CRISTINA CAMPO AND IRANIAN MYSTICISM

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I would like to present and comment on *La Tigre Assenza*, one of the most enigmatic and splendid poetical texts by Cristina Campo. Here it is:

Ahi che la Tigre,
la Tigre Assenza, o amati,
ha tutto divorato
di questo volto rivolto a voi! La bocca sola
pura
prega ancora
voi di pregare ancora
perché la Tigre Assenza,
o amati,
non divori la bocca
e la preghiera . . .

Alas that the Tiger,
the Tiger Absence, oh beloved ones,
has totally devoured
this face turned towards you! Only the pure mouth
still prays
you to pray again
because the Tiger Absence,
oh beloved ones,
does not devour the mouth
and the prayer . . . [1]

[1] Cristina Campo, *La Tigre Assenza*, (Milan: Adelphi, 1991) 44.

This poem was written in September 1967 for her recently deceased parents. We can think of it as a lament, a prayer. An invocation.[2] The lament stems from the fact that Tiger Absence has completely devoured the face of the writer as she looks towards her dear ones, the beloved. The invocation is made to the beloved, the now absent parents, so that Tiger Absence does not devour the only thing that the praying person has left, that is, her mouth, from which the prayer emerges.

The text has a circular evolution. It is a prayer to her loved ones asking them to intervene so that Tiger Absence, which is devouring the link between her and them, does not devour her mouth, her voice, the means of invocation itself.

We might say: so that it does not devour the possibility for the poem to unfold over time, with her voice, with her rhythm. In fact, we realise, on reading it, that this short poem is like a song, almost as if it were a religious chant. Indeed, the entire poem is a vocal, oral prayer.

This is Cristina Campo's fixed point of thought. It recognises a close and profound relationship between rite and poetry, which then becomes a kind of short and perfect liturgical composition. In an interview published in "Tempo," we read: "Rite is quintessentially this experience of death-regeneration through beauty . . . [Rites] are . . . I believe, the true models, the archetypes of poetry that is the daughter of liturgy, as Dante shows from the beginning to end of his *Comedy*."[3] We can add to this what Cristina Campo says about herself and her vocation for writing, seen as her most authentic form of prayer: "I am . . . shamefully sad and annoyed, as always when I cannot write. And this is my real prayer, which none other really supplants."[4] This is because writing is able to regenerate those who lived, to bring them back to life "in water and spirit." And when she is not writing, it is as if she is shying away from this transmutation

[2] On the conception of poetry as cry, lament and vocal act between orality and writing in reference to *La Tigre Assenza*, refer to Monica Farnetti, *Cristina Campo* (Ferrara: Luciana Tufani, 1996), 16-17.

[3] Cited in Margherita Pieracci Harwell, *Il sapore massimo di ogni parola*, in Cristina Campo, *La Tigre Assenza*, ed. Margherita Pieracci Harwell (Milan: Adelphi, 1991), 302. A similar reflection can also be found in Cristina Campo, "Il linguaggio dei simboli," in *Sotto falso nome* (Milan: Adelphi, 1998), 215.

[4] Ibid, 304.

which is the only authentic form of prayer that she can evoke. That she can make happen.

Poetry, as prayer, merges with the two worlds, the visible and the invisible. We are familiar with Cristina Campo's love for perfection as an aspiration towards absolute quality which, nevertheless, shines into the ordinary world. The world of unrepresentable perfection is both simultaneously connected and unconnected to the visible world. The homeland, which Campo acknowledges, is the absolute world. What value does the other concrete and historical world have then? We read at the beginning of *Diario Bizantino*:

> Two worlds – and I come from the other one.
> Behind and within
> the sodden roads
> behind and within
> fog and laceration
> further chaos and reason.

Beyond this is the "world hidden from the world, permeated in the world / indescribably unknown to the world."[5]

It is important to remember that the two worlds are totally different, and yet, at the same time, one "permeates" the other. This term indicates that one enters into the other even though they are two distinct worlds.

So, the other world is hidden from the ordinary world. It is invisible. World, whose reality consists in being the impossible of the historical world. And yet it is, at the same time, connected to this necessary world. It is unknown, but it is with us here and now. Here and now "from the divine breath / aroused for a moment, / from the divine breath / immediately obliterated."[6] We can feel it. We can

[5] "Due mondi – e io vengo dall'altro / Dietro e dentro / le strade inzuppate / dietro e dentro/ nebbia e lacerazione / oltre chaos e ragione / . . . Mondo celato al mondo, compenetrato nel mondo / inenarrabilmente ignoto al mondo" (Cristina Campo, *La Tigre Assenza*, [Milan: Adelphi, 1991] 45).

[6] "Dal soffio divino / un attimo suscitato, / dal soffio divino / subito cancellato" (Campo, *La Tigre Assenza*, 45).

perceive it when something obliquely indicates it "at a certain favourable hour."[7]

Going back to *La Tigre Assenza,* we can now consider it within this framework where poetry bears a trace of the enigmatic. The invisible and unknown world intertwines with the invocation to her loved ones, her "beloved" and fidelity to a resounding word. The poem itself is a meeting place between visible and invisible in its valorisation of the mouth, of sound, of voice.

I would now like to show what her conception of poetry, intended as prayer linked to orality, rhythm and voice, leads to. First of all, it is very different – as a practice – from silent prayer which comes from the soul, according to the tradition centred most significantly in Saint Augustine when he wrote in the *Commentary on the Psalms* that interior prayer, which is continuous and can be intended as our desire for God, is fundamental. Prayer that suppresses the tongue and yet expresses with the heart. It is continuous and silent in orienting the soul.

