

## 3

## Polishing a Dirty Mirror: The Philosophic Imagination

VISION, THE STRONGEST OF OUR SENSES, IS CENTRAL TO OUR ENGAGEMENT WITH and in the world. Without vision, we encounter the world in only two dimensions, unable to process the fullness of the world in all of its richness and diversity. Since the currency of the imagination is images, its main activity is often associated with a type of visualization. This vision, however, is not external and directed toward what physically exists before us; rather it is internal, bringing into existence that which is no longer present. For this reason, the medieval thinkers often refer to the imagination as the inner eye (*Ar. al-ayn al-batinīyya*; Lat. *oculus imaginatiois*). The imagination is, thus, a creative faculty responsible for the formation of images of things or concepts that the senses have apprehended but that are now no longer visible.

This presencing of the absent is both the blessing and the curse of the imagination in the history of Western philosophy. Because of its ability to make the absent present, many philosophers in both the ancient and medieval worlds regarded this faculty as unreliable and unpredictable, responsible for the formation of inauthentic expressions. For example, the image of a beautiful object is not the same thing as the object itself, which, in turn, is but a pale imitation of a formal and incorporeal beauty. Images, then, are twice removed from the really real. For reasons such as this, philosophers distrusted the productive or mimetic aspect of the imagination: in a system that gives priority to intellect, production must always be derivative. To imagine something, then, is secondary (or even tertiary) and inferior to our ability to encounter it physically and in such a manner that we can study, analyze, and know it.

But if this is the curse of the imagination, the philosophers who are the subject of this study also appreciated that this faculty could, in phenomenological parlance, grant access to a mode of being otherwise

inaccessible. When properly conditioned and when working in tandem with the intellect, the imagination has the potential to bring forth our engagement with the world in such a manner that we can experience and apprehend that which exists without form. The imagination, in other words, becomes the faculty with the potential to create internal impressions of that which exists incorporeally. The imagination, thus, becomes the locus in which the individual can experience the divine presence.<sup>1</sup>

As I conceptualize it here, the imagination is essentially a hermeneutical faculty. Presenting one thing in terms of another, it translates the unknown into the known, the unfamiliar into the familiar. It does this by actively producing images that permit the individual to visualize and conceptualize spiritual entities. The imagination is not simply a passive faculty; rather, it enriches the individual's engagement with the world, mediating his or her experience with the divine. I concur with Elliot Wolfson who, in his analysis of the role of the imagination in ancient and medieval Jewish mysticism, argues: "In the absence of imagination there is no form, and without form there is no vision and hence no knowledge."<sup>2</sup> So even though the medieval philosophers were critical of the imagination, I think it is no coincidence that the telos of many of their systems is often an elaborate discussion of the philosopher's gaze into the divine, which is described in terms of rich and highly *visual* imagery. This is made all the more telling by the fact that these philosophers argued that God was neither a body nor bound by corporeal extension. From where do these images to describe the divine come? Are they metaphors used to suggest what the experience might be like? Do they represent the translation of the encounter with the Ineffable? Or do they constitute the quiddity of the actual experience?

The goal of the present chapter is to examine the role and function of the imagination as it specifically relates to the initiatory tale. In particular, I wish to examine how our three authors made sense of the philosophical import of the imagination in light of a specific ontology and epistemology. The problematic that these philosophers faced and that this chapter investigates is: How can an individual in this ephemeral world gain access to the eternal world that exists above the moon? Or, put somewhat differently, how can a non-material entity become accessible to a material entity?

