

PHILOSOPHICAL SYMBOLISM  
AND THE USE OF THE MYTH  
AMONG ARAB PHILOSOPHERS

Philosophical symbolism is first of all a concrete interpretation of abstract truths. It permits one to become aware of the complex realities of intellectual and moral life by borrowing the cloak of symbols and myths whose external meaning disguises their esoteric significance. Plato's use of the myth is a characteristic example. The Platonic myth is, in reality, merely the concealment of a thought which, according to the philosopher, seemed too daring and too advanced for its period. If one wishes to explain the ideas that affect the suprasensible world, one cannot avoid using concrete symbols or alluding to them by the use of figurative meanings. Concrete symbols and myths make it possible to examine doctrines in allegorical form, wherein the imagination is given full rein, combining its freest fantasies with underlying truths. Symbolic thought proceeds in this way, by imagery and analogy, in contrast to logical thought.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, philosophical symbolism is a method that consists in interpreting religious dogma and ancient systems by attributing to them a symbolic value. Rites and dogmas conceal the ideas reserved for a small number of initiates; nonetheless, their secret can be uncovered by those who make a thorough study of all the kinds of available information that relate to ancient beliefs.

1. Cf. L. Weber, "Quelques caractères de la pensée symbolique," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, 1929.

This twofold characteristic of philosophical symbolism is to be found in all Arabic myths and particularly in those that we shall attempt to elucidate.

There are many symbolic myths in Arabic philosophy. We find, for example, in the writings of Avicenna the myth of the *bird*, the myth of *Hay-ben-Yagzan*, of *Salaman* and of *Absal*, and the allegory of *destiny*. We also find symbolic poetry and parables. The poem of Ibn-Sina entitled *An Nafs* (the soul) is a marvelous example of symbolism. Moreover, there are many symbols in the writings of Gazali, particularly the myth of the *bird*, the comparison of the universe with a palace, and many moral tales. The myth of Hay-ben-Yagzan reappears in more poetic form in Ibn-Tofail's philosophical novel. Ibn Baja's book, entitled *The Solitary Regime*, can be considered the most perfect expression of Arabic symbolism. Noteworthy too is the use that Moslem mystics and the Brothers of Purity make of symbols.<sup>2</sup>

To give a clear and distinct idea in this article of all these myths would require too detailed an analytical study. Therefore I will limit myself to the examination of two examples: the myth of Salaman and Absal and that of Hay-ben-Yagzan by Ibn Tofail.

The myth of Salaman and Absal is cited many times in Arabic philosophical works. It is invested with very diverse forms. It was often transformed and it finally evolved into an epic written by the Persian poet, Djami. In the form reproduced below it is presented as having been translated from the Greek by Hunein, son of Ishak, and there is good reason to believe that it is of Alexandrine or Hermetic origin.

A second version of the Salaman and Absal tale exists. It is attributed by Thoruci to Avicenna. However, the Hermetic tale and the Avicennian tale are very different from one another. In order to assess the changes in the story accurately we would have to have the entire text of Avicenna's tale. Unfortunately, thus far no manuscript has been available, and so we shall limit our study to the Hermetic version.

Once, a long time ago, in the ancient days before the flood of fire, there was a king named Hermanos-ben-Heracl. This king owned the country of Roum which extended to the banks of the sea and included Greece and the land of Egypt. He was a very scholarly and a very powerful man, well-versed in the science of astrological influences. His master, Aquilououlas, who had taught him all the occult sciences, a wise and very old

2. Cf. M. L. Massignon, *La Philosophie orientale d'Ibn Sina et son alphabet philosophique*, Cairo, 1952.

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philosopher, was an ascetic and lived in a cave. Once every forty days he dined off of a few wild vegetables. King Hermanos often consulted him.

One day the king went to the wise man and complained that he had no heir. Indeed, this prince was not attracted to women; he detested any traffic with them and refused to approach them. The sage advised him to take a beautiful and good woman at the moment when, upon rising, the sun would give him a male child. He refused. Then the wise man told him to substitute a mandrake for the woman and to transform it into a living child. He devoted to this task all the resources of his art. To the organism thus constituted was joined the form of the soul and it became a complete human being. The child born in this manner was called Salaman.<sup>3</sup> A beautiful eighteen-year-old girl called Absal was chosen to nurse the baby. She took good care of the infant and this delighted the king.