Cristina Campo, on the other hand, is profoundly bound to orality. We know of her love for Greek-Byzantine liturgy, which is arranged into slow, solemn chants that also structure the liturgy of the word, given that gospel readings are sung. They are rites that actually represent the very roots of her thinking and her conception, not only of poetry but also of forms of an entire civilization. In keeping with this, she looked closely at hesychasm and the *Philokalia* in terms of repeating aloud short ritual formulas such as *Kyrie eleison.* A practice spoken out loud but experienced and felt with the whole heart.

So, this is poetry: liturgical prayer. It comes from chanting, from orality. That is why, when we refer to written poetry, the text is appraised and enjoyed for its sonorous and rhythmic materiality, from which it is created.

Reading the essay *Tappeti volanti (Flying Carpets)* takes us a step further towards understanding the meaning and initiatory value of poetic text. The figure of the carpet allows us to delve into the similarity between poetry and prayer in terms of their relationship with the invisible world. The image of the carpet englobes a nucleus of meanings that Cristina Campo offers so that we might understand what it means to write poetry. We read:

[7] Cited in M. Pieracci Harwell, *Il sapore massimo di ogni parola*, 284.

> Masters carpet weavers, those travelling bards of the loom, go, like ancient storytellers, from village to village, region to region, dispensing the treasures of their portentous memory, the custodian of innumerable patterns, to local artisans. And there is a single visionary everywhere, a person who gathers the dreams of generations in the hollow of his hand: a nomad who has seen and withheld so much in his heart; a slave weaver torn from his homeland, whose nostalgia, helped by winged hands, is bought in gold; a poet who grasps connections, harmonises figures with an uncompromisingly discriminating instinct of the rhythms of objects and spiritual styles; and a mystic, whose carpet imports prayer and fasting, who dedicates symbolic votive offerings, dictated to him by the loom of his devotion, to He who, as he knots and cuts the multicoloured yarns, wants to instill a ray of his splendour into the warp and weft.[8]

It is a fraught and evocative passage. The master carpet weaver travels from village to village to teach his art, like a storyteller. Orally. We know from the essay *Della fiaba* how, according to Campo, these narrations weave a highly solid and material fabric of events that do, however, provoke the occurrence of signs of the invisible. Both – weaver and narrator – are custodians of the origins of symbolic creation. In turn, every artisan that weaves a carpet can be a visionary since, in the vision, he can give shape to the dreams of generations. Visionary is a term that comes from both the western and eastern mysticism and Campo pairs it with the figure of a nomad who learns a lot about his own times and people's thoughts through his travels and ruminates on them within himself, safeguarding them and giving them expression. The similarity with poetry is made very clear here: the poet, like the carpet weaver, knows how to capture links between the various parts and then create a harmonious ensemble, giving it a rhythm that is faithful to the things he is addressing, but, at the same time, to the invisible that shines within them. That is why the weaver is also a mystic because, like the poet, he lives on a path of spiritual elevation and *quête.* What he creates is

[8] Cristina Campo, *Gli imperdonabili* (Milan: Adelphi, 1987), 63-64.

substantially prayer devoted to the invisible which can be rewarded with moments of grace and enlightenment.

We are faced with a multitude of planes that are to be held together in order to completely understand their analogical bond.

The figure of the master carpet weaver provides a reference to Iranian mystical texts which Cristina Campo was familiar with, especially through her studies of Henry Corbin. In *The Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shiite Iran,* Corbin describes the Mazdean Iranian mysticism that originated in a cultural area marked by Zororastrian tendencies and continued up to the tenth century A.D. He dedicates the most important chapters in the book to the *Imago Terrae* – a figure to which Campo expressly refers.[9] It is an intermediary reality between empirical-factual reality and the abstract world of eternal symbols and ideas. It is also called *imaginal realm*, an *interworld* which, however, should not be thought of, despite the name, as an ontological place in which to live but as an existential plane that acts as a bridge towards the invisible.[10] Corbin highlights that it is a plane of existence in which images are real and visions are authentic without the need of empirical verification and therefore without being random and rootless fantasies.[11]

What seems particularly significant to me in terms of understanding the place that Cristina Campo assigns to poetry is that this *interworld* is mediatory and performative at the same time. Let me explain in what sense. In regard to this *imaginal realm,* Corbin writes that it is "the place, and consequently the world, where not only the visions of the prophets, the visions of the mystics, the visionary events which each human soul traverses at the time of his *exitus* from this world, the events of the lesser Resurrection and of the Greater Resurrection 'take place' and have their 'place,' but also the *gestes* of the mystical epics, the symbolic acts of all the rituals of initiation, liturgies in general with all their symbols, the 'composition of the ground' in various methods of prayer (*oraison*), the spiritual filiations whose authenticity is not within the competence of

[9] See Cristina Campo, *Gli imperdonabili*, citation on the page on the *Imago Terrae.*

[10] This term is from Henri Corbin, translating the word *barzakh*, meaning 'interval, something between, interworld' (Henri Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, trans. Nancy Pearson [New Jersey: Princeton, 1989], 316).

[11] See Corbin, *The Spiritual Body*, 28ff.

documents and archives."[12] By extension, Corbin also mentions monastery cloisters, the art of gardens, the prayer mat in the Islamic culture.[13] But also, cartography and writing methods.[14]

If we think about these practices, we realize that they feature a *hortus conclusus*, an enclosed and defined area. Living in this enclosed space, one can access the roots of spiritual truth. Truth that is not given universally but by following a singular and subjective approach. There is nothing sentimental in this tradition, nothing generic, but there are precise and exact words.

The Islamic prayer mat is a sacred ground, a microscopic space that makes revelation possible. It is always subjective even if crossed and drawn to a loving, impersonal, secret source.[15] Concrete and spiritual planes are interwoven into and from the carpet.

