



# SEEING THE MARVELOUS: THE REDISCOVERY OF THE IMAGINAL

*Posted on November 1, 2022 by Paul Ducay*



The world of tradition is saturated with marvelous images that modern thought has often depreciated to the rank of "imaginary" productions of Man. This desacralization of the sign, which deprives the religious reference marks of any possible comprehension, is based however on a fundamental ignorance—that of the "imaginal," of which the hermeneuticist Patrick Geay, in *Hermès trahi* (*Hermes Betrayed*) [1996], presents the rediscovery as the key for resolution of the disenchantment of the world.

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*Hermès trahi* (*Hermes Betrayed*) is the name given by Patrick Geay to his philosophy thesis, published in 1996 and republished in 2010, to illustrate a quite decisive project—that of remedying the divorce of myth and reason, of *mythos* and *logos*, upon which philosophical modernism made the mistake of founding itself. Hermes is first of all a god—the god of secrets and stratagems in Greek mythology, son of Zeus and Iris. He is also and above all Hermes Trismegistus, author of a doctrinal corpus which Iamblichus said delivers the hidden science of all things, and which gave its name to "hermeticism," on the refusal of which modern hermeneutics has built its project. Against it, the director of the journal of traditional hermeneutics, *La Règle d'Abraham* (*The Rule of Abraham*), sought to "judge a form of anti-metaphysical philosophy, [namely] critical philosophy," by the yardstick of the "traditional doctrines" of which the work of *René Guénon* provides the method of comparison and understanding.

Deepening the philosophical rediscovery of religious symbolism by Jean Borella, Patrick Geay works on a metaphysical rediscovery of the "imaginal." Largely forgotten, ignored, denied, and sometimes misinterpreted, the imaginal, solidly theorized by the Sufi Ibn 'Arabi, nevertheless proves to be essential to the understanding of all that traditional religions conceal of the marvelous. By listening to the great visionary tradition of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Patrick Geay abolishes the reduction of the imagination to the human imaginary, showing that it extends well beyond the limits that modern psychologism assigns to images and their genesis. In doing so, to use the words of the philosopher Bruno Pinchard in his Preface, the author restores the conditions necessary for understanding the "true laws of the constitution of the religious," against the demystifying undertakings of materialism and neo-spiritualism found at work in the human sciences.

## **Demythologization**

Modern religious thought is based on a serious hermeneutical contradiction—that of interpreting

images and sacred texts without recognizing their sacred character. This contradiction has a name—"demythologization." Initiated by the Protestant philosopher Schleiermacher, who reduced the interpretation of sacred texts to the simple "psychological and grammatical study of the works," it consists in saving the relevance of sacred texts only by emptying them of all that is mythical; that is to say, extraordinary, miraculous, supernatural—in a word: sacred. Thus undertaken, hermeneutics contradicts itself—it wants to study the sacred without recognizing its sacred character, as Ricoeur admits when he justifies the "oblivion of the signs of the sacred" by the "loss of man himself as belonging to the sacred." As soon as it is posed, the object of hermeneutics is removed from its study.

Marcel Gauchet tried to save this logical contradiction by conceiving of Christianity as "the religion of the exit from religion," that is to say, a religion without the supernatural, a religion which, by its monotheistic affirmation, "contributes to placing the unique God outside and beyond the world of men." For Marcel Gauchet, Judeo-Christianity would thus be the religion of the absence of God in this world. However, in so doing, the philosopher only completes a contradiction with an ignorance; for, as Patrick Geay points out, "this forced and distorting approach to Hebrew prophetism [ignores] the function of the *Shekinah* as the Presence of the Divine in the Tabernacle of the Ark of the Covenant, which is recounted in *Exodus*. Marcel Gauchet's interpretation of Judeo-Christianity also ignores "the very rich Jewish visionary literature, as found in the famous writings of the *Merkabah*," as well as the symbolic profusion of "medieval Christian visionary narratives." In sum, Marcel Gauchet reduces his conception of monotheism to its modern, heterodox version, which came out of the Protestant Reformation. From Paul Ricoeur to Marcel Gauchet, modern hermeneutics, by proposing to the human sciences the method of demythologization in order to satisfy "their claim to have knowledge of the religious," has thus taken the risk of making them "systematically miss their target for lack of sufficient metaphysical and initiatory preparation" (Bruno Pinchard). This unpreparedness has for cause a progressive dismantling of the symbolic sign by modern philosophy, from nominalism.