To reward Aquliquoulas, Hermanos ordered, at the former's request, the construction according to his plans of two immense monuments capable of resisting the onslaughts of both fire and water. These were the two great pyramids.

When there was no longer any need to nurse the infant, the father wanted to separate the nurse from his son. However, moved by the child's sorrow, he consented to allow her to remain. But when Salaman grew to puberty his affection for Absal changed to love. Dazzled by this woman for whom he felt a great passion, who was so submissive and obliging, he would not accede to the repeated remonstrances of the king—this parent who begged him not to dim the bright light of his intelligence by enslaving himself to a woman.

“Leave that libertine, Absal, alone,” he said. “She can do you no good. Remain pure until I find for you a fiancée from a higher world who will bring to you the grace of the Eternal. Know, oh beloved son, that women are makers and instigators of evil and that there is no good in them. Do not give any place in your heart to a woman; your powers of reason will be enslaved, the brightness of your view obscured, your entire existence submerged.

Carried away by his passion, Salaman did not heed the king's advice. He repeated to Absal all that the king had said and she advised him to pay no heed to it.

“He wants,” she said, “to deprive you of true pleasures for the sake of aspirations that are largely illusory, to cut you off from immediate joys in

3. Salaman is the name of a tree, the name of a place and the name of a man, according to Nasir-ed-din Thouci. Cf. *Commentaires des Isharat* (Cairo, 1325 A.H.), p. 102.

exchange for remote blessings. As for me, I submit to you, I give in to all your caprices. You are intelligent, you have a will of your own. Go and tell the king that you will not leave me.”

The young man reported Absal's words, not to the king himself, but to his vizier, who gave the king the message. In great sorrow the king summoned his son and remonstrated with him again. But realizing that he could not make him change his mind, he agreed to a compromise. Salaman was to divide his time in two: one half was to be given to the study of wisdom, the other to his passion for Absal. Although the son consented he kept his promise poorly.

Then the king decided to ask the wise man which opportunity he should seize to do away with Absal. His vizier discouraged him from carrying out this plan. Rumors of this discussion reached Salaman who hurried to warn Absal. Together they sought a means of foiling the king's plans and of protecting themselves from his anger. They decided to flee to the banks of the western sea.

Hermanos discovered the flight of the two fugitives by using a kind of magic flute pierced with seven holes which permitted him to view seven surrounding countries. Using magical charms, the king then deprived the young couple of the means of satisfying their passion. However, he did not separate them, but they were plunged into the cruelest of torments.

Salaman then decided to return and to plead again with his father.

“The throne,” the father said, “demands your exclusive attention; Absal also wants it and the two are not compatible. You cannot put your hand on the throne and ascend it while Absal clings to your foot, just as you cannot ascend the throne of heaven while Absal's love clings to the feet of your thought.”

And he ordered that the two be chained together in just the way he had mentioned in his first analogy—the hand of Salaman tied to the throne and Absal bound to Salaman's foot. When night fell he ordered their fetters removed. But, taking each other by the hand, they went together and threw themselves into the sea. The king commanded the spirit of the water to save Salaman. As for Absal, he let her drown.

When Salaman was certain of Absal's death he was about to die of despair. The wise man, in response to the king's request, went to his aid. He promised to resurrect Absal on three conditions: that the young man would conceal nothing from him, that he would imitate everything he saw the wise man do, and that he would love no other woman save Absal for the rest of his life.

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From then on, every day, Salaman saw the image of Absal, who came to visit him in the cave. On the fortieth day, in answer to the wise man's prayer, the face of Venus appeared in the place of Absal's. Salaman fell violently in love with it. He no longer wanted to hear about Absal, who was about to be returned to him forever. She had become hateful to him. But, once his new passion was gratified, Venus, in turn, became indifferent to him. Then his mind became whole and healthy again. It was purified of the disorders of love which had brought it down from the level of wisdom to that of pleasure. He succeeded to his father's throne, cultivated wisdom, and became not only a great king, but the leader of a great religious sect. He ordered that this story be inscribed upon seven golden tablets<sup>4</sup> and that these be placed in the pyramids at the head of his father's tomb.

