytical psychology as the work with the unconscious, both individual and collective, that reveals itself, *inter alia*, in dreams. In addition, Jung himself provides an interesting personal example of the work of *imaginatio* in his notes published as *The Red Book* (Jung, 2009).

⁶ When considering the relations between Jung and Corbin, it should be emphasized that before Corbin settled on the Latin term *mundus imaginalis*, he used other terms to describe *alam al-mithal*, such as *mundus archetypus* and *mundus imaginalis archetypus*. They constitute a direct reference to the theory of archetypes, the core of Jungian psychology (cf. Proulx, 2019, p. 194).

two concepts are identical: Corbin's understanding of imagination relates to the metaphysical and religious context, whereas Jung remains primarily a psychologist, for whom the encounter with spirituality is a prerequisite for self-development (cf. Proulx, 2019, p. 193).

Let us return to the notion of *mundus imaginalis* and its possible interpretations. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger employs this notion in his philosophy of image. Wunenburger postulates a hierarchy of image and distinguishes three levels shaping the human world of images. The first level is imaging (*imagerie*), which consists of mental and material reproductions of reality. This also includes conscious and unconscious transformations of what is real. At the second level there is imagination (*imaginatoire*), which substitutes what is real but absent or non-existent. In contrast to imaging, imagination opens itself to the unreal. The third level is the imaginal (*imaginal*), i.e., *mundus imaginalis*. Wunenburger describes it as follows: "Imaginal, a true source of symbols, implements [...] epiphanic images of sense that transcends beyond us and that does not let itself to be reduced either to reproductions or to fiction" (Wunenburger, 2002, p. 24).

This highest and at the same time the deepest level of creation of images accounts for "visual images, schemata, geometrical forms (triangle, cross), archetypes (androgyny), parables and myths" (Wunenburger, 2002, p. 24). In the ontological dimension, this level transcends the empirical realm and extends to meta-physis, revealing the presence of the most fundamental and primeval dimension of being. This ability of imagination to embody what is intelligible, making possible everything else, leads us to reflect on its essence and suggests that we should perceive it as a transcendental cognitive function. As such, imagination makes cognition possible, providing it with the necessary conditions (structures).

At the imaginal level, the unambiguity of notions disappears and the complexity of being becomes manifest. Imagination, freed from the reality which it would copy or substitute with its products, opens itself onto what is irrational to humans. Abandoning classical logic, imagination reaches the realm of myth, dream, daydreaming, symbol or archetype, allowing for and even assuming the coexistence of A and non-A. Here we return to the questions that were also asked by Henry Corbin in the context of active imagination and *mundus imaginalis*. Might the reductionism of antonymies and precluding involved in the dualism of the true and the false actually cover the complexity of things that exist? When we think about the world in

accordance with the classical logic, do we close ourselves to its antonymies that are impossible to reduce? Jean-Jacques Wunenburger believes that “the experience of mutual dependence between phenomena, the search for the ultimate truth, and even dreams enable us to experience the insufficiency, inadequacy of this common logic that forces us to think that the nature of the world is simple, that opposite predicates rule each other out, that antithetical claims are absurd” (Wunenburger, 2010, p. 519).

The division of the world of images into the three parts proposed by Wunenburger makes us perceive imagination as a structure. We pass from the images that copy the reality through the imaginations that breed fiction to the sphere of the imaginal as a borderline between the material and the transcendental. At the same time, we dive into the structures of imagination, from the superficial, through those that create fictions, to the rudimental and primeval. Each of them performs different functions and directs the subject towards a different sphere of being. Certainly, this division, like any other conducted on the tissue of life, freezes processes that are in fact interconnected; they coexist and permeate one another, together creating the world of symbolic imagination. The three activities of imagination postulated by Wunenburger, imaging, imagining and imaginalizing, become intertwined in the common experience (cf. Wunenburger, 2010, p. 519).

While Corbin focuses primarily on the category of *mundus imaginalis*, Wunenburger inscribes the imaginal into the whole human iconosphere. Irrespective of those differences, both theories emphasize the active character of imagination understood as a source of knowledge. Such a concept of imagination leads to defining the oneiric as thinkable, and therefore structured. Dreams, daydreams, artistic and religious visions, and artistic creation are understood as symbolic, therefore opening the way to other meanings than those directly given in the content of a work of art, a vision or a dream. Imagination, in turn, as the factor that realizes these meanings, plays a complementary role to thinking and perception, broadening the scope of our cognition with what escapes the dualism of the true and the false.

Recognizing the symbolic dimension of the image leads to the question of the meaning of what this image reveals, both for individuals and for the culture. Proponents of the theory of active, transcendental imagination postulate a vindication of the image in the present-day world, which tends to marginalize it. At first, this endeavor appears to be misguided, as it seems that currently the world is overfilled with images and that we are suffering

from their excess, not their scarcity. This paradoxical lack of actual imagery in the modern world is aptly diagnosed by Henry Corbin: “We are no longer participants in a traditional culture. We are living in a scientific civilization, which is said to have gained mastery even over images. It is quite commonplace to refer to our present-day civilization as the »civilization of the image« (to wit our magazines, motion pictures, and television). But one wonders whether – like all commonplaces – this one does not also harbor a radical misunderstanding, a complete misapprehension. For, instead of the image being raised to the level of the world to which it belongs, instead of being invested with a symbolic function that would lead to inner meaning, the image tends to be reduced simply to the level of sensible perception and thus to be definitely degraded. Might one not have to say then that the greater the success of this reduction, the more people lose their sense of the imaginal and the more they are condemned to producing nothing but fiction?” (Corbin, 1964).

Many thinkers reflect on the loss of the deep – both ontologically and existentially – meaning of images. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger also pleads for a renewal of the actual meaning of the image, whose symbolic, hidden sense has nowadays been forgotten. Both Wunenburger and Corbin highlight the fundamental, primeval dimension of the image perceived as a symbol, as “an instance intermediating between the sensible and the intelligible” (Wunenburger, 2002, p. 25). At the same time, they point out that the positivist, scientific orientation of Western culture condemns it (including the modern humans who inhabit it) to a disconnection from the immense transcendental sphere. The philosophers of creative imagination leave us with a critical diagnosis of modernity and the following question: Are modern humans, who are drowning in images, but at the same time shying away from exploring their primeval sense and reducing them to superficial aspects, perhaps also reducing their needs, their destination and their calling as spiritual beings?

Seeing imagination as something that opens us to experiences from the borderline between sensibility and ideas presents humans as spiritual beings – creatures whose well-being depends on the recognition of the metaphysical, transcendental dimension of the reality. This recognition is not a goal in itself; it is a challenge, a never-ending beginning, a threshold (*limen*), which stems from the essence of humanity. This intuition is prominently present, *inter alia*, in the works of Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, who notes: “Imagination opens for us the gates to a certain surplus of sense, but it does

not allow us to cross the limits of our finitude; symbols enrich us, but do not allow for an ontological transformation. They enable us to reach other perspectives on things, but they do not absolve us from continuous beginning anew, searching further and further and anew; since symbolic cognition does not equal divine intuition, absolute knowledge”.⁷

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⁷ “L’imagination nous ouvre des portes vers un surcroît de sens mais ne nous permet pas de franchir les limites de notre finitude: les symboles nous enrichissent mais ne permettent pas une mutation ontologique. Ils nous font accéder à d’autres regards sur les choses, mais sans nous dispenser d’avoir à recommencer, à chercher plus loin, et à nouveau, car la connaissance symbolique n’équivaut pas à une intuition divine, à un savoir absolu” (Wunenburger, 1997, p. 211).

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