## **The Great Split**

The dismantling of metaphysical knowledge consisted in an increasing reduction and confinement of the faculties of the human mind, the stages of which Patrick Geay rigorously traces. As time went by, the image was less and less understood, because it was more and more separated from the idea. Starting with the nominalist William of Ockham, a Franciscan doctor of the 14th century, who held that "words are created by imposition," "language is no longer the privileged reflection of being; ideas, concepts, the universal have no reality except in the soul" of individuals. In other words, "the names of

things... no longer derive from their nature." Ideas no longer have the value of objectivity and universality that the Neoplatonists of the early Middle Ages recognized—they are entirely mentalized, to be no more than psychological concepts. The word is no longer the real name of an intelligent thing (formally received by the intellect), but the conventional sign of a purely mental conception.

The nominalistic mutilation of the concept is pursued, in modern times, against the imagination. Initially, Descartes separated, in his sixth *Meditation*, imagination and conception (itself confused with intellection). His argument is the following: if there are things that one can both imagine and conceive, like the triangle, there are however things that one can conceive without imagining them, like the chiliogone (polygon with a thousand sides). Descartes, who differentiates the soul and the body as two distinct substances, takes advantage of it to found on his first dualism that of the concept and the imagination: "the imagination being naturally rather on the side of the body cannot succeed in conceiving any idea of what it simply puts in image, if it even succeeds in doing so." With Descartes, the image no longer implies the concept in its existence; the imagination without the concept is indigent. Just as the body is, in itself, reduced to its mechanism, so the image is unintelligible by itself.

This split between the concept and the image is completed a century and a half later by Kant who, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (A15/B29), bases his theoretical enterprise on the postulate according to which there are "two strains of human knowledge which perhaps start from a common root, but unknown to us; namely, sensibility and understanding; by the first one, objects are given to us; but by the second one, they are thought." The consequence is obvious: as Geary notes: "this separation makes the corporeal world a neutral, empty form, since, according to Ilya Prigogine's expression, nature is by it rendered 'dumb.'" Indeed, for Kant, there is no real giving of meaning. There is only thought produced by the internal activity of understanding—the images that we perceive sensibly do not cause any thought in us; they do not deliver any meaning; but it is we who confer it on them: "in *a priori* knowledge," Kant summarizes in his second Preface, "nothing can be attributed to the objects but what the thinking subject draws from himself." The image is decidedly no longer intelligible, any more than beauty is for Kant a property of the object: "the universe is consequently reduced to the state of confused 'matter' to be organized; it is *a priori* dispossessed by Kant of its semantic content; that is to say, of an intrinsic symbolic structure that man would only have to unveil." Philosophical modernity is founded thus, from Occam to Kant while passing via Descartes, on the big split between thought and the real, and within thought, between the concept and the image.

Several contemporary attempts, in the 20th century, were made to give back to the images their

nobility, and to the images of the supernatural an interest against the materialist impoverishment of the world—Gaston Bachelard, in his "new scientific spirit," as well as Gilbert Durand, within the framework of his "new anthropologic spirit." However, impressed by the psychoanalytical theory of the imagination, their common mistake was to reduce the imagination to the fantasy of the human conscience or unconscious. For Bachelard, who saw in alchemical symbolism only an "immense sexual reverie... a reverie of wealth and rejuvenation... a reverie of power," while the religious imagination was only human poetry. For Durand, who confused traditional data with that of psychoanalysis, its "transcendental fantasy... remained locked in psychological categories... of 'fabulation,' whose 'supreme meaning' lay in euphemism; that is, in the human power of 'improvement of the world.'" Patrick Geary's conclusion is without clear: the revaluation of the image and the marvelous is not possible within the framework of the modern theory of the imagination, since it deprives of intelligibility any possible mythical content.

