

# A methodology of the Imagination

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‘After speaking a lot, change, but don’t be silent’<sup>1</sup>

In his work on Sufi mystics, Henry Corbin uses the term *mundus imaginalis* to designate the psychic space in which the “super-sensible” reality of dreams, theophanies and spiritual beings are manifested, in a visionary sense, to the individual.<sup>2</sup> This is the “intermediate place” in the neoplatonic cosmos of emanation from spirit to matter where the former is given a perceptible form through an image, and the latter loses the density of embodiment and is “seen through” to its immaterial essence. This is the place revealed through the symbolic image and perceived by the corresponding soul activity of the active imagination, an approach which has been developed extensively by C. G. Jung and James Hillman through the disciplines of depth and archetypal psychology.

In this paper I want to consider the possibility of a “methodology of the imagination” as a basis for the symbolic interpretation of texts and images in an academic context. Such an imaginal methodology would honour, and speak from, this meeting place of literal and spiritual realities. Corbin’s articulation of this world (which is described as more “real” than that of sense-perception alone) is of primary importance for studies in traditional cosmology and divinatory or magical practice. It grants the creative imagination an interpretative function in the realm of visionary experience, whether this is entered through divinatory methods or spontaneous intuitive insight. It allows imaginal perception to be understood as engendering a kind of knowledge which arises from the confluence of inner recognition with “external” reality. The study of esoteric traditions which incorporate astrology, alchemy, Cabala and

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<sup>1</sup> A. Bocchi, *Symbolicae Quaestiones*, Bologna, 1555.

<sup>2</sup> See H. Corbin, *Mundus imaginalis, or the Imaginal and the Imaginary*, Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1976.

other divinatory and magical forms requires an understanding of this kind of knowledge, as these practices arise from, and depend on, the capacity of the imagination to form and interpret symbols in order to gain deeper insight into the spiritual dimensions of human life. It has been argued persuasively by Arthur Versluis that an authentic methodology for esotericism must include an understanding of the premises of esoteric practices (a “sympathetic empiricism”), if not necessarily an actual expertise in those practices (although this would be recommended). Furthermore, Versluis maintains that scholars of esoteric traditions should beware of

the dangers inherent in approaching this delicate, subtle, and sophisticated field without a sufficient appreciation not only of their subject’s historical context, but also of its underlying premises, or to put it another way, of their subject’s metaphysical and cosmological self-understanding.<sup>3</sup>

He makes the point that for the rational or scientific mind, the premises of esoteric understanding are “unfamiliar.” I would go further than that, and suggest that they are in fact opaque to a such a mind, if it is bound by its own convictions about the true (and only) nature of human knowledge as quantifiable. Most importantly, Versluis advocates a willingness to ‘enter into the perspective one is studying’ through the *imagination*, shifting from a stance of objectivity, of ‘self and other’ to one of imaginative participation in the underlying philosophy of the texts or images under consideration which then may *reveal* something of their transcendental meaning.<sup>4</sup>

This method is further explored by Jeremy Naydler.<sup>5</sup> Taking a phenomenological approach, he again argues that the attempt to understand religious experience from a secular perspective and the disengagement from its “reality” for the subject cannot do justice to the

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<sup>3</sup> A. Versluis, ‘What is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism’, *Esoterica* IV, 2003, p.5 ([www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeIV/Methods.htm](http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeIV/Methods.htm)). See also: ‘Mysticism and the Study of Esotericism’, *Esoterica* V, 2003, Pt.II ([www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeV/Mysticism.htm](http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeV/Mysticism.htm)).

<sup>4</sup> Versluis, ‘What is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism’, p.12.

<sup>5</sup> J. Naydler, ‘A Question of Method’ in *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts*, Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2005, Ch.5.

existence of the spiritual as ‘as a real and operative dimension of existence’.<sup>6</sup> This is also the concern of transpersonal research methods, as we shall see, and both these approaches emphasise that when the researcher moves into the realm of spiritual knowledge, understanding can no longer be acquired by rational or objective assessment alone. The tools of scholarship may then be applied in conjunction with a mode of empathy with one’s subject matter, in which insights are revealed through a ‘knowing... driven by devoted love’;<sup>7</sup> in other words, deeper understandings are only available to the extent to which one *desires* to know them. Naydler implies that a successful methodology for understanding religious texts inevitably involves a change in consciousness on the part of the researcher, a deepening of perception, as the dynamic content of the text or image becomes personally *meaningful* and not simply an interesting object of critique:

