

Notes on the mystery of the *coincidentia oppositorum*

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Knowing God

God alone knows Himself. (Nicholas of Cusa)

Between the Divine and the Human, between the Absolute and the Relative, between Principle and Manifestation, there is discontinuity and continuity. Discontinuity, for there can be no common measure between for God and man. Continuity, for nothing can be other than God. At the meeting of such two states lies an interface. In the Qur’an this interface is portrayed as an isthmus (*al-barzakh*) between two seas, described as an “insurmountable barrier”.¹ This “barrier” between Manifestation and the Principle expresses the point of resolution of contraries, of dissolution of duality into Unity.

Nicholas of Cusa speaks of the “walls of Paradise”, which conceal God from our sight, as being constituted of the *coincidentia oppositorum*.² The celebrated theologian and Sufi, Sahl al-Tustari, says, ‘One knows God by the Union of the contraries which relate to Him.’³ In the resolution of contraries one knows God as essential Unity.⁴ The distinction of subject and object disappears; knower, known and the act of knowing are indistinct. All distinctions, in the words of Meister Eckhart, are fused but not confused. Here knowledge of the Divine comes through

¹ For a further study on the *barzakh* see T. Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987, Ch.19.

² *De visione Dei* ix, xi cited in A. Coomaraswamy, ‘On the One and Only Transmigrant’ from *Selected Papers* vol.2 ‘Metaphysics’ (ed.) Roger Lipsey, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1987, p.71, n.21.

³ Cited in T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1976, p.30, n.2.

⁴ In the Islamic tradition this is *al-Ahadiyah* (the Divine or Transcendent Unity). This is to be distinguished from *al-wahidiyah* (the Divine Unicity). The Divine Unity is beyond all distinctive knowledge whereas the Unicity appears in the differentiated just as principal distinctions appear in it.

identification. ‘If you do not make yourself equal to God, you cannot apprehend God; for like is known by like.’⁵ So says Hermes Trismegistus. ‘God can be known only by God.’⁶ This is a universal maxim. Nicholas of Cusa declares: ‘God alone knows Himself.’⁷ In the Hindu tradition there are many such statements. ‘*Brahman* knows *Brahman*, and is established in Its own Self.’⁸ ‘Anyone who knows that supreme *Brahman* becomes *Brahman* indeed.’⁹ ‘Being but *Brahman*, he is absorbed in *Brahman*.’¹⁰ In the majestic words of Alighieri Dante: ‘O Light Eternal who only in thyself abidest, only thyself dost understand, and self understood, self-understanding, turnest love on and smilest at thyself!’¹¹ Thus, for Ibn `Arabi, it is not a question of “becoming one” with God or the Godhead, rather becoming conscious of the Divine Unity which is.¹²

From a certain perspective this knowledge is so utterly without objectification as to imply absence of knowing. ‘*Brahman* is known to him to whom It is unknown, while It is unknown to him to whom It is known. It is unknown to those who know and known to those who do not know’¹³. Again: ‘Although he does not know, nevertheless he knows; he does not know but there is no loss on the knower’s part, since he is indestructible; it is just that there is no second thing other than and distinct from himself that he might know.’¹⁴ For Erigena this is the “ignorance that surpasses all knowledge”: ‘God does not know what He himself is, because He is not any what; this ignorance surpasses all knowledge’.¹⁵



⁵ Hermes, *Libellus* XI (ii), 20b; cited in W. N. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.752.

⁶ *Theologia Germanica*, XLII.

⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* I, xxvi; as translated by Fr. G. Heron: *Of Learned Ignorance*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954.

⁸ *Yoga-Vasishtha* cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.753.

⁹ *Mundaka Upanisad* 3.2.9.

¹⁰ *Bṛhadâraṇyaka Upanisad* 4.4.6.

¹¹ *Paradisio*, XXXIII, 124.

¹² See F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1987, p.170

¹³ *Kena Upanisad* 2.3. Similarly, ‘Those who say do not know; those who do not know say’ (*Tao Te Ching* 56).

¹⁴ *Bṛhadâraṇyaka Upanisad* 4.3.30.

¹⁵ Erigena cited in Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* Vol.1, New Delhi: Sata-Pitaka Series, 1990, p.17, n.48.

The Essential Complementarity

The Being of all beings is but one only Being, but in its generation it separates itself into two principles. (Jacob Boehme)

Manifestation arises from the simultaneous “withdrawal” and “concentration” of the Infinite, to employ the image of the *tsimtsum* found in Lurianic Kabbalism.¹⁶ The concentration of the Infinite at what has been called the “Point Limit” corresponds to the concomitant emanation of Being.¹⁷ The Point Limit is simultaneously the principial point, the Centre and the Container of ontological Existence. In Kabbalah this is expressed by the *reshimu*, the “seed” of the Infinite. Within the *Zohar* this first point is variously expressed by the symbols of a spark, a drop, a stone.¹⁸ In the Vedantic tradition the Point Limit is the *bindu* (Tib. *thig-le*).¹⁹ Lama Anagarika Govinda observes the word, “*bindu*”, as having many meanings, like “point, dot, zero, drop, germ, seed, semen”, etc..²⁰ The Point Limit is the principial ontological point. It manifests as the spatial point. As René Guénon, observes, ‘space itself presupposes the point.’²¹ Elsewhere Guénon remarks, ‘the geometric point is quantitatively nil and does not occupy any space, though it is the principle by which space in its entirety is produced, since space is but the development of its intrinsic virtualities.’²² The Point Limit is the “determinant of space” from which manifestation begins.²³ The

¹⁶ On the *tsimtsum* see my ‘Withdrawal, Extinction and Creation: Christ’s *kenosis* in light of the Judaic doctrine of *tsimtsum* and the Islamic doctrine of *fana*’, *Sophia*, Vol.7 No.2, Oakton: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 2001. Also G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, pp.260-62; L. Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, New Jersey: Allen & Unwin, 1971, p.65.

¹⁷ These are not two separate processes but the one act of Creation: ‘He commanded and they were created’ (Ps.148:5). ‘For nor before nor after was the process of God’s outflowing over these waters’ (Dante, *Paradiso*, XXIX, 20).

¹⁸ See for example, *Zohar* I, 86b-87a; I, 231a-231b; II, 222a-222b.

¹⁹ On the “*bindu*” see A. Daniélou, *The Gods of India*, New York: Inner Traditions, 1985; in the Tibetan tradition see Lama Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1969.

²⁰ Lama Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 1969, p.116.

²¹ R. Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, London: Luzac & Co. Ltd., 1975, p.77; see Ch.XVI.

²² R. Guénon, *Man and his becoming*, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1981, pp.41-2. Again, Guénon observes that ‘though arithmetical unity is the smallest of numbers if one regards it as situated in the midst of their multiplicity, yet in principle it is the greatest, since it virtually contains them all and produces the whole series simply by the indefinite repetition of itself.’ (ibid. p.42) Meister Eckhart says ‘a point has no quantity of magnitude and does not lengthen the line of which it is the principle.’ (*Parables of Genesis*, prop.20) See also Albert the Great, *On Indivisible Lines* 5-6 and Euclid, *Geometry*.