After two floods of fire and water, when the world was once again repopulated, divine Plato appeared. Knowing how much the pyramids contained of sublime knowledge and precious treasures, he wanted them to be opened. But the king of that era refused to give him permission. Aristotle was more fortunate. Alexander the Great gave him permission to open the door according to the rites that Plato had indicated. He took out the golden tablets which contained this story.<sup>5</sup>

This, in general terms, is the story of the first allegory. It would be difficult to say precisely whether a tale of this kind contains, in the author's view, a definite philosophical system, or whether it is merely an important symbol into which anyone can interpolate something of his own thinking. However, we would like to point out that this myth was obviously adapted to neo-Platonic philosophy and that subsequently it was deliberately modified by Avicenna, who changed it in accordance with his own system of thought.

The following interpretation is given by Avicenna's commentator, Nāsir-ed-din-el-Thouci: King Hermanos represents active intelligence; the sage typifies higher wisdom shedding its light upon active intelligence. Salaman stands for the soul of reason, sprung from active intelligence and independent of bodily things. Absal is the ensemble of animal faculties. Salaman's love for Absal indicates that the soul is attracted to sensual

4. On the motives inscribed on the seven tablets placed in the pyramids, cf. Bidez and Cumont, *Mages hellénisés*, II (Paris, Société d'Éditions "Les Belles Lettres," 1938), pp. 338, 319, n. 8; 324, n. 12.

5. Cf. Tis'Rasa'il, Cairo, 1325 S.H.; Nasir-ed-din Thouci, *op. cit.*; Henri Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire*, pp. 241-259; Carra de Vaux, *Avicenne* (Paris, Alcan, 1900), pp. 290-298.

pleasures. The flight to the western sea represents the soul's submersion in things perishable; the punishment—ungratified love—illustrates the persistence of the soul's evil tendencies after the bodily faculties, weakened by age, became less active. Salaman's return to his father denotes the inclination toward perfection and repentance. The two lovers' suicide in the sea is the collapse and death of body and soul. Salaman's salvation indicates the survival of the soul after the body's death. The loftiness of his love for Venus represents the pleasures of intellectual perfection. Salaman's ascent to the throne is the soul's achievement of perfection. The pyramids, enduring throughout the centuries, symbolize corporeal form and matter.

The names of Salaman and of Absal are therefore symbolical ones. Something of Adam is indicated in Salaman, just as Absal typifies paradise. Ibn Sina, in the *Isharat*, cites a story in which these two names appear; they seem to be part of the old Arabic tradition. "Know," he says, "that Salaman represents yourself and that Absal represents, allegorically, your degree of knowledge, if you are among those who are addicted to knowledge. Now, if you can, find out the meaning of this allegory."<sup>6</sup>

Ibn-el-Arabi in his book, *An-Nawadir*, also cites a story in which the name of Salaman, or Sulaman, symbolizes goodness and salvation while the name of Absal, or Ibsal, symbolizes evil. In any case, as Thouci says, this is a story of a man who pursues something that he attains only little by little and that elevates him to higher and higher degrees of perfection. Generally speaking, Salaman stands for the higher level of nature and Absal for its disorder.

Thouci, who assumed the task of deciphering the meaning of this Hermetic tale, says, first of all, that on the basis of a preliminary reading it does not seem possible that the drama of the romance is what Avicenna thinks it is—namely, that Absal "represents the degree of mystical knowledge that the adept achieves." At first glance, it is true, Absal's role and her fate seem to run counter to this meaning. But actually the problem rests on a deeper level of understanding. Avicenna, in referring to Absal, is thinking of the adept's progress in mystical knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Our Hermetic tale is also merely a description of the phases of spiritual initiation. An agreement should be possible at one extreme. To achieve it, the spiritual

6. Ibn Sina (Avicenne), *Livre des Directives et Remarques*, translated by A.-M. Goichon (Paris, Vrin, 1951), p. 484.

7. The Avicennian tale attempts to demonstrate the triumph of man's intelligence over sensual passions, which is plausible. According to Gauthier, Salaman symbolizes the soul's reason, and Absal, speculative intelligence. Cf. Gauthier, *Ibn Thofail* (Paris, Leroux, 1909), pp. 68–85.

experience of Hermeticism would have to be translated into Avicennian terms. This interpretation is not impossible, and it is what Thouci attempted to do in a limited way.