Explanatory reductionism...will take the researcher halfway to an actual engagement with the spiritual content of a religious document or ritual then save the researcher from direct encounter with it by concentrating on its historical or social context or its linguistic structure.<sup>8</sup>

Research for Naydler, then, itself becomes an act of *gnosis* where skills of scholarship are combined with openness and soul-engagement in an attempt to do justice to the numinous “truth” conveyed by the particular text or tradition under review. There could be no more convincing example of this “direct encounter” than in the writing of Corbin himself; or one might think of the differentiation made by the Platonic philosophers (and developed in Christian theology) between “human” reason or opinion and revelatory insight from the divine source: the former, as discursive thought (*episteme*), was always in service to the latter, which was a primary encounter with metaphysical reality as in prophecy or *gnosis*. Corbin’s is certainly not a fashionable scholarly method, and I am not suggesting it should be the only one. But *if* we are to pursue an approach in which the imagination is allowed to become a primary research tool, then we have to consider the nature

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.141.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.127.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.143.

and function of such an imagination, its *modus operandi*, its rightful way of expression and its relationship with other discourses. Most importantly, true imagination (from *im-ago*, ‘I act from within’),<sup>9</sup> whether one considers it from neoplatonic, Romantic or archetypal psychological perspectives, is the mode in which the soul reveals its nature through the language of symbol and metaphor. As such, it is active and creative and will always seek to amplify and enhance that which it touches.

To bring the imagination to bear on a research topic requires that the metaphorical mode is honoured as a primary means of investigation. Marie Angelo, in her ground-breaking invitation to allow images to speak in academic research,<sup>10</sup> refers to Jung’s definition of the psyche as ‘a series of images in the truest sense’, and suggests that if that is so,

then image is the substance of our most direct, immediate perceptions, and the characteristic moves of academic thinking: keeping a distance, interrogating, translating or interpreting, need to be recognised as only one style of rhetoric; a particularly iconoclastic, uninviting one. By maintaining the conventional “two cultures” opposition between image and concept, imagination and cognition, this rhetorical mode will take us into abstract definitions, but not into the imagistic deepening called for if we took Jung’s claim seriously.<sup>11</sup>

Angelo herself teaches a programme in which “the art of seeing” is a primary method.<sup>12</sup> She approaches images “from the inside out,” as objects of intelligence which have something to teach the observer about the very processes of observation. The impulse to abstract symbolic meaning prior to simply contemplating details is resisted, so that the student can begin to move into the image itself as “a poetic ground.”<sup>13</sup> It is from this position that he or she may then begin to “move out,” to explore the historical and cultural contexts of the symbolism, to investigate the deeper meanings glimpsed during the

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<sup>9</sup> For this particular etymology see Abraxus, ‘The Magic of the Image’ in *Introduction to Magic*, ed. J. Evola, Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2001, p.266.

<sup>10</sup> M. Angelo, ‘Splendor Solis: Inviting the Image to Teach’, *Harvest* 51: 2, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>12</sup> Master of Arts in Transpersonal Arts and Practice at Chichester University, UK.

<sup>13</sup> Angelo, ‘Splendor Solis: Inviting the Image to Teach’, p.24.

period of contemplation through appropriate source material and critiques. The study then becomes a dance of perspectives, perhaps initiated by a powerful recognition of the relationship of a life-event to the symbolism, or generating a creative element such as narrative, poetry or art-work as an element of amplification.

As an initial experiment in “image-teaching,” I asked my MA/M.Phil. students to illustrate the *mundus imaginalis* by bringing along images, texts or objects which they felt demonstrated it for them. The material offered included paintings, crystals, sculpture, poetry and a Tarot image, which each student connected to their life experience before exploring the archetypal or mythic dimensions of significance. In doing this, it was agreed that the levels of perception described by Corbin, the movement from sense perception to “internalisation” of the image were grasped more immediately and dynamically than had been possible through reading his text and attempting a conceptual understanding. The images were allowed to “speak” in the way advocated by Angelo (even acted out, in the case of the Tarot card), and in effect they became vessels for an active research process, whereby critical and discursive perspectives could always be referred back to a living connection with their symbolic properties. It was also noted (and I do not consider this as extraneous or irrelevant to a discussion of research methods), that through this creative sharing the group as a whole developed a deeper sense of its own purpose, and individuals felt the link between their inner vision and their research projects considerably strengthened.