²³ Daniélou, *The Gods of India*, 1985, p.203. See p.229 where Daniélou refers to the Point Limit as “the centre of the universe”.

various symbols, mentioned above, all express the idea of the “Centre”.²⁴ Similarly then, Adrian Snodgrass, whose formidable masterwork is an analysis of traditional architecture in the light of metaphysics, remarks that the Centre ‘symbolizes the progenitive Source whence the manifested world deploys ...It is the spaceless and timeless Origin of space and time, the One that produces plurality. The centre is the similitude of unitary Being, wherein the virtualities of spatial extension and temporal duration are contained in a state of inseparable fusion, and whence they are actualized by a projection into separativity’²⁵.

Nicholas of Cusa sees the Centre as an image of God. He states that ‘the poles of the spheres meet together with the centre which is God. He is both circumference and centre, who is both everywhere and nowhere.’²⁶ According to the famous formula of Hermes Trismegistus, ‘God is an intelligible sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.’ For Giordano Bruno this became: ‘the centre of the universe is everywhere and the circumference nowhere.’²⁷ From this to Pascal: ‘Nature is an infinite sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.’ The purely divine symbolism of Nicolas of Cusa and Hermes Trismegistus stands true; however, as Guénon rightly observes, from the strictly metaphysical point of view, the formula of Pascal, referring as it does to the plane of manifestation, ‘should and indeed, must, be reversed.’ He continues, ‘It is the centre that is rightly speaking nowhere, because it is not to be found anywhere in manifestation, since it is absolutely transcendent in respect thereof, while being the centre of all things. ... it is therefore really the circumference that is everywhere, since all places in space, or more generally, all manifested things (space being here only a symbol of universal manifestation), “all contingencies, distinctions and individualities”, are only elements in the “stream of forms”, points on the circumference of the “cosmic wheel”.’²⁸

²⁴ The concept of the “Centre” is fundamental in traditional thought. Any number of helpful references could be offered here, of particular relevance see Guénon, *Man and his becoming*, 1981, Ch.III; *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, Chs.74-76; *The Lord of the World*, Yorkshire: Coombe Springs Press, 1983, Ch.7; and *Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, passim.; also M. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, SanDiego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987; *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York: Princeton Uni. Press, 1974, pp.12-17.

²⁵ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* Vol.1, 1990, p.58.

²⁶ Cited in J. Chevalier & A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols* (tr.) Buchanan-Brown J., Middlesex: Penguin, 1996: ‘centre’.

²⁷ *Della causa, principio ed uno*, V.

²⁸ Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, p.129-30.

The potentiality of the Point Limit is expressed by its representation as the “Cosmic Seed”. The extension or realisation of the Cosmic Seed produces both a polar and axial symbolism expressed in the diremption of the principial ontological biunity into the complementary ontological principles: Essence and Substance.²⁹ ‘It is true’ says Guénon, ‘that Being is beyond all distinction, since the first distinction is that of “essence” and “substance” or of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*; nevertheless *Brahma*, as *Īshwara* or Universal Being, is described as *savishesha*, that is to say as “implying distinction,” since He is the immediate determining principle of distinction’.³⁰ In the Vedanta this idea is expressed through the doctrine of *bhedâbheda* or “Distinction without Difference”. The axial symbolism of this diremption gives rise to the *Axis Mundi*, the foremost symbols of which include the Mountain and the Tree.³¹

Being contains the essential ontological complementarity: Essence and Substance. In the Vedantic tradition these terms most readily correspond to *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, however, these principles can be recognized, at the respective levels, as both *Atmā* (the Divine Self) and *Māyā* (the “Great Theophany”) and *nāma* (name) and *rūpa* (form). Furthermore, this complementarity is found, *mutatis mundis*, with Platonic *nous* (Intellect) and *psyche* (soul); Aristotelian *eidos* (*forma*) and *hyle* (*materia*) and, again, Aristotelian Act and Potency; Heaven (*T’ien*) and Earth (*Ti*) of the Chinese Great Triad; *yang* and *yin* of Taoism,³² Sulphur and Quicksilver of Hermetic Alchemy; Christian Spirit and Soul; and again, *Kether* and *Malkhuth* of Kabbalah.³³

Symbolically, Essence and Substance are respectively the active and passive principles: male and female; communicative and receptive; positive and negative; right and left; light and dark; above and below. The degree of these qualities must be distinguished according to the perspective from which these principles are viewed. As Guénon observes with respect to the Chinese tradition,

²⁹ The term “diremption” differs from “separation” in that it implies the extension of biunity into the two “connected” poles, in other words the movement from a point to a line. On the diremption of the complementary principles see Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* Vol.1, 1990, p.60; also Guénon, 1975, *Symbolism of the Cross*, Chs. VI & VII.

³⁰ Guénon, *Man and his becoming*, 1981, p.164.

³¹ For numerous examples of the *Axis Mundi* see Eliade, *Shamanism*, Middlesex: Arkana, 1989.

³² *Yang* is the active principle and *yin* the passive principle. In traditional texts *yin* is generally mentioned before *yang*. This accords with the cosmological point of view.

³³ Guénon recognizes this complementarity in terms of Quality and Quantity, see *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, 1972, Ch.I & passim.. Whitall Perry discusses this in terms of Subject and Object, see *The Widening Breach*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995.

Within the Universal, and viewed from the side of their common principle, Heaven is “active perfection” (*Ch’ien*) and Earth is “passive perfection” (*K’un*). Neither of these is Perfection in the absolute sense: a distinction already exists, and a distinction inevitably implies a limitation. Viewed from the side of manifestation, they are merely Essence and Substance, which necessarily possess a lesser degree of universality because they are observed in correlation with each other, Heaven is always an active principle and Earth always a passive principle.³⁴

Whitall Perry recognizes three principal categories of polarities: (1) *reciprocal or complementary*, hence *neutral*, e.g. right / left; (2) *opposite but symmetrical*, e.g. night / day; (3) *contradictory and dissymmetrical*, e.g. real / unreal.³⁵ The distinction between Absolute and Relative, inasmuch as it be granted, is of this last kind. In this sense there cannot really be said to be any “meeting” of these two terms. However, inasmuch as the Absolute is the Principle of Being—without being limited to this designation—and the Relative is Manifestation, then they may be said to be a polarity or complementarity of the second category: opposite but symmetrical. They are, in this sense, “cause” and “effect”. This complementarity is that of formless potentiality or Pure Being and the potentiality of form, *materia prima*.

Both Essence and Substance exist only in terms of their essential complementarity or biunity. As Guénon says, ‘complementarism is essentially a correlation between two terms.’³⁶ Thus Frithjof Schuon observes that Essence and Substance are ‘almost synonymous in practice’³⁷. Still we can talk provisionally of “Pure Essence” and “Pure Substance” in respect to their being metaphysical realities. To which point Schuon remarks that Essence and Substance ‘differ in that substance refers to the underlying, immanent, permanent and autonomous nature of a basic reality, whereas essence refers to the reality as such, that is, as “being,” and secondarily as the absolutely fundamental nature of a thing.’ He continues, ‘The notion of essence denotes an excellence which is as it were discontinuous in relation to accidents, whereas the notion of substance implies on the contrary a sort of continuity’.³⁸

³⁴ R. Guénon, *The Great Triad*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994, pp.24-25.

³⁵ Perry, *The Widening Breach*, 1995, pp.18-19.

³⁶ Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, p.28.

³⁷ F. Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1989, p.53.