Campo writes: the carpet is a language that can be read as a poem.[16] To this regard, I would like to highlight a double analogy between the carpet's weave, liturgical oration, and the practice of writing poetry.

Let's consider the first analogy. Cristina Campo writes: "The carpet, obstinately, is none other than the real, and only in virtue of the real does it touch the geometries of the spirit."[17] Nothing is abstract in the carpet, despite its diamond-shaped patterns, its central corollas that bloom and extend geometrically. There are no unifying symbols that lead to one single meaning. They are, instead, precise figures, exact in their visibility, that refer to a meaning only

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[12] Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, vi. They are the "vision lands" that Campo speaks of in *Gli imperdonabili*, 69. According to Campo, the carpet flies since it is "spiritual land" where the path to the spring of life can be found (70).

[13] See Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 235.

[14] In one note, Corbin associates the art of gardens and writing methods to this acting within the limits to make other than mapping occur, citing his master Louis Massignon, a leading 20th-century Islamist (*Spiritual Body*, 276n40). On the influence that both Corbin and Massignon had on Cristina Campo, see María Pertile, "Compatientes: Acción poética de la Tradición en María Zambrano y Cristina Campo," in *Aurora. Papeles del Seminario María Zambrano* 7 (2005), 67-77.

[15] Campo, *Gli imperdonabili*, 65.

[16] Campo, *Gli imperdonabili*, 64.

[17] Campo, *Gli imperdonabili*, 64.

alluded to, that everyone will, however, read as the truth that appears to them personally. That is why the carpet is a *hortus conclusus* and, at the same time, a microcosm, living in which leads to the roots of a truth that involves us individually.[18]

At the same way, poetry is the fabric of tangible things and precise harmonies. It is no coincidence that one of Cristina Campo's most loved poets is Marianne Moore. In her poems, the visible exactness of small animals, sea coves, and brightly-lit side streets does not seek the symbolic and inexpressible, but does, instead, make the reader feel the invisible within the concreteness of the object here and now. Because Marianne Moore was "meticulous, specious, inflexible like all true visionaries."[19] Visionary here means perceiving the clue, the announcement of something that connects generations, in a material object. An announcement of truth for everyone that is, however, accessed through subjective elaboration. Take, for example, some forms in Japanese culture. The inexpressible is captured in the gesture of pointing at a pine tree on the side of the path and in the sleeve on which snow has fallen. This is even more evident when every piece of stringent and discursive narration is removed. Gestures and objects are therefore signs of intensified presence like things that appear in dreams.[20] Indeed, dreams have no coherent narration since they link fragments. Things are charged with an allusive power.

Now let's look at the second analogy. The carpet is both a place of oration and, at the same time, a weaving of the threads with which it is harmoniously constructed and which refer to and illuminate divine inspiration. Similarly, poetry is the place where prayer is possible as it is a *hortus conclusus*, a living space and, at the same time, an active gesture of prayer and invocation.

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[18] On this subjective reading gleaned from considering the carpet, we can read: "Speaking about the carpet of symbolism is no more infantile than speaking about fairy tale and parable, senses and beyond senses have knotted together just as tightly as the warp and weft and every man . . . will read the message meant specifically for him and nobody else" (Campo, *Gli imperdonabili*, 64-65).

[19] Campo, *Gli imperdonabili*, 74.

[20] I refer to the observations that Cristina Campo made about Japanese dramatic theatre, although she gives no precise indication. It seemed significant, on following her intention, to refer to the Nô theatre. See Campo, *Gli imperdonabili*, 26.

The person who weaves the carpet and ties the warp by knotting coloured threads, does this following a destiny and a devout inspiration, so that the carpet becomes holy circumscribed ground that brings sacredness into being. Sometimes the warp is crossed by the splendour of the invisible to which it is dedicated. In this sense, as I said earlier, the practice of weaving is performative: it brings into being what it is directed to and what it addresses. So that, at the limit, what it strives for and what it attracts come to coincide.

Poetry is the same. Going back to *La Tigre Assenza*, it is weaving a warp and weft of writing that creates the harmonious and rhythmic enclosure of a ritual prayer. As a prayer, it lets the invisible shine through. The other world. Therefore, it acts and brings into being what it speaks of. Writing constitutes the poem as a circumscribed place of prayer – writing creates a *hortus conclusus* – but it is prayer in itself since the absolute world penetrates it. The fabric of invocation brings the invoked into being, and in turn comes towards the person invoking it.[21]

PROXIMITY TO IRANIAN MYSTICISM

We have already seen elements of the Iranian mysticism in Cristina Campo through the conception of poetry as weaving, similar to that of a carpet, a place of prayer. More generally, I would like to demonstrate how the figures of Iranian mysticism have explicitly and implicitly guided her thought. However, in my opinion, they represent a subtext in her writing, in the sense that we could say that they were figurative matrixes for her. They helped her to reflect on what was dear to her. Campo was very familiar with Corbin's texts, also through *Conoscenza religiosa*, the magazine she collaborated with, in which some of Corbin's essays had been translated.

Going back to the enigmatic nucleus of the image of the carpet. Or rather, to the fact that the poem and the carpet are profoundly focussed on weaving and – performatively – bring into being what they refer to. The fabric of invocation brings the invoked into being, which in turn comes toward the person doing the invocation. It is a

[21] This is a crucial moment where the angel is made into being and, at the same time, brings his person into being. This movement follows a form of circular performativity, expressing the idea of twinning at the base of Corbin's notion of *sygyzy* (see below).

symbolic concept that we find in Persian philosophy both prior to Islam and within Islam. It corresponds to the deepest meaning of the words "orient" and "orientation."