### **Transpersonal Research**

All the approaches so far considered find common ground under the general umbrella of transpersonal research methodology (defined as “qualitative” rather than “quantitative” research). I realise that I am opening a can of worms here, in the light of Jorge Ferrer’s recent exhaustive critique of the transpersonal movement.<sup>14</sup> Ferrer questions the ‘intrasubjective empiricism imported from empiricist science that has dominated the field and colonised it with inapt and self-defeating requirements for replication, testing and falsification’,<sup>15</sup> and seeks to

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<sup>14</sup> J. Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, New York: SUNY, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Tarnas, Foreword to Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, p.xiii.

promote a participatory and pluralistic view through establishing ‘alternative epistemological and metaphysical grounds’ for research.<sup>16</sup> Whilst his post-modern stance rejects any “a priori” assumptions of the “perennial wisdom” and its truths,<sup>17</sup> it does prioritise an approach based on ‘direct, intimate contact with the world’ wherein the researcher *participates* in its ‘self-disclosure’ in order to understand the resonances between macrocosm and microcosm that we term “spiritual experience.”<sup>18</sup> I will return to this radical “turn” later, but firstly want to consider some broad themes that arise in the work of William Braud and Rosemarie Anderson,<sup>19</sup> insofar as they are A) of direct relevance for researchers of cosmology and divination, whether this involves client-based research or investigation into the spiritual dimensions of divinatory practice, and B) bear on the question of imaginal discourse.

#### **Expansion of research methods.**

In ‘Can Research be Transpersonal,’ Braud describes the tension existing between traditional or conventional research methods and “transpersonal” subject matter, concluding:

However, if the assumptions, methods and praxis of research can be expanded, extended, enriched and enlivened, so that they better address the deep, expansive, subtle and profound experiences that characterise the transpersonal, these tensions and ill-fittings can melt away.<sup>20</sup>

By “transpersonal,” Braud is referring to the particular category, within psychology, of EHE (exceptional human experience), i.e. including the “spiritual” in its huge variety of manifestations. In the context of religious and divinatory studies, “transpersonal” then can refer to the incorporation of spiritual experience into research, however broadly that is defined. I would suggest that one route this might take is that of the image-work I have already described, as a pathway to a deeper

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<sup>16</sup> Ferrer, Preface, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, p.xx.

<sup>17</sup> Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, p.87.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.173.

<sup>19</sup> W. Braud & R. Anderson, *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> W. Braud, ‘Can Research be Transpersonal?’ ([www.integral-inquiry.com/cybrary/crbt.html](http://www.integral-inquiry.com/cybrary/crbt.html)).

understanding of the nature of symbolic perception through “doing it” rather than relying on others’ descriptions, or analyses, of it. In other words, it would involve reflexive attention to one’s own participation in the process being studied, looking at it from many different angles, both inner and outer. This would provide a means of connecting research material with the researcher’s own search for meaning, and would promote deeper understanding by both researcher and reader. The corollary to this, of course, would be that the researcher would only be drawn to investigate in the first place a theme which “captured” his or her imagination like a bait that “called” for attention. As Braud comments (here echoing both Versluis and Naydler), ‘research may share commonalities with individuation’ (in the Jungian sense), and it could be argued that the most effective and transformative research is that in which the researcher feels something is “at stake” for his or her life and is impelled to get to the bottom of it. A sense of the writer’s passion and commitment is much more likely to engage the reader and even promote new insights which could change previously held assumptions:

If the research findings are presented to audiences in a sufficiently rich and particularised manner, the audience, too, may experience transformation. Thus, the typical boundaries among research, practical applications, and psychospiritual growth and development melt away during rich qualitative studies of meaningful topics.<sup>21</sup>

In my opinion, one of the most important aspects of transpersonal research is its insistence on addressing “multiple levels of knowing,” in which Braud includes

...conventional sensory information about the outer world, proprioceptive and kinaesthetic information about one’s inner world, thoughts, images, feelings, bodily knowings, tacit knowings, intuitions, direct knowing—including paranormal modes and a mode of knowing through being or becoming the object of one’s enquiry... meditation, deep contemplation, entering silence and emptiness, entering various altered states of consciousness and partaking of the different varieties of non-ordinary knowing

