

The Mystery of the Veil

by

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The veil evokes the idea of mystery because it hides from view something that is either too sacred or too intimate; but it also possesses a mystery of its own when it becomes the symbol of universal veiling; in other words the cosmic and metacosmic veil is a mystery because it has its root in the depths of the divine Nature. According to the Vedantists, it is impossible to explain *Māyā*, even though one cannot help acknowledging its presence; *Māyā* like *Ātmā* is without either origin or end.

The Hindu notion of “Illusion”, *Māyā*, coincides in fact with the Islamic symbolism of the “Veil”, *Hijāb*: universal Illusion is a power that both hides and reveals; it is the Veil before the Face of *Allāh*¹ or, according to an extension of the symbolism, a series of sixty-six thousand veils of light and darkness, which screen the fulgurating radiance of the Divinity through either clemency or rigor.²

The Veil is a mystery because Relativity is a mystery. The Absolute, or the Unconditioned, is mysterious by virtue of its self-evidence; but the Relative, or the Conditioned, is mysterious by virtue of its unintelligibility. If it is impossible to understand the Absolute, it is because its luminosity is blinding; on the other hand, if it is impossible to understand the Relative, it is because its obscurity offers no point of reference. At least this is the case when we consider Relativity in its seeming arbitrariness, for it becomes intelligible to the extent that it serves as the vehicle of the Absolute or appears as an emanation of the Absolute. To be the vehicle of the Absolute while veiling it is the purpose of the Relative.

One must therefore seek to penetrate the mystery of Relativity from the starting point of the Absolute or in relation to it, and this compels—or allows— us to discern the root of Relativity

¹ In Sufic terminology derived from the Koran, the Divine Essence (*Dhāt*) is called “Face” (*Wajh*); at first sight this seems paradoxical, but it becomes comprehensible when we consider the symbolism of veiling.

² Omar Khayyam; “Neither thou nor I shall solve the mystery of this world; neither thou nor I read this secret writing. We both would like to know what this veil hides; but when the veil falls there is neither thou nor I.”

within the Absolute itself: this root is none other than Infinity, which is inseparable from the Real; because it is absolute, the Real is necessarily infinite. This Infinity implies Radiation, for the good tends to communicate itself, as Saint Augustine observed; the Infinity of the Real is none other than its power of Love. And the mystery of Radiation explains everything: by radiating the Real as it were projects itself “outside itself”, and in separating itself from itself it becomes Relativity to the very extent of this separation. It is true that this “outside” is necessarily situated within the Real itself, but it nonetheless exists as outwardness and in a symbolic fashion, which means that it is “thought” by the Infinite by virtue of its tendency toward Radiation, hence toward expansion in a void that does not really exist. Indeed this void has no reality except on the basis of the Rays projected into it; Relativity is real only because of its contents, which for their part belong essentially to the Absolute. Thus space has no existence except because of what it contains; an empty space would no longer be a space but a nothingness.

Hence the principal prototype of the Veil is the divine dimension of Infinity, which radiates so to speak from the Unconditioned while remaining a rigorously intrinsic quality; in the Absolute, Shiva and *Shakti* are identical. Separative and playful *Māyā*, the *Māyā* that creates illusion, does not emerge inexplicably from nothingness; it proceeds from the very nature of *Ātmā*; since the good has by definition a tendency to communicate itself, the “Sovereign Good” cannot but radiate for itself and in its Essence, and then—and as a consequence—from itself and outside itself; being Truth, “God is Love.”

This amounts to saying that the first Veil in God is a purely principial and essential tendency toward communication, hence toward contingency, a tendency that remains strictly within the divine Essence. The second Veil is as it were the extrinsic effect of the first: it is the ontological Principle, creative Being, which conceives the Ideas or Possibilities of things. Being in turn gives rise to a third Veil, the creative *Logos*, which produces the Universe; this too— and to some extent *a fortiori*—is a Veil that at once dissimulates and transmits the treasures of the Sovereign Good.

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Absolute, Infinity, Perfection; the third term designates the result of the Radiation brought about by the Infinite in virtue of the Absolute, or let us say instead by the Infinitude that necessarily belongs to the Absolute. The first *Hypostasis* arising within Relativity, namely Being, the personal and creative Principle, is the first Perfection in the sense that it is All-Perfection; now Perfection is essentially woven of Absoluteness and thus of Infinitude but in a relative and thus differentiated mode, whence the profusion of divine Qualities.

In Being—*Īshvara* of the Vedantists—the Absolute gives rise to the determinative and so to speak masculine or paternal pole of Being, *Purusha*, whereas the Infinite is reflected in the receptive and productive and so to speak maternal pole of Being, *Prakriti*. The new *Hypostasis* that results from these, at the summit or very center of Existence and thus on this side of Being

and within creation, is the universal Intellect, *Buddhi*; it is the “Spirit”, already created but nonetheless still divine; it is in short the efficient prolongation of the creative and illuminative Intelligence of God within creation itself.³

Perfection paradoxically combines the Absolute, which is infinite, with Relativity, hence with a degree or mode of limitation; but it is limitation, precisely, which allows a given potentiality of absoluteness or infinitude to be perceived, and this shows that Relativity, while on the one hand it veils by limiting, on the other hand unveils by specifying.

