

Chapter 10

THE “RENEWING OF CREATION AT EACH INSTANT”

There is an aspect of the Sufi theory of Creation called the “Renewing of Creation at each instant”, or, “at each breath” (*Tajdīd al-khalq bil-anfās*), and it is very directly connected with spiritual realization. It was said above that the “immutable essence” (*al-‘ayān ath-thābitah*), the pure possibilities in which God manifests Himself to Himself, are never, as such, brought forth to existence and that only their relative modalities—all the possible relations (*nisab*) they imply—are deployed in the Universe. Nor do these latter really “come out” from their archetypes, and their variety is never exhausted in a mode of succession, even as the waves of a river never cease from changing their form while at the same time obeying the law imposed on them by the configuration of the river-bed.

In this picture, imperfect just because it is concrete, the river water represents the incessant “outpouring” or “flux” (*fayd*) of Being and the river-bed “immutable determination” while the waves correspond to form, either sensory or subtle, resulting from this ontological polarity. The “immutable essence”, or the archetype, can also be compared to a colorless prism which breaks up the light of Being into rays of all the colors of the rainbow, the coloring of the rays depending both on the essential nature of the light and on the nature of the prism.

In the world which is beyond form or the spiritual world (*‘ālam al-arwāḥ*, or *al-Jabarūt*) the variety of the reflections of one single archetype appears as a “richness” of its aspects, one contained within another as are the many logical aspects of one single truth or the beatitudes included in a single beauty. At this level of existence their variety is as far as possible from any repetition because it directly expresses the Divine Uniqueness. At the same time, the different archetypes mutually include one another. In the world of individuation, on the other hand, the reflections of an archetype manifest themselves successively because here the cosmic condition of form enters in as a delimitation or reciprocal exclusion of the various aspects.

It is this world—and it includes psychic as well as bodily forms—which is called the “world of analogies” or the “world of the

alike” (*‘ālam al-mithāl*)¹ because the forms which in it are manifested successively or simultaneously are analogous one to another through being analogous to their common archetype. In the lower levels of existence, such as the corporeal world (*‘ālam al-ajsām*)—the variety of forms closely approaches repetition, expressed by the quantitative mode, but never reaches it, for in pure repetition all the distinct qualities which constitute the world would be dissolved.

If the variety of the reflections of one single archetype is envisaged in connection with their temporal succession, which may be taken as a symbolical expression of all possible succession, then it is said that the “projection” of the archetype into existence is renewed at each instant in such a way that the same state of “reflected” existence never subsists. Thus a relative being is subject to continual annihilation and continual renewal. In his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* Muḥyi-d-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī writes that “man does not spontaneously arrive at a clear idea of the fact that at each ‘breath’ he is not and then again is (*lam yakun thumma kāna*). And, if I say, ‘then’, I am not supposing any temporal interval but only a purely logical succession. In ‘the Renewing of Creation at each breath’ the instant of annihilation coincides with the instant of the manifestation of its like (*mathal*)” (from the chapter on Solomon).

In the same sense ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Qāshānī² writes in his commentary on *The Wisdom of the Prophets* that “there is no temporal interval between annihilation and re-manifestation, so that we do not perceive any interruption between two analogous and successive creations, and thus existence appears to us to be homogeneous”. According to Muḥyi-d-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī this illusion of continuity is “expressed by the saying in the Qur’ān that ‘they are deceived by a new creation’³ which means that for them not an instant passes without their perceiving what they perceive. . .” (*The Wisdom of the Prophets*). This recalls the Buddhist parable which compares existence to the flame of an oil lamp; this flame, though it seems the same, never ceases to be renewed at each instant, so that in reality it is neither the same nor yet another.

¹ This is also called the “world of imagination” (*‘ālam al-khayāl*).

² A thirteenth-century Sufi master who wrote a commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* of Ibn ‘Arabī.

³ “Are We exhausted by the first creation? Assuredly they are deceived by a new creation” (50:15).

The “Renewing of Creation at Each Instant”

In order to complete this Buddhist picture from the Sufi point of view⁴ it must be added that the flame as such corresponds to Being (*al-Wujūd*) whereas the form of the flame reflects the archetype, and that it is to the archetype that the flame owes its relative continuity. If it is true that the flame has no autonomous existence, it is equally true that it exists. Thus there is in the cosmos an “absolute” discontinuity which expresses its illusory character and brings us back to the fundamental discontinuity between the world and God.