It is difficult to address the role and function of the imagination from the vantage point of the twenty-first century without addressing the importance of phenomenology.<sup>3</sup> This is because phenomenology, as developed by Edmund Husserl, emphasizes the centrality of the imagination for the intuition of essences and its ability to reveal human consciousness to itself.<sup>4</sup> This, in turn, allows one to avoid the thorny issue

of attaching valuational terms such as "true" or "false" to imagined forms of consciousness. According to Wollson, "One cannot speak of an intentional object that is imaged without an intentional act of imaging, just as one cannot speak of an act without the object."<sup>5</sup>

According to the formulation of Martin Heidegger, one of the main goals of phenomenology is to investigate the way in which the structures of Being are revealed through the structures of human existence,<sup>6</sup> both of which are inseparable from modes of temporality. Because of this temporality, whenever an individual understands Being, he or she can only do so in time. As a result, all ontological understanding is ultimately rooted in temporality.<sup>7</sup> Hermeneutical phenomenology becomes important here since both of these structures ultimately require interpretation. Hermeneutical phenomenology is, therefore, inseparable from the uncovering of truth (*aletheia*).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, because truth does not exist apart from the phenomena of this world,<sup>9</sup> the goal of phenomenology is to reveal or uncover the nature of Being as it shows itself temporally to individuals rooted in their own temporality. Significantly, in his later writings, Heidegger acknowledged that this could best be done in works of art, in particular poetry.<sup>10</sup>

This discussion proves helpful in dealing with the imagination because it provides one with a framework with which to treat seriously the imagination and its workings. Rather than posit that the images created by the imagination are chimerical, reduced to the exercise of the senses, a phenomenological approach suggests that images not only represent the disclosure of reality, but that they can also become reality itself. The image thus becomes a translucent symbol through which an otherwise unapprehensible reality shines forth.

But this line of inquiry has the potential to create almost as many problems as it solves. If we simply read the imagination of phenomenology onto the medieval thinkers, how can we understand the medieval thinkers on their own terms? Such a question is made difficult owing to the extreme hermeneutical difficulties associated with examining a temporal and spatial order different from our own. Although objectivity is my aim, I am also extremely self-conscious of Gadamer's claim that the goal of interpretation is not simply to bring out the so-called "literal meaning" of the past but also to analyze the manner in which the past confronts the present and the various modalities whereby this confrontation manifests itself. Gadamer, for example, argues that

every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by

attempting a naive assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present.<sup>11</sup>

My goal, then, is not only to try to re-create and describe the medieval philosophical imagination so as to place it within the various psychic and somatic hierarchies, but also to speculate as to why these medieval philosophers were so interested in this faculty despite their criticisms of it. The former allows for a historical study: How did the medievals think about the imagination? What did it allow them to do? What is the nature of the relationship between the intellect and the imagination? The latter permits us to examine the intentional structure of the imagination's content as it is, regardless of its causal origins. Why, for example, do all of these philosophers ultimately fall back on the concept of an inner vision, which implies the creation or formation of highly visual images?

Both of these approaches should, ideally, allow me to present the imagination as an important philosophical faculty. What do I mean by a "philosophical faculty"? Such a term could mean (1) an internal faculty that is relevant to philosophy; (2) an internal faculty capable of producing philosophical knowledge; (3) an internal faculty that translates philosophical knowledge. For the purposes of this study, I shall confine my use of the term to (3). The reason for this is that (1) is too vague and is, at any rate, pre-supposed by (3). Also, (2) would go against much of the philosophers' own comments, which, for the most part, treat the imagination with great suspicion.

The imagination's task, as I have already stated, is essentially hermeneutical. It is the faculty responsible for the creation of forms or images. These forms and images, however, are experienced and not simply described in symbolic terms. Although these forms and images are ultimately reflective of sensory experience, they cannot simply be confined to such experience. The imagination, in its engagement with the sensual world, translates particulars into images that the intellect uses.<sup>12</sup> Thought, as Aristotle claimed, is impossible without our ability to form images, which essentially become the raw data of our higher intellectual processes. Images and the imagination, therefore, represent the prolegomena to noetic activity. For even if, as many of the ancient and medieval philosophers formulated it, the goal of intellectual activity is to comprehend the imageless and the formless, human consciousness is impossible without either image or form. But even more than this: the imagination becomes the locus within the individual soul that allows access to the incorporeal through an intricate process of symbolization.<sup>13</sup>

How does this discussion bear on the imitatory tale? Imitatory tales challenge the assumption that the human mind is somehow distinct from the world and that it is capable of grasping reality by means of formless and imageless principles and that it is independent of the natural order. Based on this assumption is the concomitant notion that thinking is somehow distinct from imagining. The former, in theory existing without corporeal extension and, thus, independent of ephemeral matter, is deemed most real, least susceptible to corruption. The latter, in contrast, relies on the spatial and geometric extensions associated with matter because the imagination's function is to engage in pictorial representation. To a certain extent, however, this juxtaposition is misleading: even the most abstract thought is ultimately dependent upon images that are supplied to it.