This myth was used by the Persian poet, Djami. His romantic theme is but another variation of the one that Thouci attributes to Avicenna. When Djami speaks of the nurse caring for the child, he describes her in these terms "When it was time to sleep she sat straight up in her bed and burned like a night-lamp at his side. At dawn, when he awoke, she seemed to him like a golden doll." And it was in these passionate terms that this prim poet spoke of Absal's death: "How can I explain the catastrophe that has befallen me?" Salaman asked. "Would that it had pleased the heavens that I might perish with you and that with you I might pace the roads of nothingness, that I might be freed of this body that weighs heavily upon me and that I might taste with you the eternal joys."<sup>8</sup>

Pursuing an analysis of this first example a little further, we will deal with other analogies and other philosophical truths. But, for the moment, let us content ourselves with isolating the first characteristic of Arabic symbolism as it appears in the myth of Salaman and Absal. This myth is an ensemble of obvious imagery adapted to the exigencies of Moslem neo-Platonism. The abstract notions seem empty, their content is indiscernible. However, the content does exist; it merely escapes us. To understand it one has to have recourse to sensible images.

The use of symbols, of course, is satisfying to the masses. Men of inferior caliber are not encouraged to try their hand at philosophical interpretations. They do not allow themselves to encroach upon the preserve of philosophers and to interpret the religious symbols which disguise truths.

And so there are mainly two classes of men: the common man who is incapable of understanding hidden truths, and the philosopher, who alone is competent to investigate the semblance of things. This is made particularly plain by an analysis of symbolic poetry and of the myths of *Hayben-Yagzan*.

This is not the place to deal with Arabic symbolic poetry. But we would like to mention the poem entitled *An-Nafs* (the soul) in which Ibn Sina sings of the soul's descent into the body which, without it, would be akin to decay. The soul finds itself imprisoned there and yearns for the higher universe it has forsaken. At last, liberated by the death of the body,

8. Djami wrote the story of Salaman and Absal in Persian and it was translated by Bricteux (Paris, 1951). On the life and work of Djami, cf. Ali Asghar Hikmat, *Djami* (Teheran, 1320 A.H.).

it ascends to the universe whose mysteries are now accessible to it. Ibn Sina says:

“In all its protective grandeur, a dove has descended to you from the very depths of the heavens, hidden from the sight of all the initiated, yet unconcealed by any veils.”<sup>9</sup>

It is not difficult to interpret the symbols of this text. The dove is the universal soul, the depths of the heavens represent isolated intellects; the descent is an emanation and the veil denotes the sensory world.

In the same way, in a poem by Ibn Arabi,<sup>10</sup> the land of Najd signifies the mind, rain denotes knowledge and the solitude of the desert symbolizes mystical exercises. The camel stands for abstract reason, the female camel is religion and fire represents spiritual enlightenment.

In a comparison of the universe with a palace, a theme that Gazali developed at length, the king is God and the vizier represents the active intellect or the angels in whose hands God has placed the power to govern the world. The court that surrounds the vizier’s chamber is the sky which contains the twelve signs of the Zodiac, which are the seven planets. The four captains of the foot-soldiers are the four elements: water, earth, fire and wind.<sup>11</sup>

Avicenna’s commentary, which appears in the thirty-fifth verse of *Sourat al-Nour*, is a well-known one. According to him, the “niche” is material intellect and the lamp represents intellect acquired through action. Since the Orient is the place where there is light and the Occident where light becomes obscured, the expression “that which is neither of the East nor of the West” is extended to include the nature of reflection—neither purely rational nor purely animal. Finally, fire is the light of universal intellect.

Let us now go on to the philosophical novel entitled *Hay-ben-Yagzan*, the living son of the vigilant, by Ibn Thofail. This romance contains not only the symbol of Hay-ben-Yagzan, who represents the active intellect, but also the symbols of Salaman and of Absal. Ibn Thofail changed Absal to Assal and made him a far more vital symbol.

In order to understand Ibn Thofail’s purpose in this romance, and to appreciate its symbolic value, a brief, general summary of the story is indispensable.<sup>12</sup>

9. M. H. Masse’s translation published in *Revue du Caire*, June 1951.

10. Cf. Ibn Arabi, *Mohadarat-el-Abrar*, p. 107.

11. Cf. Carra de Vaux, *Les penseurs de l’Islam*, Vol. IV (Paris, Guethner, 1923), p. 165.

12. The characters Hay-ben-Yagzan, Absal, Salaman got their names from the master Abou Ali. On the Avicennian tale of Hay-ben-Yagzan, cf. Corbin, *op. cit.*, p. 161.