On the other hand there is also in the cosmos an “absolute” continuity inasmuch as it is wholly a reflection of its Divine Cause. ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Qāshānī wrote further of this that “in so far as man is a possibility of manifestation, but does not see Him Who manifests him, he is pure absence (*‘udum*): but on the other hand in so far as he receives his being from the perpetual irradiation (*Tajallī*) of the Essence, he *is*. The ceaseless revelation of the Divine Activities which flows from the Divine Names renews him after each annihilation, and that instantaneously without any perceptible temporal succession but following a purely logical succession. For here there is only one permanent non-existence—that of pure possibility—and only one permanent Being—the revelation of the one Essence—and then there are activities and individuations succeeding one another with the ‘breaths’ which proceed from the Divine Names. . .” (commentary on *The Wisdom of the Prophets*).

As for the “breaths” or “exhalations” (*anfās*) referred to in this text, they are modalities of the “Exhalation of the Merciful” (*Nafas ar-Raḥmān* or *an-Nafas ar-Raḥmānī*), this term being understood in the sense of the divine principle which “dilates” (*nafassa*)⁵ or deploys relative possibilities starting from the archetypes. This “dilation” only appears as such from a relative point of view in which the state of “inwardness” (*butūn*) of the possibilities appears as a “contraction” (*karb*). The Divine “Exhalation” is connected with the total Mercy (*ar-Raḥmah*) because it is through this Mercy that the superabundance of Being “overflows” (*afāḍa*) into limitless essences.

⁴ In conformity with its own outlook, Buddhism but underlines the impermanence of the cosmos: for it the immutable Reality is identified with the “Void” (*Śūnya*) which cannot be expressed in positive terms. In an analogous sense Ibn ‘Arabī speaks of the “non-existence” (*‘udum*) of the archetypes.

⁵ The same verb also includes the meaning of “consolation”, in contrast to the “constriction” (*karb*) induced by distress. “Consolation” clearly comes from the Divine Mercy (*Raḥmah*).

At the same time the idea of “exhalation” or “breath” relates to the symbolism of the Divine Word, for, just as the different sounds or “letters” (*ḥurūf*)⁶ which make up the sayings of the revealed Book are analogous to the archetypes which are reflected in the cosmos, so the breath which is the support or “carrier” of articulated sounds is analogous to the Divine Principle which deploys and supports the possibilities of manifestation.⁷ The Divine “Exhalation” is the “dynamic” and “feminine” complement of the Divine Command (*al-Amr*), the pure Act expressed by the word “Be” (*kun*)⁸ and corresponds, in the symbolism mentioned above, in some sense to the emitting of simple sound. In his *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* Muḥyi-d-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī identifies the Divine “Exhalation” with universal Nature (*aṭ-Tabī‘ah*) and attributes to the latter a cosmogonic function analogous to what Hindus call the *Shakti* or “Productive Energy” of Divinity. The expression “the renewing of creation at each breath”, or “by breaths”, must be understood through this symbolism.

As for the close connection between the theory just set out and spiritual realization, we need only say that the human soul is part of the “world of the alike” which includes not only this world but also the formal paradises and the hells; the soul is thus constituted by reflections which succeed one another indefinitely and without pause so that it has no true continuity and the identity of the “I” is only a recollection of the “Self”⁹ (*al-huwiyyah*), the possibility of the being which subsists eternally in the Infinite Essence. That which “lights up” and knows the unceasing flight of the “alike”¹⁰ and connects them with their archetype is clearly not the individual consciousness but pure and transcendent Intelligence.

⁶ Since Arabic writing is strictly phonetic the “letters” also designate sounds.

⁷ In this lies a foundation of the science of invocation.

⁸ According to the teaching of the Greek Fathers of the Christian Church the world was created “by the Son in the Holy Spirit”. The Divine Command corresponds to the Word and so to the Son. It will be remembered that the Holy Spirit is also called “the Comforter”, a term analogous to the Arabic verb *nafassa*. This analogy between the “Exhalation of the Merciful” and the Holy Spirit is valid only as regards the “economic” role of the Holy Spirit and not as regards the hypostatical person.

⁹ The word *huwiyyah* means, literally, “ipseity” and is derived from the pronoun *huwa*, “he”, inasmuch as this is outside the opposition between “I” and “thou”.

¹⁰ This expression is from the Qur’ān: “. . . it is not We who will be forestalled from changing your ‘likeness’ (*amthālakum*) and from reproducing you under a form you know not” (56:60-61).