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.4

available therein, accessing one's dreams, using all faculties of the imagination...<sup>22</sup>

The stylistic forms which could contain such expressions not only include conventional prose and critical discourse, but also narratives, poetry and artwork. I have already suggested that in the symbolic analysis of an image or textual image, critical sources on the symbolic meanings could dovetail with poetic or narrative methods of interpretation which allow the image to “speak” in many voices. These could include autobiographical references or examples of symbolism “working” in the world. More widely, by using the word “intentionality,” Braud is touching on a largely ignored aspect of academic research, namely the impact of “affectivity” on the quality of research which is determined by the researcher’s love and enthusiasm for their subject.<sup>23</sup> This desire, which can be directed towards specific aims, ranging from the gathering and cataloguing of information to the enhancing of spiritual awareness (of self and/or reader), is surely the “qualitative” essence of the work. It may even facilitate the marriage of intuitive/reflexive and critical/objective modes of study and heal the age-old split between head and heart, for love—as the impulse of eros—demands the union of opposites (in the sense of the alchemical *coniunctio*). That, as I understand it, is one of the motivations behind transpersonal research—to reach the place where the distinction between “outer” and “inner” moves into single focus, where the many forms of things disclose hidden, unifying themes:

...through endeavouring to plumb the depths of a given experience, not only can we appreciate the experience more fully, but we also can increase the possibility of encountering the universal lessons deep within all particulars.<sup>24</sup>

Divinatory systems using symbolic images are of course the supreme models for this movement from universal to particular meaning (and vice versa), and it opens the possibility for astrological researchers to move between theories of symbolic interpretation and particular

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.9.



examples with clients or in their own lives of universal meaning “realised” in concrete events in the world. The experience of symbolic “instantiation”<sup>25</sup> can then be explored on its own terms in a variety of ways: as a phenomenon of “transpersonal” understanding, a “truth” of participant and practice (which can be both related to tradition, source-material, symbolic theory as well as revelatory significance for the individual) or as a living image. For example, the researcher could present an initial narrative on, say, the significance of an astrological transit, or divinatory image, in his or her life. This could then be developed via an exploration of the universal principle in question with its traditional meanings and associations, symbolism (e.g. neoplatonic, Jungian) and questions of the function of the imagination as an organ of interpretation. If it is emphasised at the outset that imaginal research does not seek to “reduce” symbolic experience to rational/scientific norms and terms, nor to “explain” it through an objectivist discourse which is alien to its own terms of reference, then it may perhaps be granted a basis in a mode of “seeing” which operates through *analogy* and speculation.

### **Intuitive Inquiry**

This leads us to Rosemarie Anderson’s paper “Intuitive Inquiry”<sup>26</sup> in which she develops some thoughts on a transpersonal method which values the “immediate apprehension of meaning” within a given research context. This “immediate knowing” is linked to the idea of sympathetic resonance, where poetry, metaphor and symbol are used explicitly to connect directly with the reader’s intuitive understanding. The idea of sympathetic resonance as a way of uniting like with like is of course an ancient one, and takes us deep into the heart of esoteric cosmology (although this is not acknowledged by Anderson). Taken up by Jung with formulation of the “acausal connecting principle” underlying synchronistic events, it is a powerful image, which justifies the principle that to “know” a thing requires “believing” it, in the sense that true understanding arises from the sympathetic resonance of the

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<sup>25</sup> On symbolic instantiation, see Maggie Hyde, ‘The Cock and the Chameleon’ in *The Imaginal Cosmos: Astrology, Divination and the Sacred*, Canterbury: University of Kent, 2007, pp.47-54.