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Beyond-Being is the Absolute or Unconditioned, which by definition is infinite, hence unlimited; but one can also say that Beyond-Being is the Infinite, which by definition is absolute; in the first case the accent is placed on the symbolism of virility, in the second case on femininity; the supreme Divinity is either Father or Mother.⁴ Thus the notions of the Absolute and the Infinite do not in themselves indicate a polarity except when they are juxtaposed, and this juxtaposition already corresponds to a relative point of view. On the one hand, as we have already said, the Absolute is the Infinite, and conversely; on the other hand the Absolute suggests a mystery of unicity, exclusion, and contraction whereas the Infinite suggests a mystery of totality, inclusion, and expansion.

As we noted above, Relativity arises from the Limitlessness of the Unconditioned and proceeds by successive veilings up to the ultimate point of remotion—a point that is never reached since it is illusory or that is reached only symbolically; for our world this ultimate point is matter, but it is possible to conceive of ultimate points that are indefinitely more solidified, and *a fortiori* much subtler. Now there is no cosmogenesis without theogenesis; this term is

³ Specifically theological thought, poorly suited for grasping the simultaneity of the uncreated and created, shrouds it in the greatest mystery; this is the meeting point between the transcendent and immutable Holy Spirit and the immanent and acting Holy Spirit or, from another point of view, between the Holy Spirit and the immaculate soul of the Virgin. The Koran says of the “Spirit” (*Rūh*): “And they shall question thee concerning the Spirit. Tell them: the Spirit pertains to the Commandment (*amr*) of my Lord. And you have been given (on this subject) but little (divine) Knowledge. And if We (*Allāh*) wished, We could certainly take back from you what We have revealed to you” (*Sūrah* “The Night Journey” [17]:85-86). The word “Commandment” indicates a direct emanation; moreover the entire passage aims to shroud the question of the “Spirit” in mystery and to guard it from all profane, and virtually profaning, curiosity. In exoterism only what stimulates piety is true and not what threatens to disturb it.

⁴ We have a well known example of this divine Femininity in Isis of the Egyptians, whom we mention here because of her connection with the Veil: Isis is *Māyā* not as the opposite, but as an aspect or function, of *Ātmā*, hence as his *Shakti*, and she represents not so much the power of cosmic illusion as that of initiatic disillusion. By removing the veils, which are accidents and darkness, she reveals her Nudity, which is Substance and Light; being inviolable she can blind or kill, but being generous she regenerates and delivers.

metaphysically plausible, but it is unfortunate in that it seems to attribute becoming to the *Hypostases*, whereas it can only be a case of principal succession in the direction of the relative. The end-point of theogenesis is the most relative or the most outward *Hypostasis*, namely the “Spirit of God”, which is still divine even though, having already been created, it occupies the luminous center of creation; this is the *Logos*, which prefigures both the human species as the natural representative of God on earth and the *Avatāra* as the supernatural representative of God among men.

The polarity “Unconditioned-Unlimited”—insofar as there is a polarity here, one that results not from the meaning of the words themselves but solely from their comparative juxtaposition, which restricts their meanings—is repeated in the very structure of the Veil, or *Māyā*, or Relativity, which brings us to the symbolism of weaving. The first term of the polarity is the warp, or the vertical or masculine dimension, whereas the second is the woof, or the horizontal or feminine dimension; and each of these dimensions includes at all levels elements of Existentiality, Consciousness, and Bliss, in keeping with the Vedantic ternary and in either an active or a passive manner, depending on whether the elements refer to the warp or the woof. The complementarity “Unconditioned-Unlimited”, which contains these three elements, thus produces the measureless river of phenomena in an indefinite and iridescent display; the universe is thus a veil: on the one hand it exteriorizes the Essence, and on the other hand it is situated within the Essence itself as Infinitude.

In Islamic terms, the divine polarity, which we have just compared to the warp and the woof, is expressed by the letter *alif*, which is vertical, and the letter *bā*, which is horizontal; these are the first two letters of the Arabic alphabet, the first symbolizing determinativity and activity and the second receptivity or passivity.⁵ The same functions are expressed by the Pen (*Qalam*) and the Tablet (*Lawh*): in every phenomenon and at every cosmic level, there is an “Idea” that is incarnated in an existential receptacle; the Pen is the creative *Logos* whereas the Ideas it contains and projects refer to the Ink (*Midād*). We find the same polarity in the human microcosm, for man is both “vicar” (*khalīfah*) and “servant” (*‘abd*)⁶ or Intellect and soul.