³⁸ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.53, n.1.

Essence and Substance constitute the poles of Existence: the ontological poles of the *Axis Mundi* or, what in various traditions is called the “Celestial Ray” or “Divine Ray”.³⁹ It is through the union of Essence and Substance that Cosmological Existence is brought into being. This “union” can be seen in the entwined lovemaking of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, and in the sexual intercourse of Moses and the *Shekhinah*.⁴⁰ The perfection of this “celestial union” is to be seen in the marriage of the King and Queen in the Chemical Wedding of Alchemical tradition.⁴¹ Neither Essence nor Substance exist independent of the other. This is just so by virtue of the fact that Existence is by its very nature the actualization or effect of this union.

From a certain perspective the first distinction is that of Absolute and Relative. However, this distinction exists only when viewed from “below” and then only as the illusion of duality. Schuon remarks that as this is a distinction it is necessarily prefigured *in divinis* by the differentiation between the ‘Absolute as such and the Absolute relativized in view of a dimension of its Infinitude’⁴². Schuon continues to say that this distinction is “illusory” precisely because this difference ‘is real only from the standpoint of Relativity.’ In the ultimate reality the Absolute is “One without a second”⁴³.

All dualities are complementarities expressing the vicissitudes of a multivalent singularity. Hot and cold, dry and wet, light and dark, good and evil: these are the asymptotic poles between which a creatural being measures its state of temperature, moistness, visibility, and morality respectively.⁴⁴ On their particular plane of activity, and from the perspective of the Relative, each complementarity reflects the principal distinction of Absolute and Relative. God is One but Creation is born from duality.

³⁹ See Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, Ch.XXIV. It is possible, from a particular state of being, to conceive of two world axii corresponding to the horizontal axis and vertical axis respectively. What we have in mind here is the vertical axis, the “Divine Ray”, which, in virtue of its greater universality, necessarily includes the horizontal axis.

⁴⁰ *Zohar* I, 21b-22a, cited in Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.226, n.72. See also *Zohar* I, 49b-50a.

⁴¹ On the Alchemical Wedding see T. Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974, Ch.11.

⁴² F. Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1989, p.73.

⁴³ See for example, in the Hindu tradition: *Chandogya Upanisad* 6.2.1, *Brhadâran'yaka Upanisad* 2.5.19. In the Semitic traditions we find this affirmation repeated often, for example, *Isaiah* 45:5 & 46:9, and in the Qur'an: ‘There is non divinity but Divinity’ (*La ilaha illa 'Llah.*); ‘Say He is the one God’ (*Qul hua 'Llahu ahad*).

⁴⁴ Perry offers a lists of complementarities that, as he remarks could be expands endlessly; see *The Widening Breach*, 1995, p.3.

‘Once and for all God has spoken two things.’ (Ps.61:12) ‘I have spoken once, I shall not speak again; I have spoken twice, I have nothing more to say.’ (Job 40:5) ‘Everything that falls away from the One, the First of all things,’ says Meister Eckhart, ‘immediately falls into two and into the other numbers by means of duality.’⁴⁵ Between two there is relationship and thus there is ternary. In the final analysis the illusory duality of all complementarities dissolves in the Unity of the Absolute. As St. John declares, ‘These three are one.’ (1Jn. 5:7)⁴⁶



The Isthmus

He has let loose the two oceans: they meet one another. Yet between them stands a barrier which they cannot overrun. (Surah 55, *al-Rahman*)

‘God said, “Let there be a vault through the middle of the waters to divide the waters in two.” And it was so.’ (Gen.1:6) The Zohar speaks here of “the Upper Waters” and “the Lower Waters”.⁴⁷ The Qur’an refers to “the two seas”.⁴⁸ In Surahs 25 and 35 these are referred to as respectively “sweet” and “bitter”: ‘It was He who sent the two seas rolling, the one sweet and fresh, and the other salty and bitter, and set a rampart between them as an insurmountable barrier.’ (Surah 25) Titus Burkhardt remarks that according to interpretations well known in Sufism, ‘the two seas symbolize respectively Quiddity and the Quantities, or, according to other interpretations, the non-manifested and the manifested, the formless and the formal, immediate knowledge and theoretical knowledge, etc. In short, the two seas can represent two more or less exalted, but always consecutive, degrees in the hierarchy of Being’.⁴⁹ Again: the Upper Waters symbolise formless potentiality, principial non-distinction. This, as Guénon remarks, ‘is Pure Being and as such is identical to the “Great

⁴⁵ *Comm. Gen.* prop.26.

⁴⁶ In his *Parables on Genesis* (sect.180 Latin ed.), Meister Eckhart, cites Gen. 18:2 as ‘He saw three and adored one.’

⁴⁷ *Zohar* I, 32b.

⁴⁸ Surah 18: *al-kahf* (The Cave); Surah 25: *al-Farqan*; Surah 27: *al-naml* (The Ant); Surah 35: *al-Fatir* (The Creator); and Surah 55: *al-Rahman* (The Merciful).

⁴⁹ T. Burkhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987, p.193. The terms “Quiddity” and “Qualities” are explained according to their Moslem sense in more detail in T. Burkhardt (tr.), ‘Abd al-Karîm al-Jîlî, *al-insân al-kamil* (Universal Man), Gloucester: Beshara

Unity”⁵⁰. On the Sefirothic Tree the Upper Waters are *Binah*, the “Great Sea”. The Lower Waters symbolise the potentiality of Form, potential non-distinction, ontological possibility. The Lower Waters are ontological Substance, *materia prima*, *Mulaprakriti*, Mater Creatrix. On the Sefirothic Tree this is *Malkuth*.

According to *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch*: ‘That which is from the heavens above (the Upper Waters) is masculine water, that which is underneath the earth (the Lower Waters) is feminine.’⁵¹ This agrees with the reading of the Upper Waters as Essence and the Lower Waters as Substance. Chevalier & Gheerbrant’s seminal *Dictionary of Symbols* remarks that the symbolism of the Upper and Lower Waters is often depicted by the “double spiral”.⁵² The two directions of the double spiral express the dual action of the cosmic complementarity: expansion and concentration, centrifugal and centripetal movement, catabasis or “going down” and anabasis or “going up”, departure in to the manifest and return to the non-manifest, the expiration and inspiration (or exhalation and inhalation) of the Divine Breath. According to a shift in perspective and in strict observance of the law of parallel analogy, the symbolism of the Upper and Lower Waters can again be applied to ontological Substance to distinguish between the *materia prima* and *materia secunda*. As Schuon remarks, ‘The element “Substance” is represented at each ontological or cosmic level in appropriate mode; and *a fortiori*, pure Substance or Substance as such underlies each of its secondary manifestations.’⁵³

Between the two seas is an isthmus (*barzakh*), an “insurmountable barrier” (Surahs 25 and 55). Schuon refers to the *barzakh* as ‘a dividing line between two domains [which] line appears, from the standpoint of each side, to belong to the other side’⁵⁴ He adds, ‘The archetype of the *barzakh* is the half-divine, half-cosmic frontier separating, and in another sense uniting, Manifestation and the Principle; it is the

Publications, 1983. The term “Quiddity” comes from the technical scholastic term “*quidditas*” meaning “what-it-is”.

⁵⁰ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, pp.18-19, see particularly n.4.