<sup>26</sup> R. Anderson, ‘Intuitive Inquiry’ in Braud & Anderson, *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Ch.4.

knower's soul with the matter under investigation.<sup>27</sup> Anderson uses the term "focal depth" to refer to the quality of attention given to the research material, and suggests that the research activity itself is a form of ritual which creates a space for the sacredness of human life to reveal itself under the researcher's gaze. In this expanded state of awareness, the researcher is guided by intuition as to the most appropriate methods for the particular topic of enquiry. The problem remains, however, that useful as Anderson's proposed guidelines are (and they are undoubtedly of interest for the exploration of the divinatory "moment" or revelation) the word "intuition" remains somewhat vague. Despite the social science/psychology context, Anderson is clearly referring to an orientation which we could define as religious as it seeks to open up the potential of an imaginative "knowing" with access to a "sacred dimension." I would argue that this can be much more clearly developed and the word "intuition" given a stronger foundation if we now take as our model a system of interpretation which arose through the neoplatonic school of philosophical hermeneutics and became established in early Christian theological discourse. I will then show how this way of working could become the framework for our methodology of the imagination, and how it can help us locate and identify the work of Corbin, Jung and Hillman on active imagination at a very particular level of intellectual understanding. It also provides a philosophical rationale for transpersonal theory, which as I see it is struggling in the dark as long as it maintains a firmly secular or psychological orientation.

### **Symbolic Method**

The fourfold method of interpreting a text or image immediately presents us with the problem, as in all hierarchical systems (especially Platonic), of discrete levels ascending like a ladder, which tend to be laden with value-judgements.<sup>28</sup> However, I would invite you to suspend

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<sup>27</sup> On the religious dimension of symbolic perception, see Robert Barth, 'Symbol as Sacrament' in *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition*, Princeton: University Press, 1977, Ch.1 and Paul Tillich, 'Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God' in *The Christian Scholar* 38: 3, 1955.

<sup>28</sup> On the four levels of interpretation see John F. Boyle 'St Thomas Aquinas and Sacred Scripture' ([www.nd.edu/~afreddos/papers/Taqandss.htm](http://www.nd.edu/~afreddos/papers/Taqandss.htm)); Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology*, Bournemouth: Wessex Astrologer, 2003, Ch.14; Dante 'Letter to

this over-literal image in favour of a free-flowing movement of perceptive intensity, which encompasses different conditions of relationship between the observer/reader and what is studied. For the purposes of clarity, however, we must distinguish between four stages which are described as having their own distinct modes of expression; the literal, allegorical, symbolic (tropological) and anagogic.<sup>29</sup> A researcher using this framework would be able to locate him or herself at a particular stage, which would then require a mode of discourse appropriate to it. They could also move between different levels (the seeing with many eyes that Braud advocates) and alert the reader to the dangers of confusing “literal” discourse, for example, with symbolic interpretation. This could be especially important in writing about divinatory experiences and honouring the mode of intelligence which uses intuitive (symbolic) insight rather than logical/rational (literal) deduction. That the final goal of this hermeneutic unfolding is anagogic or mystical unity of the individual soul with the ground of its being (i.e. knowing God is becoming God), implies that the previous three stages describe a continuum along which the division between knower and object of knowledge gradually decreases. However one might understand the anagogy, at any rate, “knowledge” or “vision” proceeding along these lines ultimately culminates with a sense of the *unus mundus* of the alchemists and firmly places the use of symbol and metaphor within a teleological and purposeful process of ever-deepening insight. It does not have to include a blinding revelation of divine light—it may be glimpsed in any divinatory practice as a profound sense of merging between self and world.

The literal and allegorical ways of knowing are self-evident. The former sees things “as they are,” as literal facts “out there”; the latter sees one thing in terms of another thing, but still keeps its distance from

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Can Grande’; Helen Flanders Dunbar, ‘The Fourfold Method’ in *Symbolism in Medieval Thought and its Consummation in the Divine Comedy*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1929; Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, the Four Senses of Scripture*, repr. trans. Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998 & 2000; Karen Jo Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen’s Exegesis*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986; Angela Voss ‘From Allegory to Anagoge: the question of symbolic perception in a literal world’ in *Astrology and the Academy*, Cinnabar Books, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> It is not difficult to see the correspondence here with the four alchemical stages of *nigredo*, *albedo*, *citritas* and *rubedo*.

both. As Corbin explains, symbolic revelation is of another order entirely:

The current attitude is to oppose the real to the imaginary as though to the unreal, the utopian, as it is to confuse the exegesis of the spiritual sense with an allegorical interpretation. Now, every allegorical interpretation is harmless the allegory is a sheathing, or rather, a disguising of something that is already known or knowable otherwise, while the appearance of an Image having the quality of a symbol is a primary phenomenon, unconditional and irreducible, the appearance of something that cannot manifest itself otherwise to the world where we are.<sup>30</sup>