According to a famous *hadīth*, God was a hidden treasure who wished to be known and who for this reason created the world. He was hidden from men as yet inexistent; thus the inexistence of men was the first veil; God therefore created the world for men in order to be known by them

⁵ Nevertheless the woof, represented by the shuttle, is active, which does not contradict feminine passivity since woman is active in child-bearing, whereas man in this connection remains passive; this is why creative activity is attributed in Hindu doctrine to universal Substance, *Prakṛiti*, which in fact “produces” beings, whereas *Puruṣa* “conceives” them as ideas. This appearance of inversion provides an illustration of the Taoist doctrine of *Yin-Yang*, which is the theory of reciprocal compensation; without this compensation, dualities would be absolute and irreducible, which is impossible since Reality is one.

⁶ This is why the Prophet is called both *Rasūl*, “Messenger”, and *‘Abd*, “Servant”; the latter is extinguished before God whereas the former prolongs Him.

and in order to project his own Felicity into innumerable relative consciousnesses. This is why it has been said that God created the world out of love.

Wherever *Ātmā* is, there also is *Māyā*, intrinsic Life and extrinsic Power of unfolding. In Islamic terms—setting aside the notion of the *Hijāb*—it is said that wherever *Allāh* is, there also is *Rahmah*, infinite Clemency and Mercy; this is expressed by the fundamental formula that introduces the *Sūrah*s of the Koran as well as everything written and undertaken in human life: “In the Name of God, the most Clement, the most Merciful”. The fact that these Names of infinite Goodness are added to the Name *Allāh* indicates that Goodness is in the very Essence of God and that unlike most of the divine Qualities it is not an element appearing only by refraction on the already relative plane of the attributes; this means that *Rahmah* belongs to *Dhāt*, the Essence, and not to the attributes, *Sifāt*.⁷ *Rahmah* is *Māyā*, not with respect to Relativity and Illusion but with respect to Infinitude, Beauty, Generosity.⁸

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In *Vedānta*, *Ātmā* is clothed in three great veils (or “envelopes” = *koshas*), which correspond analogically—by prefiguring them causatively—to the states of wakefulness, dreaming, and deep sleep: these veils or states are *Vaishvārana*, *Taijāsa*, and *Prājna*; what they veil is unconditioned and ineffable Reality, *Turīya*, which in the human microcosm is the divine Presence within the depth of the heart. This reality, or fourth “state” in the ascending sense, is Beyond-Being or *Ātmā* as such; it is said to be “neither manifested (*vyakta*) nor non-manifested (*avyakta*)”, and this calls for an important precision.

The idea of the non-manifested has two different meanings: there is the absolutely non-manifested, *Parabrahma* or *Brahma nirguna* (“not qualified”), and the relatively non-manifested, *Īshvara* or *Brahma saguna* (“qualified”); the relatively non-manifested, Being as existentiating principle or matrix of archetypes, may be called the “potentially manifested” in relation to the “actually manifested”, namely the world; for in the divine order itself, Being is the “manifestation” of Beyond-Being; otherwise manifestation properly so called, or Existence, would be neither possible nor conceivable. To say that the absolutely non-manifested is the

⁷ *Allāh* “was” good and loving “before” creation, and this is expressed by the Name *Rahmān*, “most Clement”; and He is good and loving “since” creation and toward creation, and this is expressed by the Name *Rahīm*, “most Merciful”. According to the Koran, *Al-Rahmān* is synonymous with *Allāh*—which shows that this Name pertains to *Dhāt* and not *Sifāt*—and it is *Al-Rahmān* who created man, taught him speech (*bayān*, the capacity to express himself with intelligence, hence to think), and revealed the Koran. It should be noted that the Name *Rahīm* pertains to the Attributes and not the Essence, though it nonetheless prolongs the Name *Rahmān* within the created order.

⁸ In other words it is *Shakti* rather than *Māyā*; what this means is that *Māyā* contains no ambiguity insofar as it is inherent in *Ātmā* and that it is thus properly *Shakti*, the Power of divine Life and cosmic Manifestation.

principle of both the manifested (the world) and the relatively non-manifested (Being) would be a tautology: as the principle of Being, Beyond-Being is implicitly the principle of Existence. From the standpoint of the absolutely non-manifested, the distinction between the potentially manifested—which is relatively non-manifested and creative—and the actually manifested or created, hence between Being and Existence, has no reality; from the standpoint of Beyond-Being, it is neither a complementarity nor an alternative.

Within the principal or divine order it is important to take account first of the Absolute in itself and second of the Absolute insofar as it unfolds in *Māyā* or in the mode of *Māyā*; in this second respect “all things are *Ātmā*”. In an analogous manner but within the context of *Māyā* itself, it is possible to consider things first in themselves, hence from the standpoint of the separate existence that determines them as phenomena, and second in Being, hence as archetypes. Every aspect of relativity—even the principal—or of manifestation is *vyakta*, and every aspect of absoluteness—even the relative—or of non-manifestation is *avyakta*.