In his book *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism,* Henry Corbin explains it as: "the being who takes on the effort of this upward movement is, at the same time, the 'being beyond' whose growing manifestation itself guarantees this progress."[22] So, in this perspective, what guides us and what we discern as being beyond our subjectivity, invites us to act in such a way that our own path gradually manifests it. In other words, the path we tread, step after step, is contemporarily the expression of what guides us. A reciprocity between these two polarities, or rather, between these two aspects of movement, is in play.

By obeying the destiny that secretly guides our life, we follow the path alone, and yet, there are two of us. It is a paradox that Corbin calls *syzygy*, which, etymologically, refers to the fact of being a pair connected to the same yoke.[23] It is also the figure for twins, for sisters.[24] According to Elemire Zolla, it is an archetype for the dyad of One.

To this regard, Corbin refers to the symbology of the Angel, who guides us and appears in hermetic texts and especially in Suhrawardî and Avicenna. He quotes the beautiful prayer that Suhrawardî directs to the Angel: "Thou, my lord and prince, my most holy angel, my precious spiritual being, Thou art the Spirit who gave birth to me, and Thou art the Child to whom my spirit gives birth."[25]

This is the duplicity of an interwoven path: You begot me and you were begotten from my spirit. In this sense, at the end of the path, when we achieve our destiny in its purest form, we are what each of us were at the beginning, according to the perfect nature that our angel has always been. The Angel that guides us is the image and mirror of ourselves.

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[22] Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. Nancy Pearson (New Lebanon, NY: Omega, 1994), 11.

[23] See Corbin, *Man of Light*, 16.

[24] On syzygy, see Sara Bigardi, "Sizigia: spazio relazionale simbolico," in Aurora. *Papeles del Seminario María Zambrano* 18 (2017), 18-24.

[25] Corbin, *Man of Light*, 21.

The names given to the single and personal Angel are different depending on the text: invisible guide, celestial companion, and so on. What characterises it is that it represents our own specific companion, taken individually. It is a relationship with individualized traits.[26] There is nothing generic in the figure of the Angel. On the other hand, as we have already seen, the Companion is our own image, our own mirror.

Cristina Campo resumes these Iranian mystical figures in a passage in "In medio coeli," in *Il flauto e il tappeto*:

> The destination therefore walks beside the traveller like Archangel Raphael, Tobiolo's custodian . . . In reality, he has always been there, within him, and travels towards the immobile centre of his life: the cave near the source, the cavern – where infancy and death, tied together, share their mutual secret. The idea of a journey, of effort, of patience, although extremely exact, is therefore quite paradoxical. This paradox contains the crossroads between the eternal and time, because form must destroy itself but only when it has been perfectly achieved.[27]

The perfect Nature that guides us is, from some points of view, our destination which was, however, attributed to us from our very infancy. Just as reaching the destination – our essential nature that identifies us – is a process that re-connects us to our beginning. This is why Cristina Campo writes that the destination walks alongside the traveller on this path. It is the beginning of our individual identification. Our singular essence. It guides us and, at the same time, was given to us when we came into the world, as a singular archetype.

For this reason, death too, when form no longer makes sense and therefore vanishes, is also the perfect fulfilment of that individual essence we were given in infancy. Therefore, infancy and

[26] "Whether it is referred to as the divine Being or as the archetype-Angel, no sooner does its apparition reveal the transcendent dimension of spiritual individuality as such, than it must take on individualized features and establish an individuated relationship" (Corbin, *Man of Light*, 20).

[27] Cristina Campo, "In medio coeli," in *Gli imperdonabili* (Milan: Adelphi, 1987), 18.

death whisper to each other the secret that has so profoundly involved them in a mutual relationship.

And yet all this requires a journey made up of patience, effort, and concentration. The amount of required patience is huge and absolutely necessary. Indeed, we are not on a straight road without any bends: there may even be irreversible deviations that lead us off track.

Some Persian texts help us to understand what happens when we lose our way towards our more proper nature. The Mazdean tradition speaks of Daênâ, the female archangel who guides us since she herself is our purest soul. What happens when we stray from the path?

Daênâ is depicted as a young woman. She is a celestial figure that we meet after death. Those who have followed the road to their own singular nature will meet her radiant figure after death when they cross the Chinvat Bridge, where their lives are judged. We know that, in the various traditions, judgement after death takes on many figures. We know, for example, that, in Ancient Egypt, the soul was weighed. In the Mazdean tradition, crossing the bridge offers a chance to directly meet who we are. It means finding ourselves facing our most authentic "who" we are, out of sync compared to the illusionary representations that we had of ourselves in life prior to death.[28]

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[28] While we can describe ourselves objectively and we can talk about ourselves, we can talk about 'what' we are, nevertheless what we are, our essential quality, our Angel, our 'who', escapes our gaze. We will only be able to meet him after death. In another way, Hannah Arendt comes to formulate a very similar figure in *The Human Condition*, when she writes that men reveal their being implicitly in action and discourse and this is graspable by others. She writes: "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this 'who' in

The Mazdean text quotes the words of Daênâ at the moment of encounter: "I am thine own Daênâ. I was loved, and you have made me more loved. I was beautiful, and you have made me even more beautiful."[29] Corbin comments: "This *post mortem* dialogue again reminds us of the reciprocity of the Giving-Birth/Being-Born relationship . . . In contrast, he who has betrayed the pact concluded prior to existence in this world sees himself in the presence of an atrocious figure, his own negativity . . . what the man sees who has cut himself off from her, who has made her invisible to himself, is fittingly his own shadow, his own Ahrimanian darkness, instead of his celestial mirror of light."[30]

It is interesting to note, as Corbin points out, that the figure of the Angel is female. And he responds to "austere critics" who see a danger in this feminisation, that those who criticise it have actually lost the relationship with their own soul and become stiff caricatural human forms.[31]

The Angel therefore generates the essential nature of that particular human being, of whom she is a guide, and is, at the same time, transformed (generated) by the actions of the human being with which she is in a form of syzygy, of twinning.