⁵¹ *1Enoch* 54.8. E. Isaac remarks that this that this section is believed to be part of the lost Book of Noah (see J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* Vol 1, New York: Doubleday, 1983, p.38).

⁵² Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 1996: ‘water’. On this point see Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.39, n.12. On the “double spiral” see *ibid.* Ch.5.

⁵³ Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, 1989, p.56.

⁵⁴ Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, 1988, p.187.

“Divine Spirit” (*Rûh*) which, seen “from above” is manifestation, and seen “from below” is Principle. Consequently, it is *Mâyâ* in both its aspects; the same thing appears, in a certain manner, in the Christian expression “true man and true God.”⁵⁵

Burckhardt remarks that, when seen “from the outside” the *barzakh*, must necessarily have the definite meaning of “partition” or “seperative element”, but, that it cannot be merely this for a perspective which applies to it the principle of non-otherness. He continues: ‘Looking at it in regard to its ontological situation, if one may so put it, it appears as a simple partition only from the point of view of lesser reality, whereas seen “from above”, it is the very mediator between the two seas. ... The *barzakh* is thus separation only in that it is itself the starting point of a seperative perspective, in the eyes of which it appears to be a limit.’⁵⁶

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, discussing the *Hayy ibn Yaqzân* of Ibn Sina, says of the *barzakh* that it is ‘the *intellectus materialis*, or *al-`aql al-hayûlânî*, which with respect to the intelligible forms acts as *materia prima*.’⁵⁷ This is to view the Intellect, *al-`Aql*, with respect to its Substantial mode or polarity. But the Intellect is equally Essence. As noted earlier, Essence is “almost synonymous” with Substance. Thus the *barzakh* is also *al-`aql al-awwal*, the First Intellect, analogous to *al-qalam* (the Supreme Pen), and here we might recall that the symbolism of the Pen implies both active instrument and passive ink; moreover, the ink will then be active to the Guarded Tablet (*al-Lawh al-mahfûz*) which will, at this level, be passive. To compare the Intellect to the *barzakh* is to agree with Plotinus who places the Intellect as the mediating principle or hypostases “between”, if this phrase be allowed here, the One and the World Soul. Moreover, this is the same, as Schuon says, with the Divine Spirit or *Rûh* which, in the Christian Trinity, is the mediating principle between the Father and the Son.

Schuon’s comment on the “archetype of the *barzakh*” alert us to the fact that this term refers both to *an* intermediary and to *the* intermediary, the archetypal interface

⁵⁵ Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, 1988, p.187, n.1.

⁵⁶ Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, 1987, pp.193-94.

⁵⁷ S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1978, p.269. He notes that the use of the Aristotelian language of form and matter is ‘here transposed into the spiritual domain to symbolize the inner experiences of the traveler’.

between Transcendence and Immanence. This is similar to what we may note of the Tibetan term *bar-do* or “in between”, which usually refers to the state in between death and rebirth but equally refers to the sense of a phase between two successive states of being.⁵⁸ In the Hindu tradition this intermediate state is called *sandyhā* (twilight).⁵⁹ This word, as Guénon observes, is derived from *sandhi*, the point of contact or of junction between two things. It is used in an ordinary sense to describe the twilight (morning and evening); in the theory of cosmic cycles (*manvantara*), it is used to indicate the interval between two *Yugas*.⁶⁰ Mention deserves to be made here of the planet Venus, which, as the Morning and Evening Star, appears at each twilight as the intermediary between Day and Night and, more specifically with respect to the celestial bodies, between the Sun and Moon. Moreover, inasmuch as the *barzakh* is equated with the *al-`aql al-hayûlâni* or the *materia prima* of the intelligible forms, it is worth noting that the planetary symbolism of `Abd al-Karîm al-Jîlî corresponds Venus with the imagination (*al-khayâl*), with al-Jîlî noting that this is the ‘*materia prima* of the world of forms.’⁶¹

In the Taoist tradition this intermediary or interface can be recognised in the “line” that marks off the two halves of the *yin-yang* symbol.⁶² Throughout his writings Guénon often remarks that this symbol, far from affirming any “dualism”, stresses the unity of this single principle, the *T'ai-chi* or Great Ultimate of Chinese tradition.⁶³ Guénon writes of the *yin-yang* symbol:

The two halves are marked off from each other by a line that curves, which indicates an interpenetration of the two elements; if on the other hand they were divided by a diameter one would be inclined to deduce a simple juxtaposition. It is worth noting that this curved line consists of two semi-circumferences whose radius is half the radius of the circumference forming the outline of the whole diagram. Accordingly the total length of the line is equivalent to the half the total length of the circumference, which means that each of the two halves of the diagram is contained by a line equal in length to the line containing the whole diagram.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ See the *Bardo thos grol*, ‘The Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between’, or as it is commonly known in the West, ‘The Tibetan Book of the Dead’.

⁵⁹ *Matsya Purāna* 3. tells of the birth of Sandhyā from Prajāpati, the lord of progeny; cited in Daniélou, *The Gods of India*, 1985, p.236.

⁶⁰ Guénon, *Man and his becoming*, 1981, p.88, n.1.

⁶¹ Al-Jîlî, *al-insân al-kamîl* (tr.) Burckhardt, 1983, p.xviii.

⁶² On the *yin-yang* symbol see Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, Ch.22; *The Great Triad*, 1994, Ch.4.

⁶³ R. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, p.208. On *T'ai-chi* see Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (tr.) Wing-tsit Chan, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969, p.263, passim..

⁶⁴ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.34, n.12.

The circumference of the whole may be said to symbolise the Infinite. The symbolism of the circumference alludes to this “boundless” nature. The white *yang* is marked off by a black line marking out a half circumference; the black *yin* is marked off by a white half circumference; these two then cancel each other, so to speak, such that it can be said that there is really no circumference to this infinite “circle”. As such, Guénon’s observation that each colour is bound by a line of equal length to the circumference alludes to the idea that each of these colours or principles is infinite and thus non-distinct within the unity of the *T’ai-chi*. It is only from the perspective of manifestation that we recognise these principles as distinct and even then the *yin-yang* symbol reminds us of their complementary nature through the small circle of *yang* that resides in *yin* and *visa versa*.

It might be objected that there is no “line” between the *yin* and the *yang* in this symbol and in truth there is no line as such that is distinct from either *yin* or *yang*. Rather this line is implied where the two principles meet, but it is precisely not articulated because of the “mysterious” nature of this interface. This is to recognise the term “mystery” according to its root meaning of “silence”, for what is being alluded to here is beyond rational language. As Pseudo-Dionysius says, ‘The best that one can say about God is for one to keep silent out of the wisdom of one’s inward riches.’⁶⁵ Similarly, Whitall Perry considers that the Islamic *barzakh* equates with the Christian “Cloud of Unknowing”.⁶⁶ This mystery is the “something in the soul” that Meister Eckhart spoke of as being “uncreated and not capable of creation” which, in perfect accord with all we have so far considered, Meister Eckhart says is the “Intellect” (see Serms.13, 48, among others). Again, in Kabbalah this mystery is expressed by the Holy of Holies, analogous to the sefirah *Tiferet*, the “centre” or “heart” of the lower seven “cosmological” sefirot.⁶⁷

The likening of the interface to the “heart” is similarly found in the Islamic tradition. The Shaikh Si Mohammad Tadilî of Jadîda says: ‘All *barâzikh* (plural of

⁶⁵ *Mystical Theology* 1.1.