According to the *Katha Upanishad*, in order to realize Beyond-Being, which is the absolute Self, it is necessary to pass “beyond darkness”; now what is “beyond darkness” is obviously the intrinsic luminosity of the Self, which is revealed after the darkness presented by the non-manifested in relation to the illusory luminosity of the manifested. Since “extremes meet”, a maximum of “inward” knowledge will have as its complement a maximum of “outward” knowledge, not of course in the sense of scientific knowledge but in the sense that the man who sees God perfectly within the inward and beyond phenomena will see Him perfectly within the outward or within phenomena;⁹ thus the “ascent” of the spirit toward God involves subjectively a “descent” of God into things.¹⁰ This “divine vision” of the world may well carry with it a “celestial mandate” or spiritual mission, whatever its degree of importance, which will vary according to the profundity or totality of the inward knowledge; conversely, one may say that a given predestined mandate providentially coincides with supreme knowledge, but it cannot be said that a degree of knowledge or realization *ipso facto* entails a law-giving prophetic mission, for otherwise every perfect sage would be the founder of a religion.

Be that as it may, what we are concerned to point out here is that the lifting of the veil in the inward and intellectual dimension is accompanied by an illumination or a transparency of the veils in which and through which we live and of which we are made, from the very fact of our existence.

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⁹ God, insofar as He manifests Himself in the cosmos, is called “the Outward” (*Al-Zāhir*) in the Koran.

¹⁰ “It is not I who have left the world, but it is the world that has left me,” an Arab *faqīr* once told us; we would add that by way of compensation God makes Himself present in the world to the very extent that the world becomes absent for us.

The Veil can be opaque or transparent, unique or multiple; it veils or unveils, violently or gently, suddenly or gradually; it includes or excludes, and thus it separates two regions, one inward and the other outward. All these modes are manifested in the microcosm as well as the macrocosm or in the spiritual life as well as in the cosmic cycles.

The impenetrable Veil covers from sight something that is too sacred or too intimate; the veil of Isis suggests both possibilities since the body of the Goddess coincides with the Holy-of-Holies. The “sacred” refers to the divine aspect of *Jalāl*, “Majesty”, whereas the “intimate” refers to *Jamāl*, “Beauty”: blinding Majesty and intoxicating Beauty. The transparent Veil on the other hand discloses both the sacred and the intimate; it is like a sanctuary that opens its door or a bride who gives herself or a bridegroom who welcomes and takes possession.

When the Veil is opaque, it hides the Divinity: it is made of the forms that constitute the world, but these are also the passions within the soul; the opaque Veil is woven out of sensorial phenomena around us and passional phenomena within us; and let us note that an error is a passional element to the extent that it is serious and a man is attached to it. The opacity of the Veil is both objective and subjective in both the world and the soul: it is subjective in the world insofar as our mind fails to penetrate to the essence of forms, and it is objective in the soul in the sense that passions and thoughts are phenomena.

When the Veil is transparent, it reveals the Divinity: it is made of forms insofar as these communicate their spiritual contents, whether we understand them or not; in a similar fashion, the virtues allow the divine Qualities to shine through, whereas the vices indicate their absence or—what amounts to the same thing—their opposites. The transparency of the Veil is at once objective and subjective; this can be understood without difficulty after what has just been said, for though forms are transparent with regard to their messages and not their existence, it is precisely our mind that makes them transparent by its penetration. Transcendence thickens the Veil; immanence renders it transparent, whether in the objective world or in ourselves, through our awareness of the underlying Essence—although, from an altogether different standpoint, our understanding of transcendence is a phenomenon of transparency, whereas the coarse enjoyment of what is offered us by virtue of immanence is obviously a phenomenon of thickening.¹¹

The ambiguity of the Veil is expressed in Islam by means of the notions of “abstraction” (*tanzīh*) and “resemblance” (*tashbīh*). From the first perspective sensible light is nothing when compared to divine Light, which alone “is”; “nothing resembleth Him”, says the Koran in thus proclaiming transcendence. From the second perspective sensible light “is”—or “is not other” than—divine Light, but manifested on a particular plane of existence or through a particular existential veil; “God is the Light of the Heavens and the earth,” the Koran also says; thus

¹¹ From the point of view of sacred art, we should mention the use of the cloud in Taoist painting: the cloud sometimes expresses more than the landscape, which on the one hand it conceals and on the other enhances, creating in this way an atmosphere of both secrecy and translucence.

sensible light resembles Him and “is He” in a certain respect, that of immanence. To metaphysical “abstraction” corresponds mystical “solitude”, *khalwah*, whose ritual expression is the spiritual retreat; “resemblance” for its part gives rise to the grace of “radiance”, *jalwah*,¹² whose ritual expression is the invocation of God performed in common. Mystery of transcendence or “contraction” (*qabd*) on the one hand and mystery of immanence or “dilation” (*bast*) on the other: *khalwah* separates us from the world; *jalwah* transforms it into a sanctuary.

According to a theory of Ibn Arabi, there is a correspondence between Adam and Muhammad in the sense that each of them manifests a synthesis—initial in the first case and final in the second—whereas Seth and Jesus correspond to each other in the sense that the first manifests the exteriorization of the divine gifts and the second their interiorization toward the end of the cycle; we are giving here the meaning and not the literal words of the doctrine in question. One might also say that Seth manifests *tashbīh*, “resemblance” or “analogy”, hence symbolism, the participation of the human in the divine; conversely, Jesus manifests *tanzīh*, “abstraction”, hence the tendency toward a pure “beyond”, for Christ’s kingdom is not of this world; Adam and Muhammad in this case manifest the equilibrium between *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*, Adam *a priori* and Muhammad *a posteriori*. Seth, the revealer of crafts and arts, illumines the veil of earthly existence; Christ rends the dark veil;¹³ Islam, like the primordial religion, combines the two attitudes.