In relation to our imaginal method, I would like to draw attention to this third stage of interpretation, the tropological, which designates the point at which “facts” in the text or image under study are “realised” to be of direct relevance and import for the reader/viewer, not in a personally subjective sense, but in the sense of the reader’s participation in a reality which encompasses and is much greater than his or her “experience.” *Tropos* means a “turning,” and this is the point at which apprehension turns back to acknowledge its own implication in the “knowing” process. To return to Ferrer, this is, I believe, what he is referring to as the “participatory turn,” a ‘creative and multi-dimensional human access to reality,’ (whatever “reality” may mean here) and he contrasts this vision with the “intrasubjectivity” of the mind which cannot see past its own personal imperatives:

...the crux of this participatory turn is a radical shift from intrasubjective experiences to participatory events in our understanding of transpersonal and spiritual phenomena. In a nutshell, the participatory turn conceives transpersonal and spiritual phenomena, not as individual inner experiences, but as participatory events that can occur in different loci, such as an individual, a relationship, a community, a larger collective identity or a place. The intrasubjective dimension of these phenomena, then, can now be better understood as the participation of

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<sup>30</sup> H. Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation Publishers, 1995, p.13.

individual consciousness in these events and not as its fundamental essence or basic nature. In contrast, the emergence of a transpersonal event can potentially engage the creative participation of all dimensions of human nature, from somatic transfiguration to the awakening of the heart, from erotic communion to visionary cocreation, and from contemplative knowing to moral insight.<sup>31</sup>

This is the point at which traditional research methods inevitably fail to do justice to the richness of the vision, and it is, I believe, what transpersonal research methods are attempting to address. Despite his fundamentally different orientation to spiritual experience, Ferrer would seem to be talking about what for Corbin would be an interiorisation of the cosmos, realising that to adequately convey the symbolic level of understanding, inner experience must be evoked as a direct and intrinsic part of its expression, and located in a larger whole. But whilst this can easily be described, it is more difficult to speak or write from this place, or rather it is impossible to do so, without changing to a self-reflexive, metaphorical or poetic discourse. I will give here an example of what I mean: in Joanne Snow-Smith's book *The Primavera of Sandro Botticelli, a Neoplatonic Interpretation* she takes the reader through the four levels of interpretation in relation to this famous painting. The literal and allegorical perspectives do not present a problem for the art historian—there is an abundance of fact and narrative to inform the viewer from historical and contemporary sources. But what does the symbolic level demand? It is quite appropriate that Snow-Smith refers to this level as that of the spiritual initiation, and locates the imagery of the painting in the context of the mystery rites of Persephone and Demeter. She then moves to the anagogical, demonstrating that the painting has subtle resonances with what was the fount of all truth for the Renaissance humanists, the Christian revelation.

However, in taking the same “objective” stance for these two levels as she does for the first two, she is surely mis-representing them. The tropological may well be about the initiation process, but it must, inevitably, be about *her* initiation, the implications of the symbolic meaning for *her* life, as it must be for all viewers. She cannot be exempt

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<sup>31</sup> Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, p.184.

from this, if she is going to lead the reader through the levels in a way which authentically conveys their essential nature. Of course then the anagogic becomes problematic, for it would involve a realisation and a mode of writing that would become “gnostic” or revelatory, and cease to be “academic” in the accepted sense—which is exactly why writers like Ficino or Corbin are problematic for the current secularist approach in religious studies.

This is also the problem that diviners, who work with the third level—if not often the fourth—encounter in their studies, for in locating themselves at the symbolic level of insight, they have to find a way of articulating “the participatory turn” which does not just resort to the bald and “literal” statements of the “intrasubjective” experience: for example, ‘the client was depressed because she had a Saturn transit.’ Such an experience may well provide the impetus for an exploration of the Saturnine principle, but to do so one must explain the difference between a literal and a symbolic statement, knowing that poetic metaphor belongs to a different discourse. Even the deepest spiritual insight can be given a context, a tradition, a framework which defines it and gives it an identifiable credential, and the challenge lies in moving, and knowing that one is moving, from one world to the other. One is reminded of the metaphor of Plato’s cave, where the philosopher must come back into the cave to explain what he has seen; or the alchemical insight that the final stage of the opus, or *rubedo*, consists of an all-encompassing and immediate sense of all previous stages. Indeed the anagogic level itself is often described as a simultaneous grasping of literal, allegorical, symbolic and mystical senses all in one—it is not a relocation on some higher, other-worldly plane, but a deep wisdom which knows exactly how to express itself in an appropriate mode for the level of understanding of the reader or audience. How does this relate to our imaginative discourse? For one thing, an image is the supreme means by which all four levels can be negotiated, and it is to this process of active engagement to which I now turn.