Corbin writes: "Etymologically she [*Daênâ*] represents the visionary organ of the soul; ontologically, the light that makes seeing possible and the light which is seen. She is the pre-terrestrial vision of the celestial world and is thus *religion* and *faith* avowed . . . she is also the essential individuality, the 'celestial' transcendent 'I,' the Figure which, at the dawn of its eternity, sets the believer face to face with the soul of his soul, because *realization* unfailingly corresponds to *faith*."[32]

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the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters" (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958], 179).

[29] Corbin, *Man of Light*, 30.

[30] Corbin, *Man of Light*, 30.

[31] Corbin, *Man of Light*, 32.

[32] Corbin, *Man of Light*, 30.

The figure of the Angel, which is the guide and, at the same time, the destination of our path, is the key to interpreting that otherwise enigmatic expression of Cristina Campo, when she says that the destination walks alongside the traveller. This figure is at the genesis of destiny's conception and is so important in Campo's thought. A great deal depends on being faithful to destiny which, however, is not transparent and, therefore, we discover it as we go along, even though it is the path to plot step by step through life.

Corbin emphasises how this reciprocal game between the Angel of light and human singularity has a particular quality that he sums up in the expression "light on light." Because it is not a question of the attraction that the celestial Angel's light might have on the human being caught up in the darkness. Neither are we dealing with the dramatic conflict between light and darkness. Corbin is, instead, alluding to a bond similar to that of the prince in the *Song of the Pearl* with the robe of light that his royal parents sent him as reminder of his origins.[33] The prince thus reconnects internally to his essence – the robe – and sets off on a return journey that implies a transformation forward.

When the transformation forward occurs, it starts its journey from the beginning, and so the form that guides us has achieved its purpose. This perspective makes it easier to understand Cristina Campo's thought when, at the end of the above-mentioned passage, she writes: "Form must destroy itself but only when it has been perfectly achieved."[34] We are familiar with her enthusiasm and passion for form. But, following the interpretation that Campo made of the Iranian mysticism, we can understand how form is nothing more than what directs the journey in order to arrive at the essence, so much so that, when it directly meets with essence at the end of the process, form has no further reason to exist. It can become inexistent.

In light of this, the link between infancy and old age takes on a symbolic meaning. Cristina Campo analyses the circular resonances between these two moments in life where old age is the step towards death. She retains that everything starts *in medio coeli*, in middle age. It is when "all acquired knowledge, before reaching that point – in mid-sky – seems to refer to infancy, the home, the first earth, to the

[33] See Corbin, *Man of Light*, 22-3.

[34] Cristina Campo, "In medio coeli," in *Gli imperdonabili* (Milan: Adelphi, 1987), 18.

mystery of roots, that have acquired eloquence day by day."[35] It is the action of *turning about,* a term used by ancient mariners. You go on and everything that is in the past acquires a new meaning. Indeed, it is not the time to search but rather to find what was already there at the beginning when that symbolic pact between the Angel and the soul was sealed.

In reality, here, infancy actually expresses the mystery of roots that, bit by bit, emerges precisely when, on going forward, we are actually developing its enigma, faithful to its secret that unfolds along the way throughout life.

When she speaks of old-age, Campo is not thinking so much of the old, wise man who knows how to grasp hidden annunciations, rather of the old man who does not lose himself in oblivion but obeys memory instead and, on remembering, poses questions. His memories may be fragmented and disorganised, but a deeper order links snippets of experience that seem to lie between dream and reality. Poetry knows how to provide the secret warp and weft because it can exist in relation to a time sensed as eternal since it includes all ages of life. She writes:

> We will just be an old person who remembers, with torment and sweetness: a blind augur but an augur all the same: perhaps unable to provide the last key, the tiny golden key, to deciphering the world; unable to indicate a road that is not dark and difficult but which is, nevertheless, the same road. Even if he does not know the hidden destination, he certainly knows every cobble of that road, every thistle and every ear of corn – and the secrets of the houses, of human works . . . It only needs a few snippets of vision . . . Like in dreams, so that, in his words, the message may perhaps sound incoherent but the secret order that aligns those words is no less perfect."[36]

The road towards essential nature embarked upon in infancy is not only hard and winding, it is also dark. We do not have a map. The enlightening vision of the Angel is not transparent and our destiny is not clear. The mirror that reflects us and the Angel is blurred and will be until after death. We need to question ourselves every time

[35] Campo, "In medio coeli," 18.
[36] Campo, "In medio coeli," 25.

as to which step to take. Remembering the root of our singular and unrepeatable infancy helps to direct our steps. Returning to the first root is how not to stray off the path that guides us.

THE SENSES, THE INVISIBLE, AND LITURGY

Iranian mysticism was also a figurative matrix for Cristina Campo in her conception of the relationship between the senses and the invisible, between the solidness of feeling and the shaft of light that we sense within it.

To understand what she meant by the relationship between body and spirit, it is essential to take a closer look at what she writes on the theme of liturgy, starting from the valuable annotations we find in *Sensi soprannaturali.*

First, however, I will try to show the paths by which Iranian mysticism has tackled this question before coming to Campo's writings through their mediation.