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On a desert island in India, situated at the equator and, thanks to particularly favorable conditions, in the center of a heap of fermented clay, a child is born, without mother or father. According to another version, a tidal wave cast him upon this island in a coffin; his mother, a persecuted princess living on a neighboring island, supposedly had to entrust her child to the sea in order to save him from death. This child is Hay-ben-Yagzan. He is adopted by a gazelle which nurses him and takes the place of a mother. He grows, observes, thinks. Endowed with superior intelligence, not only does he learn to meet all his needs with great ingenuity, but, making full use of both observation and reasoning, he soon discovers, on his own initiative, the highest physical and metaphysical truths. For instance, the gazelle that had nursed him grew old and ill; this saddened him, and he tried to understand the cause of its troubles. He found that he must first study himself and understand his own senses. The animal dies and he tries to find out if the trouble was in its chest. Using stones, he makes an incision between the ribs and studies the heart and lungs.

In this way, all of Hay's youth is devoted to learning, to the manual and physical arts. The rest of his life was to be spent discovering religious philosophy and practicing it. The philosophical system which he finally evolved led him to seek in mystical existence an intimate union with God. He withdrew to a cave and trained himself to separate his intellect from the external world by the exclusive contemplation of God. It is at this moment that his relationship with Assal began. Assal was an inhabitant of a neighboring island, a member of a pious sect which believed in revealed religion. Convinced that the island was uninhabited, Assal went there to devote himself in peace to an ascetic life. Assal taught Hay the art of language, and was astonished to find, in the philosophical system that this singular Robinson had discovered, a transcendental interpretation of revealed religion. He took Hay to the neighboring island which was governed by the pious king Salaman, and urged him to spread word of the sublime truths that he had discovered.

Filled with pity for the people, Hay tried to reach out to them. But he failed. Our two wise men were finally obliged to acknowledge that pure truth is not pleasing to the masses, enslaved as they are by sensual pleasures, and that, in order to penetrate their commonplace minds and to influence their rebellious wills, truth must be clothed in the symbols which constitute revealed religion. And so they left these poor people forever, advising them to practice, like the inhabitants of the cave, the religion of their

fathers. They returned to the deserted island to live the higher and truly holy life which few men are privileged to do.<sup>13</sup>

This, briefly, is the essence of the story of *Hay-ben-Yagzan*. What, exactly, is the point of this curious novel? We have already stated that its main purpose was to show the conformity of religion and philosophy. We could say more precisely that this tale makes a clear distinction between three categories of men: the common man, the enlightened religious man, and the philosopher. In Ibn-Thofail's novel, Assal represents enlightened religion and Salaman, involuntary faith. Philosophy could not be better symbolized than by the allegorical person of Hay-ben-Yagzan who represents, as his name indicates, the incarnation of active intellect in man. An autodidactic philosopher in the fullest sense of the term, Hay-ben-Yagzan successively elevated himself to science, then to speculative philosophy and finally to ascetism and ecstasy. His meeting with Assal was that of true religion and philosophy which soon took cognizance of their fundamental agreement. The failure of their venture in the populated island symbolizes the incurable blindness of the masses, their absolute incapacity for any philosophical interpretation of religious dogmas.

The author of *Hay-ben-Yagzan* intended that his novel should exert some influence on its readers. Arab philosophers believed in the possibility of spreading philosophical truths to the masses. To present a philosophical thesis in the attractive and allegorical form of a novel, abstract thought had to be disguised by imagery, concepts had to be transformed into people, and reasoning into episodes. What the author of *Epistle to the Jews* said of faith can be almost as accurately applied to the philosophical myth: *a visible demonstration of invisible things*. The masses require an obvious interpretation of abstract ideas because their minds are not sufficiently elevated to grasp philosophical interpretations.

Averroës, for example, divides human minds into three categories, each one superior to the last and each requiring a different approach. The lower category of humanity is the masses for whom it is necessary to employ symbols. Superior to them are men of some education for whom symbols are not suitable but who need to penetrate a little way into the inner signification. These are called dialectical men. At the top are the philosophical spirits who require neither oratorical persuasion nor symbols; the method of pure logic is suitable to their needs and truth should be demonstrated to them in all its clarity because these are men who require

13. Cf. Léon Gauthier, *Hay ben Yaghdhan*, a philosophical novel by Ibn Thofail. The Arab text and French translation (Alger, 1900).

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proof. Each class is obliged to believe in proportion to its degree of intelligence, and it would be a mistake if a man of the people tried to reason like a philosopher. It is said that the prophet Mohammed one day asked a Negress slave who had been converted to Islam:

“Where is God?”