### **Conclusion: *Ta’wil***

It is fitting to return to Henry Corbin (and James Hillman, who was deeply indebted to his work) for a method of working with images or themes which allows the researcher to create a deliberate trajectory of intent, encompassing concrete experience or manifestation,

interpretation and symbolic meaning. Corbin uses the Arabic term *ta'wil* to describe what is essentially a journey of spiritual hermeneutics through the fourfold, the interpretation of the cosmic dimension of a text or image: in *ta'wil* one refers sensible forms back to imaginative forms and then may be led to still deeper, numinous meanings. This cannot be done in reverse, as it would destroy the potentialities of the imagination. Nor can it be done through reverting to either sense-perception or “universal logic,” but only through staying with the intuition of meaning grasped by the active imagination.<sup>32</sup> This is echoed by Hillman who insists on the differentiation between the mental process of associative interpretation and the intuitive process of staying connected to the image:

To see the archetypal in an image is thus not a hermeneutic move. It is an imagistic move. We amplify an image by means of myth in order not to find its archetypal meaning but in order to feed it with further images that increase its volume and depth and release its fecundity.<sup>33</sup>

Although one could argue with this clear-cut distinction between thought and imagination (and I would certainly suggest that the modes can inform each other) Hillman valuably points out the danger of losing hold of the embodied significance of image (and thus failing to make the “participatory turn”) and falling back into allegory:

Unless we maintain this distinction between inherent significance and interpretative meaning, between insighting an image and hermeneutics, we shall not be able to stay with the image and let it give us what it bears. We shall have the meaning and miss the experience, miss the uniqueness of what is there by our use of methods for uncovering what is not there. We shall forget that wholeness is not only a construction to be built or a goal to achieve, but, as Gestalt says, a whole is presented in the very physiognomy of each event.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, p.13.

<sup>33</sup> J. Hillman, *Typologies* 37-8, in *The Essential James Hillman: A Blue Fire*, ed. T. Moore, London: Routledge, 1990, p.60.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

We are back to Rosemarie Anderson's "intuitive moment," and up against the extreme difficulty of staying on the "knife-edge" between analysis and synthesis, between "diabolic" and "symbolic" modes.<sup>35</sup> This then is what I am moving towards in my attempts to define a "methodology of the imagination." It is a marrying of worlds, a dance of perspectives, an intentional bridging of concrete/literal observation with participatory meaning. I would argue that it is only the active imagination that can make these fluid moves, that can mediate between worlds, that can bring the "light of human nature" into a single focus with "the light of divine revelation."<sup>36</sup> In this sense we might say that all research models can be regarded as "imaginal" in that they ally themselves in varying degrees with contrasting perspectives on the literal-symbolic spectrum. To describe the location of the researcher as medial in this sense does mean that secular/sacred divides no longer apply to kinds of knowledge, for all are understood as being in service to the union of the human soul and its cosmological counterpart. In essence, this is the metaphor that informs the kind of imaginal research I am proposing, and takes us back to Corbin to whom I leave the last word:

The way of reading and comprehending to which I refer presupposes, in the strict sense of the word, a *theosophia*, that is, the mental or visual penetration of an entire hierarchy of spiritual universes that are not discovered by means of syllogisms, because they do not reveal themselves except through a certain mode of cognition, a *hierognosis* that unites the speculative knowledge of traditional information to the most personal interior experience, for, in the absence of the latter, technical models alone would be transmitted, and these would be doomed to a rapid decline.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the etymologies of "symbol" and "diabol" see Pietro Negri, 'Knowledge of the Symbol' in ed. Evola, *Introduction to Magic*, p.84.

<sup>36</sup> On the Platonic idea of the two lights of the soul, see Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, ed. S. Jayne, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985, Ch.4.

<sup>37</sup> Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p.38.