Going back to Suhrawardî and Avicenna's conception of the *imaginal world,* Suhrawardî introduces, on the line of a previous cultural fabric, the idea of an intermediary world where the visionary conscience lies.[37] It is not a utopian world but a real place that is, however, not only perceived by external senses. Let's say that it lies at the confluence of two seas, the sea of senses and the sea of intellect. The word "confluence" is extremely precise here because, at this level, the waters in the sea of senses cannot be differentiated from those of intellect and yet there is no merging. This is because a world of intermediate experience is created. It is what Corbin decides to call *imaginal world* in order to distinguish it from the imaginary world of fantasy and the absurd. Corbin presents it as the world of spiritual sensing where the visions of mystics and prophets take place, as do events in holy scriptures. For example, the Resurrection of Christ.[38]

It is a world in which we can perceive the invisible with all our senses. It is therefore possible to speak of events with a strong ontological value where the invisible can be sensed. An intermediate

[37] See Henry Corbin, *L'Iran et la philosophie* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), especially the chapter "Théorie de la connaissance visionaire."
[38] See Corbin, *L'Iran et la philosophie*, 136.

world between the plane of verifiable facts and that of intellectual understanding.

I will give an example within western culture which, if interpreted correctly, explains what Corbin meant. I am referring to the character of Beatrice in the third canto of Dante's *Paradise*. We know that the figure of Beatrice has been interpreted in two different ways. Those who take the canto literally affirm that Beatrice is the woman the poet loved, spiritualized as a guide of *Paradiso*. Allegorical interpreters, however, see Beatrice as theological knowledge. On the one hand we are looking at a concrete experience of reality, modified and adapted to the spirit of the canto, while on the other, we have an allegorical figure. In regard to this, Corbin writes: "the theophanism of Ibn 'Arabî has a good deal in common with the ideas of the symbolist interpreters of Dante (Luigi Valli), though it is secure against such criticism as that of the literalist philologists, who were alarmed to see the person of Beatrice fade into a pale allegory. We have suggested that both the *Fedeli d'amore* and their critics cap be reproached with one-sidedness. In any case, the young girl who was for Ibn 'Arabî in Mecca what Beatrice was for Dante, was a real young girl, though at the same time she was 'in person' a theophanic figure, the figure of *Sophia aeterna* (whom certain of Dante's companions invoked as *Madonna Intelligenza*). The problem is similar to that raised by the person of Khidr the prophet, both individual person and, by virtue of his investiture with a theophanic function whose organ is the active Imagination, an archetype. If we fail to grasp this twofold dimension simultaneously, we lose the reality both of the person and of the symbol."[39]

We will, therefore, always be indebted to Active Imagination – if we refer to western Christian culture – for being able to think that Christ is both man and the son of God.

Corbin notes that, after some time, this intermediate world almost disappears from Iranian culture due to a powerful attack, initially by Averroes (and later Thomas), on emanationist Neoplatonism, which offers the chance to think – between the One and the soul – of intermediate worlds and multiple intelligences. These are what make the *imaginal world* conceivable. The disappearance of the hierarchy of celestial souls and the flattening,

[39] Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabî*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 52.

on the one hand, to the world of facts and, on the other, to the symbolic world, led Active Imagination to be downgraded in favour of an allegorical imaginary – by then only symbolical – disassociated from the facts and the perception of reality.

Active imagination is the fulcrum of the *imaginal world.* Its roots lie in Aristotle's *De Anima.* It should be noted how, alongside *De Anima*, works attributed to Aristotle were read in this Iranian mystical context but actually originated in a Neoplatonic-influenced Islamic environment. In this way, Arabian philosophers read Aristotle's texts interwoven and intermixed with texts by Plotinus and Porphyry without any difference.

Active imagination involves Active Intellect. And it was Avicenna who particularly spoke of it in his angelology. In the comment (or gloss) on the so-called *Theology of Aristotle,* Avicenna describes ten celestial spheres, each of which has a corresponding angel. If we look at the last sphere going from top to bottom, we find an authentic anthropology, mediated by the conception of angelic spheres. In fact, this last step regards the union between active angelic intelligence and the potential intellect of the soul. To this regard, Corbin writes: "This union crowns a mutual desire, for if the thinking human soul owes its existence to the Active Intelligence, and even cannot subsist save by being united with it, reciprocally this angelic Active Intelligence needs the thinking human soul as receptacle and pre-eminent intermediary, in order to send into this world the influx of its Energies, the gift of intelligible Forms coming to inform Matter."[40]

It is, therefore, contact with the Angel/Active intelligence that allows human beings to sense intellectual forms.[41] The intelligible form offered by Active Intellect is perceived subjectively by the individual human soul through Active Imagination, or rather, Creative Imagination. In individual experience, the soul, which is characterised by Passive Intellect, comes into contact with forms when it is gathered into itself, detached from perceptions of the

[40] Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 76-7.

[41] Active Intelligence is the tenth hypostasis, identified as *Dator Formarum* and with the scriptural image of the Angel of Revelation and Inspiration. For these topics, see Lenn E. Goodman, *Avicenna*, trans. Sergio Crapiz (London: Routledge, 1992), 95-107.

external world.[42] At that moment it senses forms as something that involve it from the outside.

It is at this level that the *imaginal realm* takes shape: it neither simply belongs to the active intellect of pure forms, nor only to the empirical and factual awareness of the external world. It is elaborated by the senses of the soul. When the soul focuses on itself, it is able to perceive the intellectual forms that come from the outside and elaborate them considerably, starting with its subjectivity. It is in this respect that we speak of subtle senses that lead to reaching a singular creation. I emphasize singularity because this subjective bond with intuition is greatly highlighted by Cristina Campo.