⁶⁶ Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.650.

⁶⁷ These are, according to the point of view adopted, the *sefirot* from *Chesed* down to *Malkuth* excluding the supernal triad of *Kether-Chokmah-Binah*, or the *sefirot* from *Binah* down to *Yesod*. On

barzakh) of man depend on his central *barzakh*, which is the heart (*qalb*), mediator between the domain of the Spirit (*Rûh*) and that of the individual soul (*nafs*).⁶⁸ Again: ‘What is called the *barzakh* of a given realm of existence is nothing other than the pole (*qutb*) that governs this realm and gives it its growth.’ Burckhardt observes that, in Sufism, the term *barzakh* is sometimes used synonymously with the term *qutb*, “pole”. Here, as Burckhardt points out, it is significant that the root of the word *qalb* (heart), QLB, implies the idea of “turning upside down”. We are reminded here of Dante’s “perplexing” inversion whilst climbing out from Hell, which occurs precisely at the “centre” of the earth, the point that is likewise the essential pole of Hell and the lowest or “substantial” pole of Mount Purgatory.⁶⁹ The word *qalb*, moreover, has the meaning of “mould”, given the inversion of “negative” and “positive” in the process of moulding.⁷⁰ There is here also an inverse analogy between the root QLB and QBL, which latter is the root of the word, *qâbil*, “receptacle”. The root QBL means to “receive”, “to placing one in front of the other”, “to be in face of”. As Burckhardt observes *al-qâbil* is the receptacle, the passive and receptive substance.⁷¹

Burckhardt notes two functions of the *barzakh*: ‘the first consists in meditation in an “ascending” sense, in other words in the passage from the manifested to the non-manifested, a passage or transformation which always traverses the blind spot of an extinction, or of a death; while the second is that this point is the point of reversal of relationships.’⁷² It is this nature of the *barzakh* that gives rise to the laws of analogy: ‘Whatever is at the lowest level corresponds, by inverse analogy, to what is at the highest level’.⁷³ Schuon expands upon this when he notes the two-fold nature of analogy:

the *Sefirot* see Isaiah Tishby’s excellent introduction to the *sefirot* in his, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* Vol.1 (tr.) D. Goldstein, Oxford: Oxford University Press (for The Littman Library), 1989.

⁶⁸ Cited in Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, 1987, p.194.

⁶⁹ *Inferno*, XXXIV, 90.

⁷⁰ Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, 1987, p.194.

⁷¹ Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, p.123.

⁷² Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, 1987, p.196.

⁷³ On the “laws of analogy” see Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, p.186, see Ch.XXV; also *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Chs.52 & 53; *The Great Triad*, 1994, Ch.7. This law follows the oft quoted Hermetic aphorism, “As Above So Below”, taken from Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus: ‘It is true without lie, certain and most veritable, that what is below is like what is above and that what is above is like what is below, to perpetrate the miracles of one thing.’

If between one level of reality and another there is a parallel analogy in respect of positive content, there is on the other hand an inverse analogy in respect of relationship: for example, there is a parallel analogy between earthly and heavenly beauty, but there is an inverse analogy as regards their respective situations, in the sense that earthly beauty is “outward” and divine Beauty “inward”; or again, to illustrate this law by symbols: according to certain Sufic teachings, earthly trees are reflections of heavenly trees, and earthly women are reflections of heavenly women (parallel analogy); but heavenly trees have their roots above and heavenly women are naked (inverse analogy, what is “below” becoming “above”, and what is “inward” becoming “outward”).⁷⁴

Burckhardt further remarks that the different aspects of the *barzakh* are represented in the diagram of the Seal of Solomon, and this, as he says, ‘leads us to consider the relationship of the *barzakh* with *al-insân al-kamîl*, “Universal man”, who by expressing the constituent analogy of the microcosm and the macrocosm, is truly the *barzakh* par excellence or, what amounts to the same thing, the symbol par excellence.’⁷⁵ This identification of the *barzakh* with Universal Man agrees with Schuon’s likening of the *barzakh* as “true man and true God.” Again this is to recognise that this interface between the Transcendent and the Immanent is none other than Christ, where Christ is identical with the Spirit (*Rûh*), as ‘These three are one’, and where ‘No one can come to the father except through me.’ (Jn.14:6)



⁷⁴ F. Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1993, p.84, n.2; *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.106, n.1; *Language of the Self*, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1999, pp.35-6, where he refers to “direct” and “inverse” analogy.

⁷⁵ Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, 1987, p.197.

The Symplegades

I am the door. No one comes to the Father except through me. (St. John 10:9; 14:6)

Die before ye die. (Muhammad)

From the human perspective the *barzakh* appears as an “insurmountable barrier”. However, this is just to say that it is “insurmountable” without a kind of active negation or death. ‘Die before ye die’ says the Prophet.⁷⁶ Again, St. Thomas Aquinas remarks, ‘No creature can attain a higher grade of nature without ceasing to exist.’⁷⁷ In this light the symbolism of the *barzakh* corresponds to that of the Symplegades, the “Clashing Rocks” or, as Ananda Coomaraswamy calls this, the “Active Door”.⁷⁸ The passage through the Symplegades is, strictly speaking, the prerogative of the Hero.⁷⁹ The Symplegades form a passage way to the “Otherworld”. Passing through this passage way the Hero relinquishes their mortal element undergoing a purification, which is a death of sorts. As Guénon says, ‘new birth necessarily presupposes death to the former state’.⁸⁰ Coomaraswamy: “No one becomes immortal in the flesh,” (SB x.4.3.9), and whoever reaches the Otherworld and the attainment of all desires does so “going in the spirit”... “having shaken off his bodies” (JUB iii.30.2-4)—the Platonic *katharsis* (Phaedo 76C).⁸¹ Against this must be placed the words of Christ: ‘I tell you of a truth, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God.’ (Mt.16:28; Mt.9:1; Lk.9:27) This alerts us to the fact that identification with God is possible in this mortal realm. At the same time: ‘Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.’ (Mt.16:25) It is only when one renounces their “ego-self” that they can be born anew, born in Truth, where even the flesh is made divine.

⁷⁶ Cited by Shaykh Ahmad al-`Alawi, in Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1971, p.160.

⁷⁷ *Summa Theol.*, 1.63.3, per Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.208.

⁷⁸ The reader is directed to Coomaraswamy’s masterful essay, ‘Symplegades’ from A. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers* vol.1 ‘Traditional Art and Symbolism’ (ed.) Roger Lipsey, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1989. This essay offers an extensive bibliography on this subject. See also the related essay in the same volume, ‘*Svayamātrnā: Janua Coeli*’.

⁷⁹ For various accounts of the motif of the Symplegades in the Hero’s journey see J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, London: Abacus, 1975, pp.79-80.

⁸⁰ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.110.

⁸¹ Coomaraswamy, ‘Symplegades’, 1989, p.256, n.12.