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Besides the word *hijāb*, “veil”, there is also the word *sitr*, which means “curtain”, “veil”, “cover”, and “modesty”; likewise *satīr*, “chaste”, and *mastūr*, “modest”.¹⁴ From the sexual point of view, one veils that which—in different respects—is earthly and heavenly, fallen and incorruptible, animal and divine, in order to protect oneself against the possibility of either a humiliation or a profanation, according to the perspectives or circumstances.

There are iridescent silks in which two opposite colors appear in an alternating pattern on the same surface, depending on the position of the material; this play of colors reminds us of cosmic ambiguity and thus the mixture of “nearness” (*qurb*) and “distance” (*bu’d*)—we might also say of greatness and smallness—that characterizes the fabric of which the world and we ourselves are made. This brings us to the question of the subjective attitude of man before the

¹² A word derived from *jilwah*, “unveiling”, in reference to a bride; the sense of “radiance” is contained in the root of the word itself. *Jalwah* is a concrete awareness of the divine Omnipresence, an awareness that makes it possible to understand the “language of the birds”, metaphorically speaking, and to hear the universal praise that rises to God.

¹³ It goes without saying that in its general and characteristic form Christianity sees in this sacrificial rending the only possible solution; nonetheless it includes the opposite or complementary attitude insofar as it is esoteric.

¹⁴ One should note the invocation *yā Satīr*, “O Thou who coverest”, to express a desire for protection.

objective ambiguity of the world: the noble man, and thus the spiritual man, sees the substantial greatness and not the accidental smallness of positive phenomena, but he is nonetheless obliged to take note of smallness when it is substantial and when it therefore determines the nature of a phenomenon. On the contrary the base man, and sometimes the simply worldly man, sees the accidental before the essential and fixes his attention on the aspects of smallness which, though they enter into the constitution of greatness, cannot detract from its greatness in the least degree—except in the eyes of a man who is himself made of smallness.

It goes without saying that the two iridescent colors can have an exclusively positive meaning: activity and passivity, rigor and gentleness, strength and beauty, and other complementarities. The universal Veil comprises a play of contrasts and shocks but also—even more profoundly and truly—a play of harmony and love.

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The central tree is symbolically identical with the veil separating creation from the Creator.¹⁵ The sin of the first human couple consisted in lifting this veil, and the consequence was their exile behind a new veil, more outward than the first and separating them from intimacy with God. From one fall to another, man created for himself new separative veils, and it is thus that for the individual each sin is a veil separating him from a preceding grace; conversely, every turning back to God brings about the falling of a veil and the regaining of a lost Paradise.

A further point: when Saint Augustine exclaims “O happy fault!” in speaking of the sin of Adam and Eve, he is indicating in essence the necessary character of the Fall; indeed many cosmogonic doctrines present the loss of original beatitude as a neutral fact and an inevitable stage in the full realization of man, thus emphasizing its compensatory effects, as Christianity does *a posteriori*. This can be seen in sexual union, the classic image of the Fall, at least according to Christian sensibility; Islam and other religions stress instead the unfolding and perfecting virtue of sexuality, though without ever denying the possible merits of chastity or its necessity in certain cases. Be that as it may, everything in the natural order is more or less relative, and a man can realize the effects of sexual alchemy in a purely inward manner, just as the reverse is possible; this is obvious, and we have already said so, explicitly or implicitly. Likewise we are saying nothing new in recalling the fact that man carries the lost Paradise within himself; in reality this Paradise always remains accessible—not easily so, but under strict traditional and personal conditions; *intrate per angustam portam*. The angel with the flaming sword or the dragon-guardian of the sanctuary¹⁶ will permit entry only to him who, having

¹⁵ According to certain mythologies—and in ancient Christian miniatures—the trees of life and death form one single tree, and their opposition is recognizable in the difference between their branches or fruits. This symbolism clearly evokes the two sides of the veil, one inclusive and the other exclusive.

¹⁶ The serpent of Genesis is not unrelated to the dragon, but the dragon is positive, as can be seen in its connection with the angel or cherubim. Since the perspective of the Bible is *a priori* moral and not

vanquished the Fall, has not been touched by sin; to him whose “descent into hell” was unambiguously a “happy fault”; or to him who, knowing the “password”, possesses the key to the heavenly Garden and Deliverance.