## Remythologization

What modernity, timidly or resolutely, has dislocated, tradition, on the contrary, has reunited. On the one hand, the concept and the image are the two inseparable modalities of the same thing—the symbol. On the other hand, the symbol is, in its turn, inseparable from the reality of which it is the sensible sign—the idea. This second point can be understood by the fact that "if, in the rational mode, we can say that we know an object through its notion, it is because this notion is still something of the object; that it participates in its nature by expressing it in relation to us," as René Guénon explained in his *Générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* (*General Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*) [III, 9], underlining here the realism of traditional logic. As for the first point, contrary to Kantian separation of the sensible given and the thought, Patrick Geary remarks that "there is no pure sensation which is not already an act of the consciousness." Sensation is not unintelligent, because man perceives accidents (figures, colors, etc.) which never exist separately from a given essence, but which belong to it and thus inform us about it. This is why Saint Bonaventure noted that "all pleasure derives from a ratio of proportion," just as beauty is objectively "an equation of numbers" (*Journey of the Soul into God—Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, I, 5). No more than the world according to the tradition is this homogeneous space of Galileo and Descartes reduced to extent; the images are not dumb matter, but on the contrary, "imprints" (*vestigia*), whose contemplation can lead us "to see God in any creature which enters in us and by the bodily senses" (II, 1).

The "despisers of the body," to paraphrase Nietzsche, are therefore not the traditional and orthodox representatives of Christianity, but rather its modern innovators. For Tradition, the physical body is

neither unreal nor autonomous, but it derives its reality from its iconic character: it is the image of an essence. Now the image is neither an obstacle to knowledge (iconoclastic error), nor knowledge itself (idolatrous error)—but its iconic means to reach the Idea of which it is the representation. If, therefore, the image puts man in contact with the world, and if this world has an organizing and creating principle (God), then the imagination cannot be reduced to a purely human faculty. Thus Ibn 'Arabi recognizes three states of imagination—contrary to modern anthropological postulates that reduce imagination to the mere "combining imagination" (psychological) of Man, "it was necessary to conceive, beyond the human imagination qualified as imagination in conjunction with the subject (*khayâl al-muttasil*), a divine encompassing imagination, dissociable from the subject (*khayâl al-munfasil*), "having a subsistence in itself." As the prototype of the human capacity to imagine, the absolute divine Imagination (*khayâl al-mutlaq*) is thus, so to speak, the container of the joint imagination." If, therefore, the human imagination is contained in the divine imagination, the latter can allow itself to be contemplated by the former and reveal itself there, in accordance with its own coordinates of representation. The place of this contemplation is not imaginary, since it is not produced by human fantasy; but on the contrary by the divine intelligence—the imaginal belongs to the "creative imagination" of God. It is the intermediate world of the soul, where spiritual principles become sensible, where sensible bodies become spiritualized by being perceived in their principle. The "mixed constitution" of the imaginal thus corresponds to "the mathematical structure of the body of the world" that Plato looked at in the *Timaeus* as the mediation between the intelligible and the sensible.

"Solidary with a true metaphysics of the image, by which the Invisible is made visible," the knowledge of the Imaginal and its "cosmological function, which is to unite the corporal plane to the spiritual plane," is thus doubly required to understand the possibility of the perception of the divine as well as the religious function of the icon and of all sacred symbolism (illuminations, liturgical songs, architecture of the temples...)—for what is an icon or a sacred symbol, if not a spiritual body, or a corporeal spirit? Also, man is *a fortiori* called to become himself an icon; that is to say a saint who is the carnal image of the spirit, an incarnation of the universal truth. The problem of the imagination thus shows how much "the progressive oblivion of the esoteric tradition," however "alone capable of allowing an in-depth illumination of religion," is "the deepest cause of the metaphysical decline in the conscience of men." The anti-metaphysical separation of *mythos* and *logos* is as false and arbitrary as is the anti-symbolic dualism of concept and image.

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*Cues and the faith of Xavier Grall. Gascon by race and French by reason. "The devout infuriate the world; the pious edify it." Marivaux. [This article comes through the kind courtesy of [PHILITT](#)].*

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*[Featured](#): "Sir Isumbras at the Ford," by John Everett Millais; painted in 1857.*