Imitatory tales work so effectively because of the Neoplatonic picture of the universe, in which the ontological gap between the One and the many is bridged through emanation.<sup>14</sup> Such an ontology is what ultimately makes epistemology possible. Within this context, non-objective and non-discursive literary images create a clearing wherein the individual imagination is allowed to experience and apprehend specific manifestations of Being. They provide the imagination with a set of symbols—drawn from the cultural, religious, and intellectual trajectories of the day—that enable this faculty to form images of what is essentially formless. As such, these images provide the individual with a framework by which he or she can fathom the transcendent world that is beyond the ken of human experience. When, for example, our authors provide an imaginative account of the various celestial spheres, they realize that such accounts cannot pretend either to be discursive or descriptive. Although the intellect cannot provide a rational description of this super-lunar world, the imagination can gain access to this world, giving it a spatial extension that is based on human experience. The mind, accordingly, yields to such images precisely because they are non-discursive or non-objective and such language is potentially able to trigger a sudden intuition.<sup>15</sup>

#### GREEK PRECEDENTS

Before I move onto the role of the imagination in Avicenna, Ibn Ezra, and Ibn Tufayl, allow me to provide a brief overview of the philosophical discourse that they inherited from the ancients. The imagination, as I already alluded, occupies an ambiguous position in the history of Western philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Occupying the interface between the rational

soul and the animal soul, it is, more often than not, regarded as part of the latter, yet, at the same time, its processes are deemed instrumental for the proper functioning of the former. Important questions that revolve around the function of the imagination are the following: Is the imagination a faculty or a capacity that serves other faculties of cognition? Is the role of the imagination to receive material from the higher soul, to convey information to it, or both? This, in turn, is related to the question of the source/s of the images that are produced in the imagination. Is the imagination simply a function of the body (i.e., the sum of the senses)? If not, what is its relationship to the intellect?

Plato's discussion of the imaginative faculty is brief, cursory and, for the most part, negative.<sup>17</sup> In the *Timaeus*, Plato argues that within the body the appetitive part of the soul, in which the imagination is located, is geographically far away from the rational part because the former does not understand the deliberations of the latter. The appetitive part is incapable "of paying attention to rational argument even if it became aware of it" and that it is "especially led by phantoms and images night and day."<sup>18</sup> Plato faults the imagination for many of the same reasons that he is critical of mimesis: both concern themselves with pale representations that obfuscate and lead astray.

Paradoxically, however, Plato presents the *Timaeus* in the form of a myth.<sup>19</sup> He is conscious of a tension between the concealment of Being and lived experience. Although he contrasts the imagination (*phantasia*) with the intellect, the functioning of the latter is impossible without the former.<sup>20</sup> Plato, then, cannot completely condemn the imagination for it is the faculty responsible for gaining access to the Ideas. In this regard, the imagination is related to the Platonic notion of intuition or the non-rational discovery of rational principles.<sup>21</sup>