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One often speaks of a multitude of Veils, and this indicates the complexity of veiling or, more precisely, its ontological and existential degrees¹⁷ as well as the provisional—and thus not irreversible—character of the separation from the human point of view. The plurality of the Veil promises a more and more welcoming movement, or else it gives rise on the contrary to the fear of an opposite movement of successive exclusion.¹⁸

The Veil that opens gently betokens a welcoming invitation into some state of beatitude, whereas the Veil that opens abruptly—or the Veil that is rent—signifies on the contrary a sudden fiat *lux*, a dazzling illumination, an instance of *satori* as the Zen Buddhists would say, unless it refers—on a cosmic scale—to a *dies irae*: the unexpected irruption of a heavenly Light that is at once avenging and saving and that ultimately restores equilibrium. As for the Veil that closes gently, it does so charitably and without the aim of rigor; if on the contrary it closes abruptly, this indicates disgrace.

As a traditional illustration of the mystery of unveiling, let us mention here the *rāsa-līlā*, or dance of the *gopis*, in the company of Krishna and also Krishna’s theft of their saris while the *gopis* were bathing. The loss of clothes signifies in each case a return to the Essence, either in an ecstasy of perfect abandon to God in the first example or as a spiritual trial in the second; the theft of the saris symbolizes the loss of individuality within the love of God, then its restitution on a higher plane, that of detachment; but it may also symbolize more generally the divine requirement that the soul appear naked before the Creator. And let us recall that clothing is an image not only of individuality but also of exoteric formalism; both of these external shells must

initiativ—this is proved among other things by its presentation of the case of Solomon—the words of the serpent have a malefic character, whereas according to the sapiential perspective the dragon does not call a man to sin but to initiatic trial and victory while at the same time warning him of the danger he risks. Certainly man has fallen into suffering and death, but this is the ransom of a higher possibility of perfection, without which there would be no reason to speak of a “happy fault”. Buddhists would say that one cannot overcome *samsāra* except by knowing it.

¹⁷ The first belongs to the divine order and the second to the cosmic order.

¹⁸ Sufism makes extensive use of the symbolism of multiple veils (*hujub*): for example, each virtue, to the extent that a man attributes it to himself, is one of the veils separating him from God; everything that is not God, or everything not envisaged in relation to God, or everything understood or accomplished imperfectly is a veil. From the point of view of rigorous and sapiential esoterism, the common religion or exoterism is a veil, and some have gone as far as to say that by adhering to such and such a form of worship the faithful are worshipping themselves since their god is thus made in their image; this is a rather blunt way of putting it but plausible with certain obvious reservations.

be transcended in one way or another and then taken up again on a higher plane and with a new intention:¹⁹ a moral transcending in the first case, in which the ego is objectified and then reanimated with the perfume of holy childhood, and an intellectual transcending in the second case, in which the forms are relativized *a priori* and then universalized *a posteriori*.

The symbolism of the Veil acquires a broader meaning when one considers a new element that may be superimposed upon it: namely embroidery, ornamental weaving, decorative effect; a veil that has been enriched in this way²⁰ suggests the play of *Māyā* in all its diversity and iridescence, as does the mysterious plumage of the peacock—in this case with the accent on the unfolding—or a painted fan, which displays its message and splendor when it is opened.²¹ The peacock and fan are emblems or attributes of Vishnu, and it is worthy of note that in the Far East and elsewhere the fan is a ritual instrument which, like universal *Māyā*, can both open and shut, manifest and reabsorb, kindle and extinguish. Whatever the image, the opening is the projection of Existence, which manifests all potentialities, whereas the closing signifies reintegration in the Essence and a return to potential plenitude; the play of *Māyā* is a dance between Essence and Existence, Existence being the Veil and Essence Nudity. And Essence is inaccessible to the existent as such, as declared by this inscription on the statue of Isis at Sais: “I am all that has been, all that is, and all that will be; and no mortal has ever lifted my veil.”

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Veils are either divine or human, not to mention the veilings other creatures represent or experience. The divine veils in our cosmos are the existential categories: space, time, form, number, matter; then the creatures with their faculties; and finally—on a completely different

¹⁹ This symbolism has nothing exclusive about it, however, for one could speak with as much justification of two forms of nudity, one lower and one higher: the nudity imposed by Krishna while the *gopis* were bathing and the nudity they freely assumed while dancing; the first refers to humility or sincerity and the second to love and unitive ecstasy.

²⁰ The most famous example of which is the Kashmir shawl, although one should not forget the decorated sari, which adds an expressive magic to the play of envelopment, as if by hiding the body it sought to reveal the soul; the same applies especially to all princely and priestly vestments.

²¹ The Japanese screen, which is often decorated with paintings inspired by Zen or Taoism, is not unconnected with the general symbolism in question here, and the same is true of Islamic screens fashioned from perforated wood and of windows of the same kind. In these examples there is a partition that is either mobile, and thus distinguished from a fixed wall, or else rendered transparent, so that it may be reopened even when it has been shut; this ambiguity corresponds very well to the mobility or transparency of the veil. The perforated screen allows one to see without being seen, and it is thus a kind of veil, transparent from one side and opaque from the other; this brings to mind the *hadīth* of spiritual virtue (*ihsān*): God must be worshipped “as if thou sawest Him, for if thou seest Him not He nevertheless seeth thee.”

level—the revelations with their truths and limits.²² The human veils are man himself, the ego in itself; then the passional and darksome ego; and finally the passions, vices, sins—without forgetting, on a normal and neutral plane, concepts and thoughts inasmuch as they clothe the truth.