In Greek mythology the *Argo* came to the Symplegades on the quest for the Golden Fleece (*Argonautica* II.549-609). The Fleece with its double symbolism of gold and the solar ram, is the hidden goal or treasure, the *Fons Vitae*, the “Well of Honey in Visnu’s highest place”,⁸² the Perennial Spring of Plotinus,⁸³ the Grail, etc. Its solar symbolism expresses the light of illumination of the Intellect. The Active Door is here the “Sundoor”. The *Argo* is the vessel of the spiritual journey, and in this sense corresponds to the human condition. That the *Argo* is a “winged ship” expresses its potential for “flight” or transcendence. The *Argo* symbolises the human intellect, which may transcend its created state by identification with the Uncreated Intellect. This is the Christian doctrine of the Logos: one with two states, created and Uncreated. This then is the “bridge” between man and God.⁸⁴ Meister Eckhart calls the Intellect–created and Uncreated–the “spark in the soul”, and again, “the *Synteresis*”. On this point, Coomaraswamy remarks that the word, *synteresis*, is etymologically equivalent of the Sanskrit word, *samtāraka*, “one who helps to cross over”.⁸⁵ The Intellect is the Self of Hindu tradition, and thus we read: ‘Now, the Self (Ātman) is the bridge, the separation for keeping these worlds apart. Over that bridge there cross neither day, nor night, nor old age, nor death, nor sorrow, nor well-doing, nor evil doing.’⁸⁶

According to tradition, the seer Phineus advised Jason that to successfully pass through the Symplegades they should release a dove between the rocks, and if they saw it pass safely between them, to sail through in full confidence, but if it was destroyed, to make no attempt to force a passage. The Argonauts released a dove from the prow; and as she flew through only the tip of her tail was snipped off as the rocks clashed together. Following suit the Argonauts waited for the rocks to part and then rowing hard made their way through, although the tip of the vessel’s poop was shorn. Ever afterwards, the Symplegades have stood motionless.

⁸² *RgVeda* 1.154.5.

⁸³ *Enneads* 3.8.10.

⁸⁴ See W. Stoddart, ‘Mysticism’ originally published in R. Fernando (ed.), *The Unanimous Tradition*, Colombo: The Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1991; republished in A. Lakhani (ed.), *Sacred Web 2*, Vancouver, 1998.

⁸⁵ A. Coomaraswamy, “Satan” and “Hell” from *Selected Papers* vol.2, 1989, p.30, n.26.

⁸⁶ *Chāndogya Upanishad* 8.4.1, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.979. Swāmi Gambhirānada’s translation has “dam” instead of “bridge” (*Chāndogya Upanishad*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992). This simply reflects a shift in perspective, for the *barzakh*, is both barrier and bridge.

In the Greek tradition the dove is associated with Aphrodite, which is to say, Love. One will recall our earlier notes on Venus as related to the intermediary state. In the Christian tradition the dove is a well-known symbol of the Spirit. Again, one is reminded of Noah releasing the dove to guide him through the waters of the Flood. In passing through the Symplegades the dove loses its tail feathers, so too the *Argo* only makes it through with the loss of her tail. Coomaraswamy notes several variations on this myth. In Greenland the Eskimo hero Giviok is confronted by “two clashing icebergs”, which he passes through only after having the stern-point of his kayak “bruised”. In the South American Tupi saga of the Sky-journey of two brothers, respectively human and divine, the way leads between clashing rocks, by which the mortal is crushed.⁸⁷ In Chrétien de Troyes marvelous tale of Yvain, *The Knight with the Lion*, the hero crosses the “narrow gate” at the expense of his horse, which is cut in half by the portcullis. And of course, passing between Scylla and Charybdis, Odysseus lost his six ablest men.

Coomaraswamy remarks on the fact that these Clashing Rocks are to be recognised as a “mouth”.⁸⁸ This, as he says, is really the “fiery Jaws of Death”, as in *RgVeda* 10.87.3. The image of the interface as a mouth not only expresses the maleficent notion of “devourment” but also alludes to the beneficent reading of this symbol in the context of the creative Word. Similarly expressing this idea of creativity the passage through the Symplegades is seen in the image of the birth canal and vagina. Coomaraswamy notes one North American myth in which the door of the king of heaven is made of his daughter’s toothed vagina, uniting the two ideas. Again, he remarks on the Polynesian tale of Maui’s brother crushed between the thighs of the Night Goddess.⁸⁹ This association between sex and death is common: ‘The stroke of death is a lover’s pinch, which hurts, and is desir’d.’⁹⁰

In the *RgVeda* 6.49.3 the “Clashing Rocks” are Day and Night. Coomaraswamy quotes from the *Kansitaki Brāhmana*: ‘Night and day are the sea that carries all away, and the two twilights are its fordable crossings’. The two twilights (*sandyhā*) are at once from alternate perspectives the “insurmountable barrier” or *barzakh* and the

⁸⁷ Coomaraswamy, ‘Symplegades’, 1989, p.531.

⁸⁸ Coomaraswamy, ‘Symplegades’, 1989, p.522, n.5.

⁸⁹ Coomaraswamy, ‘Symplegades’, 1989, p.522, n.5.

“fordable crossing” or the “bridge”. In this sense the two twilights are the “gates of the paths of Night and Day” (Parmenides frag.1) that both bar and allow passage. Coomaraswamy observes the obvious parallel of this passage from the *Rg Veda*, with its description of Night and Day as “seas”, to the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex.14:15-31). This is again paralleled in the crossing of the Jordan (Jos.3:14-17). We should also note here that the word “Hebrew” can signify “one that passes over from, or to, a place”;⁹¹ as such, it has been suggested that “Abram the Hebrew” (Gen.14:13), may be “Abram who crossed the River” (Jos. 24:2, 3).⁹² Sir William Drummond sees in this name an esoteric relationship to the meaning of the *Passover*, or “the *Transition*”.⁹³ ‘Blessed are they who make this passover: all things are known to them in truth and they themselves unknown to any creature.’⁹⁴

The Symplegades express the principle of complementarity. In the final analysis, as Guénon observes, complementarity vanishes in the “resolution of opposites”: ‘Complementarity itself, which is still duality, must at a certain degree, vanish in face of unity, its two terms being balanced and as it were neutralized when uniting to merge indissolubly in the primordial indifferencing.’⁹⁵ Thus, in Rabbinical tradition, during the time of the flood neither the sun nor the moon shed their light on the world.⁹⁶ After the *Argo* had passed through them the Symplegades stood motionless. Connected with this idea, Whitall Perry discusses the “split gates” of the Balinese northern temple, Meduwe Karang, at Kubutambahan.⁹⁷ These “gates” are carved with iconography on either side, both facing outwards and inwards; however, the opposing faces between the gates are smooth expressing the state of nondistinction “within” this unity.

Coomaraswamy concludes his magnificent article on the Symplegades thus: ‘It remains only to consider the full doctrinal significance of the Symplegades. What the formula states literally is that whoever would transfer from this to the Otherworld, or

⁹⁰ Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.297.

⁹¹ Drummond, *Oedipus Judaicus*, 1996, p.98. Hebrew (*‘Ibriy*) from *‘eber* (“across”).

⁹² M. F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1965: ‘Hebrews’.

⁹³ See Drummond’s dissertation on the Paschal Lamb, *Oedipus Judaicus* ‘Allegory in the Old Testament’ (1811), London: Bracken Books, 1996, Dissertation VI.

⁹⁴ Meister Eckhart cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.876.

⁹⁵ Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, p.32; see *ibid.* Ch.VII.