“In the sky,” this simple believer answered with candor.

The prophet was pleased with her answer and freed her. She belonged to the category of the masses who are restricted to the external meaning of revelation. A man of the second category, a dialectical man, would perceive the symbolic nature of the question. He would realize that to situate God in the sky, as if it were a dwelling, is to make a limited being of him. A man of the second category would answer: “*God is everywhere.*”

Finally, a man who requires proof, namely, a philosopher, would understand this symbol of the second category as well as that of the first category. Purging his mind of the last vestiges of sensible representation, he would know that to speak of God as being everywhere instead of localizing him in the sky is still to make a corporeal being of him. A man of the third category would answer: “*God is nowhere, he is in himself.*”

From what we have just said it is evident that the purpose of the myth and of symbols was to direct the masses, step by step, to an understanding of hidden things. “The people,” Gazali said, “must refrain from questioning everything. This is as imperative as it would be for a man who cannot swim to refrain from plunging into the deep sea.”<sup>14</sup> Ibn Sina, at the end of his book, *Al-Isharat*, also says it is inadvisable to teach philosophy to the profane, to the ignorant, to all those who are not endowed with a zealous intellect and who lack practice and habit.<sup>15</sup>

The highest degree of faith, in the opinion of the masses, is to be found in the Koran. One must not expect anything more than this of the masses. Greater understanding is beyond them.<sup>16</sup> It is very dangerous, Ibn Roshd says, to divulge the truth to people who cannot grasp it. Prudence dictates the manner in which one should communicate with others: according to their intellectual ability. In order to fully appreciate the reason for pru-

14. Gazali, *Le préservatif de l'erreur* (Damascus, 1939), p. 102 of the Arabic text.

15. *Les Isharat*, translation by A.-M. Goichon (*Livres des directives et Remarques*) (Paris, 1951), p. 525. “If you divulge this science and waste it, God will decide between you and me. And God suffices as a judge” (p. 526).

16. Ibn Sina, whose exegesis is philosophical in form, strongly advises against making available to the people a literal interpretation. Cf. *Risala adhawiyya*, pp. 46 and 49. L. Gardet, *La Pensée religieuse d'Avicenne* (Paris, Vrin, 1951), p. 139.

dence one must analyze it in the light of the reaction which, in the Moslem world, put an end to the development of philosophy.

As soon as the power and the authority of Islam passed from the jurisdiction of the Arabs, a spiritual race, and from that of the Persians, who were a particularly speculative people, into the jurisdiction of the Turks and the Berbers, philosophy was no longer cultivated in the heart of Islam. The Turks put their military strength at the disposal of Islam and everywhere they re-established orthodoxy. In the Orient, then in Syria and in Egypt, they crushed the schism of heterodoxy, believing that certain tendencies toward Karmaism were linked with it. They gave to orthodox Islam its definitive form. One even saw Arab princes destroying, not without regret, philosophical books, in order to please their fanatical subjects, composed largely of Berber elements who clamored for the persecution of all philosophers whom they considered impious detractors of religions. One way for the philosophers to escape the wrath of the people was to have recourse to the myth. Thus they could administer to these sick minds interpretations of an inferior order couched in symbolic and imaginative terms.

The inability of the masses to grasp profound truths helps us to understand the twofold attitude of Arab philosophers. Ibn-Roshd was an absolute rationalist when he spoke to philosophers; he was anti-rationalist when he addressed the masses. All those who have been taught the dignity of the symbol must take into account the feelings of the people. Avicenna, if we are to believe Gazali, only pretended to be a believer out of self-interest and to please the people. He practiced the religion of his childhood and followed the customs of his country, not so much in order to receive God's grace as to preserve his property and his children's security. Prayer was merely a kind of physical exercise for him, to safeguard his health. He claimed that God forbade the use of wine to the people, but not to philosophers.<sup>17</sup> This explains why Avicenna, because of his great wisdom, could drink a good deal of wine without any ill effects. His nights were spent in philosophical discussions, refreshed by wine, and his days were devoted to political matters mixed with religion. The purpose of his pious practices was to put a brake on the enthusiasm of the masses, to deter them from murder and quarreling, to protect them from the fury of their passions. But what has the philosopher, who does not belong to this

17. Avicenna said, "wine is forbidden because it stimulates unfriendliness and quarrels; but since I am protected from excesses by my wisdom, I drink it to sharpen my wits." Cf. Gazali, *Le préservatif de l'erreur* (Damascus, 1939), pp. 149-150.