All this has a deep bond, even if not immediately obvious, with the Angel, meant as the vocation that accompanies us, guides us and is the mirror that we reflect ourselves in, and which is at the centre of Campo's conception of destiny. In fact, in this philosophical and spiritual context, the occurrence from the outside of intellectual form through the encounter between Active and Passive Intellect is a life-changing event if we accept it. In this sense, it becomes a directional figure along our path. It can thus be understood how awareness is a way of existential transformation and is never objective nor even neutral. On the contrary, it involves us intimately. That is why I would also stress how strong the subjective and singular character of this experience – in which a form, expressed by the Active Intellect, is sensitively and individually elaborated – is. It is not like Active Intellect, whose character is collective, common, and not individual. In this context, the protagonist is Creative Imagination, which takes the sensible to an imaginal state and makes pure intelligible descend to the imaginal level. It therefore spiritualizes and corporealizes at the same time.[43] To this regard, neither materialism nor transcendent spiritualism can be spoken of. Because both immanent materialism and spiritualism sacrifice one of the two polarities which, instead, through the mediation of Creative Imagination, both can be found in the *imaginal world*.[44]

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[42] I refer back to Giannina Longobardi's wonderful lesson on Henry Corbin, lecturer on Avicenna and the visionary world during the theoretical philosophy course I led on 29 October 2019 at Verona University.

[43] See Henry Corbin, *L'Iran et la philosophie*, 139.

[44] The book by Ernst Bloch offers food for thought and is full of ideas when, in *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, he describes the position

When Cristina Campo deals with the question of the spiritualization of the sensitive and the sensualisation of the spiritual, she does so from another angle, even if she is guided by an orientation that is very similar to that of Suhrawardi and Avicenna. Let's say that the metaphysical conception is different. In Campo's opinion, the doorway to spiritual senses is rather more the body than the soul. Instead, according to the Neoplatonic Arabian philosophers, the first access is more from the soul.

What is of help in understanding Cristina Campo's thinking on how to start from the sensitive to make the invisible happen through liturgy, is her refusal of using metaphors when dealing with sacred things.[45] I would immediately like to refer to a quite long passage on the *tremendum mysterium* of the sacrament of Holy Communion, when the worshippers directly eat and drink the body and blood of Christ with their own mouths. And the body's intestines receive the body of Christ. "In the texts of the Latin Mass, an immolation was immutably celebrated, people continued to supplicate the ancient sublimity that by eating the body and drinking the blood of the Word, these would adhere to the intestines, cleansed of the stains of wickedness."[46] With the reformation of the Church in a

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of these thinkers on immanentist materialism. Nevertheless, the imaginal realm, as I have tried to explain, maintains the two converging polarities (sensitivity and transcendence) in one and the same experience through creative imagination, while Bloch sometimes loses this double root in favour of immanentist materialism. For example, when he speaks of form as the "immanent fire" or "the burning truth of substance." However, Bloch's work has its own valid philosophical value as an experimentation of new ways of Marxism and materialism in general. See Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna e la sinistra aristotelica*, ed. by Nicola Alessandrini (Milan: Mimesis, 2018), 70-73.

[45] Monica Farnetti observes how, in the third phase of Cristina Campo's thinking, and especially in *Sensi soprannaturali*, she distances herself from producing metaphors and their valorisation to mainly follow a metonymic path instead. See Monica Farnetti, "Del vivente in eterno e della bellezza. Dittico in onore di Anna Maria Ortese e Cristina Campo," in *Concepire l'infinito*, ed. Annarosa Buttarelli (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2005), 124-5.

[46] Cristina Campo, *Gli imperdonabili* (Milan: Adelphi, 1987), 236.

communitarian and participatory sense,[47] Campo notes that these aspects sank into the background: "The bodily elements of the *tremendum* seemed to disappear from all the homilies, from all the meditation books about Mass. The definition itself, *tremendum hoc mysterium*, with its own even phonic weight, more or less fell from liturgical books. The sacrifice, always faithfully remembered, evaporated into spiritual. How many still recognised that fearsome figure of the *sacrificer* in the priest?"[48] She adds that something of the "ancient transcendent spirituality" is paradoxically preserved in popular superstition for which relics, the body and touch are fundamental.[49]

These passages refer us to Cristina Campo's criticisms not so much of the Second Vatican Council as of certain effects of the Church reformation that caused the social aspect to become more important than religious relations founded on mystery. In this sense, she gave an extremely hard judgment on abandoning Latin in mass and turned to the ceremonies of the Orthodox Church which maintained the ancient liturgy.

Perhaps, precisely due to that controversy, she was urged to ask herself what meaning and which space the *sensorium* that Iranian philosophers spoke of would have today. In other words, what came to be of the senses and the divine – or rather, senses and transcendence – that the Iranian philosophers conceived in the *interworld*, where forms of Active Intellect were conceived subjectively and sensitively by the Creative Imagination in relation to individual passive intellect.

Both Cristina Campo and the Iranian philosophers were totally stranger to the confusion between material and spiritual. It seems to me that this is an essential point that brings them considerably together. They were both clear that it meant meditating on an

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[47] It should be remembered that she did not criticise the Second Vatican Council nor Pope John XXIII as much as a certain revival of a religion that entrusted only in the social, in a certain populism of participation that no longer had a sense of mystery nor the rites that go with it.

[48] *Ibidem.*

[49] Laura Boella, on considering Campo, writes some interesting pages on perception, landscape, "ancient transcendent sensuality", the sensual origin of liturgy, in *Le imperdonabili* (Mantua: Tre Lune, 2000), 58-64.

intermediary condition that kept the two states of being – the sensitive and the transcendent – in a polar tension that was the creator of other things. In reasoning about where the third area between them should be positioned.