⁹⁶ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Ch.23; cf. Jos.10:12-13; Hab.3:11-12.

⁹⁷ Perry, *The Widening Breach*, 1995.

return, must do so through the undimensioned and timeless “interval” that divides related but contrary forces, between which, if one is to pass it must be “instantly.”⁹⁸ As St. Paul says, this “mystery” will occur ‘instantly, in the twinkling of an eye’ (1Cor.15:52).



The Twin-Peaked Mountains

And in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. (*Genesis* 8:4)

The mythologist, H. A. Guerber sees the *Argo* as ‘a symbol of the earth as a living parent, which contains in itself the germs of all living things.’⁹⁹ A comparison with the Ark of Noah is immediate. The notion of the retraction of duality into the coincidence of opposites is explicit in the mythology of the Deluge. Perry remarks that one of the aspects of the symbolism of the “pairs” in the Flood story ‘is that manifestation was not to be consummated at the end of the cyclic period in question, but rather temporarily withdrawn “into the Ark”, and hence the polarities were maintained, but in a state of “suspension” for an interval.’¹⁰⁰ This retraction expresses the movement at the end of a cycle from the state of duality and, hence, relativity and indefinite multiplicity, to a state of virtual unity. This is a virtual unity inasmuch as it is distinct from the Union achieved by the solar hero in the passage through the Sundoor. With the Ark of the Deluge it is more the case that the Ark enters the “space”¹⁰¹ between the symbolic Symplegades but does not proceed to the

⁹⁸ Coomaraswamy, ‘Symplegades’, 1989, p.542.

⁹⁹ H. A. Guerber, *Greece and Rome*, London: Bracken Books, 1985, p.356. Guerber tends towards interpretation of these myths as “nature allegories”. It goes without saying that our perspective includes a transcendent element. However, Guerber’s view does not necessarily mean his reading is incompatible with ours, merely that it is limited.

¹⁰⁰ Perry, *The Widening Breach*, 1995, p.18, n.1. In a particularly germane essay on ‘The Flood in Hindu Tradition’, Ananda Coomaraswamy remarks, ‘the seeds, ideas, or images of the future manifestation persist during the interval or inter-Time of resolution on a higher plane of existence, unaffected by the destruction of manifested forms’ (*Selected Papers* vol.2 ‘Metaphysics’ (ed.) Roger Lipsey, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.398).

¹⁰¹ This use of the term “space” is purely symbolic. As Schuon remarks, ‘There is no common measure between manifestation and the Principle, and consequently there cannot be an intermediate point which is situated as it were “mathematically” in the centre. This centre exists only in relation to the world and in a purely symbolic manner. It appears either as “the Principle made manifest” or as the “manifestation of the Principle”’ (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.174).

“other side”, the higher state. Instead the Ark returns from this mysterious interval concurrently with the withdrawal of the waters of the flood. It is equally true, from the perspective of the Principle, to say that the emergence of the Ark causes the withdrawal of the waters.

Among the mythologies of the Flood the resting place of the Ark is often said to be a “twin peaked” mountain. In the Greek tradition this is explicitly stated with Mt. Parnassus.¹⁰² In the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* we find the Flood-hero, Ut-napishtim, residing with his wife at Mt. Mashu or “the mount of the twin”.¹⁰³ In Hebrew Scripture, Noah landed ‘upon the Mountains of Ararat’ (Gen.8:4), which, according to tradition, are identified with the double conical peaks of Mt. Massis in the Caucasus Mountains, called by the Persians, Kuhi-Nuh, “the mountain of Noah”. Josephus remarks that the Armenians called Ararat, *Apobatêrion* or “The Place of Descent” (Ant.1.3.92). In his notes to this, William Whiston, observed that ‘this is the proper rendering of the Armenian name of this very city [he refers here to the city at the base of Mt. Ararat]. It is called in Ptolemy *Naxuana*, and by Moses Chorenensis, the Armenian historian, *Idsheuan*; but at the place itself, *Nachidsheuan*, which signifies *The first place of descent*’¹⁰⁴. Whiston continues to note that Moses Chorenensis says elsewhere that another town in this area was ‘related by tradition to have been called *Seron*, or The Place of Dispersion, on account of the dispersion of Xisuthrus’s or Noah’s sons, from thence first made.’ These twin notions of “descent” and “dispersion” correspond respectively to the vertical and horizontal extensions of Being from the ontological Origin, in this case, Ararat, which is, one that is two.

Considered in light of its Kabbalistic symbolism the word “Ararat” (אררט) reveals further esoteric meaning:

ט	ך	ך	א
serpent	head	head	ox

¹⁰² The resting place of Deucalion’s Ark is commonly accepted as Parnassus although Robert Graves remarks that some tell it was Mt. Etna or Mt. Athos or Mt. Othrys in Thessaly (*The Greek Myths* vol.1, London: Penguin, 1960, p.139).

¹⁰³ S. Dalley (ed.), *Myths from Mesopotamia* Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p.96.

¹⁰⁴ Whiston’s notes to his translation (Josephus, *The Complete Works of Josephus*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1981, p.33-34)

Symbolically this word expresses a shift from “ox” (*aleph*) to “serpent” (*teth*). The ox, in its relationship to the cow and the bull, is an aspect of the symbolism expressing Cosmic Substance.¹⁰⁵ While it is a gross oversimplification we might nonetheless say that the bull expresses the “terrifying” strength and vitality inherent in the potentiality of Cosmic Substance or Chaos;¹⁰⁶ the cow expresses the fertility or fecundity inherent in the birth and nurturing of Creation; and the ox expresses the sacrificial nature of Cosmic Substance. The ox is further associated with the symbolism of Water, which is the symbol of Cosmic Substance *par excellence*.¹⁰⁷ In the *Zohar* the ox is explicitly associated with the power of sorcery or magic, the power of the “other side”.¹⁰⁸ This symbolism is again expressed by Water.¹⁰⁹ The serpent also relates, as part of its complex symbolism, to the notion of Cosmic Substance. The serpent is also associated, in an active sense, with the concept of the Fall and thus can be said to suggest Cosmic Substance in its productive nature.

We are here primarily concerned with the “isthmus” created between the “Upper Water of the ox” and the “Lower Water of the serpent” by the two “heads”, the two letters resh. These two “heads” form the “Active Door”, the Symplegades, between the Upper and Lower worlds. It could be suggested that the double letter structure implies the idea of the one letter/symbol seen from two perspectives, as we considered with the *barzakh*. Thus the first resh is influenced by the aleph and the second resh by the teth; yet they nevertheless remain the one letter.

It is interesting to consider this meeting of two heads in light of Genesis 1:27 (‘God created man in the image’), and this in the context of the law of inverse analogy. As such the meeting of the Transcendent and the Immanent might well be figured by an image of two human forms, one erect and one inverted, with their respective heads meeting. Coomaraswamy has considered this idea briefly in his work on ‘The Inverted Tree’.¹¹⁰ He remarks: ‘What we are concerned with is that the

¹⁰⁵ See Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996: ‘ox’, p.730; ‘bull’, p.131; ‘cow’, p. 237.

¹⁰⁶ This potentiality must be sacrificed in the act of Creation, as witnessed, for example, in the Mithraic mysteries.

¹⁰⁷ “Darkness” is the other exemplarily symbol of Substance, although it more accurately refers to the transcendent nature of Substance.