In the *Philebus*, another late dialogue, Plato mentions almost in passing that the senses bring in the data and that the memory recalls this data in such a way that images arise. In typical fashion, Plato gives a simile of the "workman in our soul" who paints pictures for us.<sup>22</sup> Although Plato ultimately claims that these images are the core of opinions, which are to be contrasted with true belief, he does acknowledge that some images and opinions are truer than others.<sup>23</sup> Those images that appear to a healthy soul, one that has the proper balance, are more likely to be true or beneficial, presumably because such an individual can differentiate between good and bad, truth and opinion.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle attempts to provide a more adequate philosophical account of the role and function of the imagination.<sup>24</sup> Although it will play an important role in his accounts of action, memory, dreaming, perception, and thought,<sup>25</sup> Aristotle's only systematic treatment of

the imagination is found in *De Anima* III.3, which is universally considered to be highly obscure.<sup>26</sup> Within this section, Aristotle situates the imagination between sense perception and discursive thinking. On the one hand, imagination is not found without sensation, since we are unable to produce images without prior sensory experience;<sup>27</sup> on the other, the imagination produces images by which we think.<sup>28</sup> Despite this, Aristotle is quick to distinguish imagination from knowledge or intelligence (which are never in error to him).<sup>29</sup>

Aristotle offers the following as his main definition of the imagination:

But since when one thing has been set in motion another thing may be moved by it, and imagination is held to be a movement and to be impossible without sensation, i.e. to occur in beings that are percipient and to have for its content what can be perceived, and since movement may be produced by actual sensation and that movement is necessarily similar in character to the sensation itself, this movement cannot exist apart from sensation or in creatures that do not perceive, and its possessor does and undergoes many things in virtue of it, and it is true and false.<sup>30</sup>

Imagination is a movement that is produced by, and presupposes, the activity of the senses. It is the faculty in virtue of which images (*phantasmata*) arise in us.<sup>31</sup> This production of images is, in turn, common to both animals and humans. It is also connected to the body and its activities. Aristotle claims that it is not possible to think without images.<sup>32</sup> This is in keeping with his empiricism, which stresses the acquisition of knowledge through the sensible world. The senses that our senses perceive are the building blocks of our ability to know phenomena; once the perception has passed, we are still able to recall the image in order to think.

Like Plato before him, Aristotle sees in the imagination an ambiguous, yet very important, faculty. It is ambiguous because its subject matter is sensibles and not universals. Furthermore, the imagination can be deceptive: because it stores images, the imagination often produces illusions, especially during sleep or sickness.<sup>33</sup> However, images are also crucial to our ability to interact with the world and form knowledge about it.

It is for precisely this reason that Aristotle argues that literature is a valid domain of philosophical enquiry. Whereas Plato had always stressed the deceptive character of mimesis,<sup>34</sup> Aristotle now transforms mimesis from the simple reproduction of particular realities to the ability of embodying universals.<sup>35</sup> This stems from the fact that, according to Aristotle, humans, by their natures, engage in and take pleasure in mimetic activity.<sup>36</sup> This pleasure, he claims, is tantamount to the natural

exercise of our faculties.<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, then, recognizes in mimesis the ability to improve our understanding; mimesis is a crucial vehicle that allows the intellect to move from particulars to universals.

Significantly, the majority of the commentators that came after Aristotle, even though they attempted to harmonize his work with that of Plato, stressed the Aristotelian justification for the relationship between literature and philosophy. However, they went beyond Aristotle in integrating his theory of poetics into a general theory of emanation and aesthetics, wherein images facilitate the upward movement of the intellect and its ability to cognize the supralunar world.

One of the key figures in introducing Aristotelian psychology into Platonic philosophy was Plotinus, who on the whole was much less suspicious of the imagination than his predecessors.<sup>38</sup> One of his overwhelming interests was in imaging: the One gradually becomes manifest through successive and increasingly corporealized images. The perception of truth is thus ontologically connected to images since it is the latter that make the former accessible. By appealing to certain types of language, Plotinus attempts to textualize the One's ineffability. Whereas ontologically the One manifests itself by dint of images, Plotinus tries to use images to point back beyond themselves.

For Plotinus, the soul is a reflection of higher being. When the soul is functioning properly—that is, according to its higher nature—the lower parts are subsumed into the higher. The higher parts, which include the imagination, are responsible for the upward progression of the individual. But the imagination is problematic. If left to its own devices, it will further enmesh the individual in this world. The imagination therefore needs to be harnessed and its subversive potential redirected so that it may be used for the philosophical enterprise.