ignorant class, to do with such narrow restrictions? He is ruled by science, which enlightens him and relieves him of the need to submit to authority.<sup>18</sup>

This twofold attitude of philosophers springs, not as was frequently suggested, from their lack of intellectual integrity, but rather from their doctrine of the conformity of religion and philosophy. Therefore, when one perceives contradictions between the sacred text and conclusive philosophical proof, this discord is only apparent; there are always means of resolving it. The means are allegorical interpretation. To reconcile the equivocal verses in the Koran, the orthodox scientists were led to distinguish between the apparent or metaphorical and the internal or deeper meaning in a sacred text; and they resolved their problem by discovering beneath outward symbols an internal significance that did not lend itself to controversy. These equivocal verses must not be taken too literally. From the standpoint of the masses, who are unable to perceive these contradictions, they are of no importance and they serve to warn scholars that they must reconcile these contradictions by interpretation, by rediscovering, in the form of divergent, incoherent symbols, ideas that are in harmony and that clarify each other.

Symbols and allegories therefore spring directly from the interpretation of the Koran. God, who is supremely wise and perfectly informed, said things in an obvious way in order that the majority might understand the holy scriptures. Averroës said, "God has given to two of his servants, who have no access to proof, the grace of bestowing images and symbols upon very obscure matters. This is why the Koran pictures paradise as a garden where rivers flow."<sup>19</sup>

Whosoever practices interpretation, *ta'wil*, is therefore one who wrests statements from their external semblance and returns them to their true meaning. That is why the term *ta'wil*, when combined with *tanzil*, represents both complementary and contrasting terms and notions. *Tanzil* actually denotes positive religion, the literal revelation dictated to the prophet by the angel. *Ta'wil* is etymologically and inversely to bring back the true and original meaning of a work. In short, *tanzil*'s relationship with *ta'wil* is that of the symbol with what is symbolized. It is that of the

18. "Often," says Gazali, "one sees one of the philosophers reading the Koran, attending religious ceremonies and prayers, and extolling religion. When one asks him why do you pray since prophecy is false, he answers: It is exercise for the body, the custom of the country, a means of protecting one's life. And yet he does not refrain from drinking wine and from performing all kinds of abominations and ungodly acts." Gazali, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

19. *The Koran*, II, 25; III, 15, 136, 195; IV, 12, 56, etc.

*zahir* (apparent) with *batin* (interior), of the *majaz* (metaphor) with *haquiquat* (truth).

However, it is not enough to say that the interpretation of symbols corresponds with an attempt to clarify the intelligible meaning hidden behind every purely sensible reality. "Such a theory," says Corbin, "would certainly fail to take into account both reality itself and the autonomy of the universe. The symbol is a mediator. . . . This is not a matter of clarifying, of abstracting. . . . The soul must suffer at that moment and effectuate a transmutation."<sup>20</sup>

From what we have said it is evident that Arab symbolism comprised a twofold characteristic: on the one hand, it contained an obvious interpretation of abstract truths; on the other, it implied the existence of two truths, religious and philosophical, which are in complete harmony despite their apparent contradictions. Philosophers are called upon to interpret religious truths allegorically in order to reconcile them with philosophical truths. They must also transform philosophical truths into vital symbols so that they will be acceptable to the masses.

This sensible representation is, moreover, the kind of thing in which Arab authors have always excelled; all Arabs are poets and make use of imagery in their writings. Their use of allegories coincided with a deep need of their spirits; the abundance of symbols in their proverbs and moral tales testifies to this.

Moreover, the prophet appeals to the imagination of the masses, not to their reason. There are symbols and precepts which philosophical reasoning could never discover, that are wonderfully appropriate for the masses and that spring uniquely from the prophet's intuition. The symbols he perceives and popularizes are subject to the influence of social life and have a powerful effect upon the crowd's imagination. Their content depends upon the constitutive factors that represent the state of awareness of a society or of a group.

But these symbols so necessary to the people are of absolutely no use to philosophy because the knowledge that they constitute is something eminently precarious, variable and often intangible. If philosophy makes use of them from time to time, it is not for purposes of reasoning but only to the extent that what is vital in it comes into contact with ordinary life. The philosopher, as a man, needs symbols. Philosophy as such has no need for them at all; it is entirely self-sufficient.

20. Cf. H. Corbin, *op. cit.*, p. 301.