¹⁰⁸ See, as a more obscure example, *Zohar* II, 64b-65a.

¹⁰⁹ See I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* Vol.2, 1989, p.507, n.302.

¹¹⁰ Coomaraswamy, ‘The Inverted Tree’: *Selected Papers* vol.1 ‘Traditional Art and Symbolism’ (ed.) Roger Lipsey, Princeton University Press, Surrey, 1989.

coming into being of the man presupposes a descent, and that of the return to the source of being an ascent; in this sense, the man, *qua* tree, is inverted at birth and erected at death.¹¹¹ Thus, in the *Acts of Peter* 37-39, Peter beseeches his executioners, ‘Crucify me thus, with the head downwards, and not otherwise...For the first man, whose race I bear in mine appearance, fell head downwards’¹¹². Again the two heads that are in fact one recalls the symbolism of *Janus Bifrons* who, like Peter, is the “holder of the keys”, the Janitor. Moreover, the “third face” of Janus, remarks Guénon, ‘in another symbolism, that of the Hindu tradition, corresponds to the frontal eye of Shiva, which is...invisible, not being represented by any corporeal organ, and which represents the “sense of eternity”’.¹¹³ This “third face” is precisely the *coincidentia oppositorum*



Union

Do not look upon the Reality, lest you abstract Him from creation.
Do not look upon creation, lest you invest it with what is not the Reality.
Know Him as both Comparable and Incomparable and so sit in the abode of truth.
(Ibn al-‘Arabi)

But when to the knower of Brahman everything has become the Self, then what should one see and through what? (*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* 2.4.14)

‘What separates man from the divine reality’ says Schuon, ‘is an infinitesimal barrier: God is infinitely near to man, but man is infinitely far from God. This barrier, for man is a mountain which he must remove with his own hands. He digs the earth, but in vain, the mountain remains; man continues to dig, however, in the name of God. And the mountain vanishes. It has never been.’¹¹⁴ The distinction between Absolute

¹¹¹ Coomaraswamy, ‘The Inverted Tree’, 1989, p.396. Most interestingly Coomaraswamy cites Holmberg on the tradition of the Inverted Tree: ‘The Lapps sacrificed every year an ox to the god of vegetation, represented by an uprooted tree so placed on the altar that its crown was downward and roots upward’ (Coomaraswamy p.396). The “sacrifice” of the aleph (ox) to the resh cannot go unnoticed here.

¹¹² Cited in Coomaraswamy, ‘The Inverted Tree’, 1989, p.399.

¹¹³ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.91. On the symbolism of Janus see *ibid.* Chs.20 & 39; also Coomaraswamy, ‘*Svayamātrnā: Janua Coeli*’.

¹¹⁴ Perry cites this quote as being from *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts (A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom)*, 2000, p.858) although I have not been able to locate this. However, a slightly

and Relative, as we have said, is an illusion, one that is extinguished in the resolution of contraries. Meister Eckhart talks thus of the Unity of God as the “negation of negation”: ‘All creatures carry a negation in themselves; one denies that it is the other. ...But God has negation of negation; he is one and denies every other, for outside God there is nothing.’¹¹⁵ *Lā ilaha illā `Llah* (The is no divinity outside the only Divinity).

According to the traditions, the realisation of the divine Unity is achievable in the human state. In the Hindu tradition we read: ‘The fruition of Knowledge may take place even in this life if there be no obstruction to the means adopted, because it is so seen from the scriptures.’¹¹⁶ The Zen renovator, Hakuin, says, ‘It is extremely foolish to think that one must wait till after one’s death in expectation of obtaining all these benefits. It is also the most culpable negligence.’¹¹⁷ ‘I tell you of a truth, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God.’ To think otherwise would be to restrict this realisation by temporal parameters, when this realisation is precisely beyond time, in virtue of being situated in the eternal present, the Now. From the perspective of the individual, this Union comes as a double death; in passing through the Symplegades the individual renounces their individual self as “I”, and in passing through the Sundoor they relinquish the illusion of God as “other”.

Considering this Union or Awakening from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, Lama Govinda, observes that this is often portrayed as “a dew-drop slipping into the shining sea”. However, as he remarks, ‘if this beautiful simile is reversed, it would probably come nearer to the Buddhist conception of ultimate realization: it is not the drop that slips into the sea, but the sea that slips into the drop!’¹¹⁸ It is not the individual that realises an interrelatedness to the many in the One,¹¹⁹ but the One that is both one and

modified version of this does appear in Schuon’s *Stations of Wisdom*, London: Perennial, 1975, p.157. Thanks due to Dr. Harry Oldmeadow for this reference.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Fox, *Breakthrough Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation*, Image Books, New York, 1980, p.190.

¹¹⁶ *Brahma-Sutra* 3.4.51.

¹¹⁷ Cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.871 from *The Embossed Tea Kettle and Other Works of Hakuin Zenji* (tr.) R. D. M. Shaw, London: Allen & Unwin, 1963, p.120.

¹¹⁸ Lama Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 1969, p.81.

¹¹⁹ Ibn Al-‘Arabi says: ‘As regards the divine Unity, there is no place in it for one as being one of many, nor does it admit of any differentiation or distraction. His Unity integrates all in potentiality.’ (*Fusûs al-hikam* Chapter on Ishmael, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (tr.) R. W. J. Austin, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980, p.106.

many. ‘A deeper truth in this matter’ as Ibn al-‘Arabi reveals, ‘is that the contingent beings are, in their final analysis, nonexistent, since the only existence is the existence of the Reality in the forms of the states in which the contingent beings are in themselves and in their essences.’¹²⁰ Similarly, Meister Eckhart speaks of all creatures as “nothing”¹²¹ a point that carries two meanings, equally true. On the one hand creatures are “nothing” in that they have no reality in comparison with the ultimate Reality of the Absolute. On the other hand creatures have as their Substance the “Divine Nothingness”, creative potentiality, analogous to the Upper Waters.¹²²

In the final analysis there can be no common measure between the Absolute and the Relative. Every idea of opposition, complementarity and even of unity is, in the words of the famous Sufi poet, Jalal-ud-din Rumi, an “awkward comparison”. Let us finish these notes with the lines from which this phrase comes:¹²³

This physical world has no two things alike. Every comparison is awkwardly rough. You can put a lion next to a man, but the placing is hazardous to both. Say the body is like this lamp. It has to have a wick and oil. Sleep and food. If it doesn't get those, it will die, and it's always burning those up, trying to die. But where is the sun in this comparison? It rises, and the lamp's light mixes with the day. Oneness, which is the reality, cannot be understood with lamp and sun images. The blurring of a plural into a unity is wrong. No image can describe what of our fathers and mothers, our grandfathers and grandmothers, remains. Language does not touch the one who lives in each of us.

¹²⁰ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusûs al-hikam* Chapter on Jacob, (tr.) Austin, 1980, p.115.

¹²¹ Meister Eckhart, *Sermon* 4.

¹²² On this idea of the “Divine Nothingness” see Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, Indiana, 2000, p.53.

¹²³ *Mathnawi*, R. Nicholson (ed.), London: Luzac, 1925-1940, IV, 419-33. This translation (here in prose) is taken from Coleman Barks' free verse rendering in his, *The Essential Rumi*, New York: HarperCollins, 1995.