As we have already seen, Cristina Campo considered the spiritualisation of holy ways entrusted to senses particularly dangerous. She retained that interpreting the Eucharist as the breaking of bread in the community merely as a reminder of the Last Supper is paramount to making a metaphor. It is an 'as if". It is representing bread as if it were the body of Christ but without it being so. This procedure makes possible to spiritualise practically anything. Instead, the Catholic Church maintains that the Eucharist ceremony was instituted by Christ at the Last Supper and it is precisely this transcendent sensitivity that always renews itself at each celebration. They are two totally different religious and metaphysical concepts. Only in the latter are being and bodily existence involved.[50]

What, then, in Cristina Campo's thought, is the intermediary space in which these two so very alien polarities – the sensitive and the transcendent – meet? What is the equivalent of Suhrawardî and Avicenna's *interworld* which holds together the senses and Active intellect? We can find the answers in the persistence with which Cristina Campo, in her texts, returns again and again to liturgy. I am not just referring to *Sensi soprannaturali*, where it is the central theme, but also to many brief texts that we find grouped in *Sotto falso nome*, such as *Nota sopra la liturgia, La trappa*, *Fuga e sopravvivenza.*

I found what she writes in *Nota sopra la liturgia* enlightening when she identifies the genesis of liturgy in Mary Magdalene's gesture of using precious perfumed oil to soothe the Lord's feet. And Jesus loved it, reminding those who complained of so much futile waste that he would only be with them for a little while longer and that that gift – and that gesture of honour linked to his body – had thus meaning in relation to presence and the divine quality of that presence, to the body here and now and, at the same time, divine. Campo says: perhaps this is the genesis of liturgy. It is interesting for me that she should use this figure to understand what liturgy is. Because liturgy would then involve the human body and the divine

[50] She writes: "Nothing is only metaphoric in the domain of the invisible, where word is a condition of substance as substance is of word" (Campo, *Gli imperdonabili*, 239).

body in presence. It is, more precisely, a way of relating to the divine body through our own human body. Mary Magdalene's gestures are solemn and publicly displayed yet still intimate. They are disruptive in relation to the context of the men who accompanied Christ. They are gestures that are not measured by usefulness. Of course, such a precious oil could have been sold and the money donated to the poor but the relationship with the divine in presence here, has nothing to do with measuring socially measurable usefulness. It shows another order. It has a different symbolic resonance.[51]

It is not just anointing the body of Christ, but the fact of being there with all herself and demonstrating that gesture. It is an action for all to see, not something done in secret within her own relationship with the divine. Mary Magdalene's gesture provoked scandal because it was not in intimacy. Therefore, not only regarded the soul but also, and above all, the body. And in fact, Campo notes, where the body is cancelled, the soul then disappears.

At this point, we can narrow down the meaning of liturgy. For Campo, that action that someone demonstrates and shares with others and that has to do with their own body and the body of the Lord in presence, where something symbolically precious is involved, like an oil, an element such as incense, a song, a prayer spoken out loud, is liturgical. Something that concerns the senses: smelling, hearing, seeing, tasting.

Liturgy opens an intermediary space where the five senses are doorways to the invisible. This is how I see the link with the *imaginal realm* of Iranian mysticism. This too is a field, where feeling and the invisible are at play in presence. Liturgy and the *imaginal realm* are intermediary areas – which, making two polarities converge (the sensitive and the spiritual) do not allow them to become confused.

I believe that there is another aspect that links Cristina Campo and the Iranian mysticism. This process of involving sensing and the divine is reflected upon by both Campo and the Iranian tradition only as an existential metamorphosis. We have seen that meeting the Angel in *medio coeli* causes a shock, a sudden change of route, because it means renewing, here and now, the close pact with him in our coming into the world and transforming our own path towards the essence of beginnings. For Cristina Campo too, "intimacy with the divine [is] the supreme chance of those five senses

[51] See Cristina Campo, *Sotto falso nome*, [Milan: Adelphi, 1998] 133.

– the *chance to metamorphosize*."[52] For this reason, liturgy, where the senses are involved, is not repetition. It is always, and each time, a new transformative beginning. This is the significant core of liturgy. What we saw in the *hortus conclusus* of the prayer mat, the cloister, the meditation ground takes on a new life in liturgy: the fact that finite, concrete and material action makes the infinite to which it aspires happen.[53] That is why we can say that liturgy is also performative, as we saw with poetry.[54] While action is being taken, it provokes and makes things happen.

Cristina Campo offers very subtle observations on how the Liturgy of the Hours and the liturgy of different parts of the year, in their circular progress, are microcosms that allude and allow the macrocosm to live. In liturgy marked by times that return, we sensitively experience the circularity of eternity without any confusion between one plane and another. In what is sensitive and has limits, we experience infinity which is exactly what attracts the sensitive.

I hope that this text I have dedicated to Cristina Campo can be interpreted as an unbroken gloss, a faithful unravelling of her words: "The more one learns about poetry, the more one realizes that it is the offspring of liturgy, which is its archetype, as all of Dante demonstrates."[55]

(Translated by Diane Lutkin)

[52] Cristina Campo, *Gli imperdonabili* (Milan: Adelphi, 1987), 231.
[53] On the relationship between finite and infinite, see Margherita Pieracci Harwell, "Cristina Campo e la 'quête' dell'assoluto," in *Concepire l'infinito* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2005), 101-14.
[54] On this performativity of writing as liturgy, see M. Farnetti, "Del vivere in eterno e della bellezza," 123.
[55] Cristina Campo, *Sotto falso nome* (Milan: Adelphi, 1998), 215.