One of the functions of the Veil is to separate; the Koran alludes to this in several connections: when the curtain separates man from the truth he rejects, or when it separates him from God who speaks to him, or when it separates men from women to whom they have no right, or finally when it separates the damned from the elect; but the most fundamental separation, the one that comes first and foremost, is between the Creator and creation or between the Principle and its manifestation. In a rigorous and complete metaphysics, one would add the separation between Beyond-Being and Being, the latter pertaining to *Māyā*, hence Relativity; the line of demarcation between the two orders of reality—in other words the Veil—is thus within the divine order itself.

If we consider *Māyā* in relation to its overall cosmic manifestation, we may say that *Ātmā* is reflected in *Māyā* and assumes therein a central and prophetic function, *Buddhi*, and that *Māyā* in turn is prefigured in *Ātmā* and anticipates or prepares therein the creative projection. In the same vein it is *Māyā* contained within *Ātmā*—and thus the Creator *Īshvara*—that produces *Samsāra* or the macrocosm, the hierarchy of worlds and series of cycles; and it is *Ātmā* contained within *Māyā*—in the sacramental *Mantra*—that unmakes *Samsāra* as the microcosm. Mystery of prefiguration and mystery of reintegration: the first is that of Creation and Revelation, the second that of the *Apocatasis* and Salvation.

All of this calls to mind the Taoist symbolism of *Yin-Yang*: a white field and a black field, the first containing a black circle and the second a white circle; what this means in the present context is that the relationship between the Face and the Veil is repeated on both sides of the Veil: first on the inside, *in divinis*, and then on the outside, at the heart of the universe. In Sanskrit terms: there is *Ātmā* and *Māyā*, but since Reality is one and since the nature of things could not imply a fundamental dualism, there is also *Māyā* in *Ātmā* and *Ātmā* in *Māyā*.²³

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²² According to the Sufis, it is much more difficult to lift veils made of light than those made of darkness; for the veil made of light is the illuminating and saving symbol, the reflection of the sun in the water; but the water mirroring the sun is not the sun. Ramakrishna said that it was ultimately necessary to transpierce the image of Kali with the sword of *jnāna*. As is well known, Zen Buddhism readily presents iconoclastic propositions, for the inward Revelation must burn its outward forms.

²³ A revealed Book, a Prophet, a rite, a sacred formula, a divine Name belong to the formal order and thus are *Māyā*, but a *Māyā* that delivers since it is essentially the vehicle of *Ātmā*; it is “*Ātmā* in *Māyā*” whereas the creative Word or *Logos* is “*Māyā* in *Ātmā*”.

In earthly usage—as a material object and human symbol—the Veil hides either the sacred pure and simple or the ambiguous or perilous. In the latter case we may say that *Māyā* possesses an ambiguous character because it veils and unveils and because—from the point of view of its dynamism—it distances things from God insofar as it creates while bringing things close to God insofar as it reabsorbs or liberates. Beauty in general and music in particular provide an eloquent image of the power of illusion, for they possess both an exteriorizing and an interiorizing quality, and they act in one direction or the other depending on the nature and intention of each man: a passionate nature and an intention of pleasure or a contemplative nature and an intention of “remembrance” in the Platonic sense of the word. Woman is veiled in Islam just as wine is forbidden, and she is unveiled—in certain rites or ritual dances²⁴—with the aim of effecting a kind of magic by analogy; the unveiling of a beauty that includes an erotic vibration works as a catalyst, evoking the revelation of the liberating and beatific Essence—*Haqīqah*, the “Truth-Reality”, as the Sufis would say. It is by virtue of this analogy that Sufis personify beatific and intoxicating Knowledge in the form of *Lailā*, or sometimes *Salmā*, a personification which becomes concrete in the Semitic world—from the point of view of human reality—in the Blessed Virgin, who combines in her person the substance of sanctity and concrete humanity: dazzling and inviolable sanctity and the merciful beauty that communicates it with purity and sweetness. Like every heavenly being, Mary embodies the universal Veil in its function of transmission: she is Veil because she is a form, but she is Essence by her content and thus by her message. She is closed and open, inviolable and generous;²⁵ she is “clothed with the sun” because she is clothed in Beauty—“the splendor of the True”—and she is “black but beautiful” because the Veil is both closed and transparent or because, having been closed by virtue of inviolability, it opens by virtue of mercy. The Virgin is “clothed with the sun” because, as Veil, she is transparent: Light, which is at the same time Beauty, is communicated with such a power that it appears to consume the Veil and abolish the veiling so that the Inward, which is the purpose of the form, seems to envelop the form by transubstantiating it. “Whoever has seen me, has seen God”: these words or their equivalent are found in the most diverse traditional worlds, and they apply especially to the

²⁴ The “dance of the seven veils” has a malefic sense in the case of Salome dancing before Herod and a benefic sense in the case of the Queen of Sheba dancing before Solomon; this difference evokes precisely the dual function of beauty, woman, and wine. In the case of the Blessed Virgin and according to Koranic commentators, the seven veils become seven doors, which Zacharias had to open with a key each time he visited Mary in the Temple; Zacharias represents the privileged soul who penetrates the mystery thanks to a “key”, which is yet another image of “unveiling”. In the same way the seventh day of creation marks the return to the Origin, or the “peace in the Void” as Taoists would say, or the meeting with principal Reality, “naked” because non-manifested. There is a similar meaning in the notion of the “seventh Heaven”, which coincides with the “Garden of the Essence”.

²⁵ The Russian Orthodox Church celebrates a “feast of the Veil” in remembrance of an apparition of Mary at Constantinople during which the Virgin lifted her luminous veil and held it in a miraculous fashion above those present. The Russian word *pokrov* means both “veil” and “intercession”: the *Māyā* that conceals the Essence is at the same time the *Māyā* that communicates graces.

“divine Mary”, who is “clothed with the sun” because she is reabsorbed within it and as it were contained therein.²⁶ To see God by seeing His human theophany is in some fashion to see the Essence before the form: it is to undergo the imprint of the divine Content together with that of the human container, and indeed “before” the container because of the preeminence of the divine. The Veil has become Light, and there is no longer any Veil.

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There is nothing but Light; the veils necessarily originate in Light itself and are prefigured in it. They do not come from its luminosity but from its radiation, not from its clarity but from its expansion. The Light first shines for itself and then radiates to communicate itself, and by radiating it produces the Veil and the veils; by radiating and diffusing itself it gives rise to distance, veils, gradations. The intrinsic tendency to radiation, which later defines itself as creative Being and then manifests itself as cosmos, is the first Veil. As the science of Light, esoterism or *gnosis* is by the same token the science of veilings and unveilings; this is in the very nature of things since discursive thought and the language that expresses it constitute a veil while at the same time the very purpose of this veil is the Light.

God and the world do not mix; there is but one sole Light, which is seen through innumerable veils; the saint who speaks in the name of God does not speak by virtue of a divine inherence, for Substance cannot be inherent in accident: it is God who speaks; the saint is only a veil whose function is to manifest God, “as a light cloud makes the sun visible”, according to a comparison used by Muslims. Every accident is a veil that makes Substance-Light more or less indirectly visible.

In the *Avatāra* there is quite obviously a separation between the human and the divine or between accident and Substance; then there is a mixing, not between human accident and divine Substance but between the human and the direct reflection of Substance in cosmic accident; in relation to the human this reflection may be called “divine” as long as the Cause is in no way reduced to the effect. For some the *Avatāra* is God “descended”; for others he is an “opening” that allows God immutably “on high” to be seen.²⁷

²⁶ The *Avatāras* are “contained” in the heavenly *Logos*, which they represent on earth or of which they manifest a function, and they are likewise contained pre-existentially in the divine Names, which diversify the undifferentiated mysteries of the Essence and whose aspects are innumerable. In Sufism the Blessed Virgin personifies the pre-existential and existentiating *Sophia*: the *Logos* inasmuch as it “conceives” creatures, then “engenders” them, and finally “forms” or “beautifies” them; if Mary thus represents the non-manifested and silent *Logos—nigra sum sed formosa—*Jesus is the manifested and law-giving *Logos*.

²⁷ What “incarnates” in the *Avatāra* is an aspect of *Buddhi*, such as Vishnu or Shiva, and not *Ātmā* as such. It should be recalled in this connection that the purpose of Christianity is to accentuate the “divine

Universal radiation is the unfolding of accident, starting from the initial Relativity; necessary Being, radiating by virtue of its infinitude, gives rise to Contingency. And the Heart that has become transparent communicates the one Light and thus reintegrates Contingency in the Absolute; this means we are truly ourselves only through our awareness of Substance and our conformity to this awareness; it does not mean we must depart from all relativity—even supposing we were able to do this—for in creating us God wishes us to exist.

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Let us summarize: possibilities are the veils that on the one hand restrict the absolute Real and on the other hand manifest it; Possibility as such, in the singular and in the absolute sense, is the supreme Veil, shrouding the mystery of Unicity and at the same time displaying it, while remaining immutable and without depriving itself of anything; Possibility is none other than the Infinitude of the Real. To speak of Infinitude is to speak of Potentiality: and to assert that Possibility as such, or Potentiality, both veils and unveils the Absolute is simply a way of expressing the two-dimensional—but in itself undifferentiated—nature we may discern analytically in the absolutely Real. In the same way we can discern in the Real a three-dimensional nature, which is also intrinsically undifferentiated but which heralds a possible deployment: these dimensions are “Being”, “Consciousness”, “Felicity”. Because of the third element—in itself immutable—divine Possibility overflows “out of love” and gives rise to the mystery of exteriorization that is the universal Veil, whose warp is made of the worlds and woof of beings.

Phenomenon” while the purpose of Islam is to reduce the phenomenon to the Principle or the effect to the Cause.