In a famous passage, Plotinus compares the imagination to a mirror:

When the intellect is in the upward orientation (the lower part of it) which contains that life of the soul is, so to speak, flung down again and becomes like the reflection resting on a smooth and shining surface of a mirror. When the mirror is in place, the image appears; but if the mirror is absent or out of place, all that would produce an image still exists. In the case of the soul, when there is peace in that part that is capable of reflecting images of the rational and intellectual principles, these appear. . . . When, on the contrary, the internal mirror is shattered through some disturbance of the body, reason and the intellectual principles are unpolished. Intellect is unattended by imagination.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, when this mirror is smooth, polished, and bright, it projects images "back beyond themselves."<sup>40</sup> We are thus able to

know intelligibles as if we had perceived them through the senses. This activity occurs, according to Plotinus, when the mind operates non-discursively.<sup>41</sup> In *Ennead* IV.4.10–11, Plotinus writes, in typical paradoxical fashion:

Even if the soul imagines this world before she enters it, yet she imagines it intellectually, and this act is ignorance not cognition; yet that ignorance is more sublime than any cognition, because the mind is ignorant of what is above it, with an ignorance more sublime than knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

Here the imagination is something that, tied to the intellectual faculty, provides beautiful images of its existence before the descent into the corporeal body. According to Plotinus,

Memory (*μνησις*) begins from heaven, because when the soul becomes like heavenly things she remembers them and knows that they are the ones she knew before entering the lowly world.<sup>43</sup>

The imagination is the faculty that allows the soul to realize that there exists something beyond this world of sense perception. It is responsible for apprehending the relationship between representation and object or appearance and reality. As a result, the imagination has the ability to take concrete particulars and show the way they represent specific disclosures of Being.

Plotinus complicates matters by arguing for the existence of two imaginations within the individual. This stems from his position that each part of the soul—both the rational and the irrational parts—possesses its own imagination. The lower imagination is associated primarily with the lower, sensual memories, whereas the higher imagination, which can also use the data of the lower imagination, departs, along with the upper soul, the body upon corporeal death.<sup>44</sup> When tied to the intellectual faculty, the imagination thus provides beautiful images of its existence before the descent into the corporeal body.

The impact of Plotinus on subsequent Arabic and Jewish Neoplatonists was significant, albeit indirect through works such as the *Theology of Aristotle*. Broadly speaking, he gave them a mythic narrative for charting the career of the soul. More specifically, he provided them with a language of vision to aid the reader's imaginative apprehension of the intelligible world.

Although medieval philosophers never developed what could be called a full-fledged discourse of the imagination, implicit in their discussion is a combination of Plato's theory of knowledge, Aristotle's theory of literature, and Plotinian psychology. The Platonism articulates a

position in which our intuition of truth (the forms) occurs through the pale images present in this world.<sup>45</sup> The Aristotelian component, by contrast, argues that the mimetic dimension of literature improves our understanding and is a crucial vehicle that allows the intellect to move from particulars to universals.<sup>46</sup> By interpreting Plato's and Aristotle's concept of mimesis in terms of the functions of the imaginative faculty, the medieval philosophers developed a distinct theory of aesthetics.

#### LOCATING THE MEDIEVAL IMAGINATION

Of the three authors who are the subject of this study, Avicenna presents the clearest and most comprehensive discussion of psychology in general and the imagination in particular. I begin my analysis with him and then show how both Ibn Ezra and Ibn Tufayl either subscribe to or deviate from his writings. Although Avicenna's basic psychology is Aristotelian, his soul-body dualism is distinctly Platonic.<sup>47</sup> Despite this, however, he disagrees with the basic Platonic position that the soul pre-exists the body; rather, for Avicenna, the soul comes into existence with the body.<sup>48</sup> For Avicenna, the human soul is a unity made up of one substance. This substance, however, is divisible into three distinct parts:

The soul's powers are divided (*inqasama*) into three categories (*qinās*). The vegetative soul (*al-naḡs al-mabāṭiyā*), which is the first entelechy of a natural body from the perspective of reproduction, growth, and nourishment. . . . The animal soul (*al-naḡs al-haywānīyā*) which is the first entelechy of a natural body with respect to desire and movement. . . . The human soul (*al-naḡs al-insānīyā*) which is the first entelechy of a natural body with regard to thought and opinion.<sup>49</sup>

The relationship between these three souls is hierarchical,<sup>50</sup> with each soul subdivided into faculties. Since the vegetative soul is concerned with reproduction, growth, and nourishment, its three faculties are nutrition (*al-qūwa al-ghāṭriyyā*), growth (*al-qūwa al-munāmiyyā*), and reproduction (*al-qūwa al-miwālīdā*).<sup>51</sup>

The animal soul is divided into two main faculties, each of which is subdivided into other faculties. The two main faculties are the motive (*muḥarrīkā*) and the perceptive (*muḥrīkā*).<sup>52</sup> The former is subdivided into active (*faʿilā*) and impulsive (*bāʿithā*) motions.<sup>53</sup> The former corresponds to instinct,<sup>54</sup> the latter to concupiscence and irascibility. Impulsive motions are related to the imagination because they either attract or repel the body through images supplied by this and related faculties.<sup>55</sup> The perceptive faculty is also divided into two—the external and internal

senses—each of which has five subdivisions. The external senses are the traditional five senses: sight (*al-basar*), hearing (*al-sam'*), smell (*al-shamm*), taste (*al-dhawq*), and touch (*al-lams*).<sup>56</sup>

The internal senses receive data from the five senses and subsequently transfer this to the intellect.<sup>57</sup> The internal senses thus play a crucial role in linking the body to the rational faculty, the outer world of sense with the inner world of intellect. The lowest of the internal senses is the faculty of common sense (*al-qūwa al-musharaka*), which functions as a general storehouse for all of the incoming sensations. This faculty, which is located in the "forepart of the front ventricle of the brain," receives sensual data directly from the senses.<sup>58</sup> Above this is the faculty of representation (*qūwa al-khayāl* or *qūwa al-masawwara*). This is responsible for retaining the representations from the faculty of common sense, even when the actual object is absent.

The next faculty is called the imaginative (*qūwa al-mutakhayyila*) with regard to animals and the cogitative (*al-mufakkira*) with regard to humans.<sup>59</sup> This faculty, which is in the middle ventricle of the brain, combines and/or separates the various data in the faculty of representation.<sup>60</sup> The imagination, then, is primarily responsible for recombining various images that are not immediately present to the senses or do not exist in reality. This ability is ultimately responsible for the creation of myths, fables, and fictions.<sup>61</sup>

The fourth of the internal senses is the faculty of estimation (*qūwa al-wahm*), which is located in the far end of the middle ventricle of the brain. This is responsible for the perception of the intentions that are in sensible objects.<sup>62</sup> The example that Avicenna always cites in this regard is that one always knows to flee from a wolf. This faculty also is what judges the images of the imagination to determine whether or not they are believable.

The fifth, and final, of the internal senses is the recollective faculty (*al-qūwa al-dhākira*), located in the rear ventricle of the brain.<sup>63</sup> This is responsible for retaining the intentions that the faculty of estimation perceives.

In addition to possessing vegetative and animal souls, humans also possess a rational soul. This soul is divided into two faculties or intellects: the practical (*al-qūwa/al-aql al-ʿāmil*) and the theoretical (*al-qūwa/al-aql al-ʿālim*).<sup>64</sup> The former is intimately connected to the imagination in serving as an intermediary between the lower souls and the theoretical intellect. For example, it uses the faculties of imagination and estimation to deduce transient activities and arts.<sup>65</sup> When the practical intellect has proper control over all of the lower faculties, the person is said to be ethical.<sup>66</sup> This intellect, however, is superior to the animal

soul because it is able to induce premises with the help of the theoretical intellect in the ethical and political sciences.

The final faculty and the epitome of the individual is the theoretical intellect, whose function is to receive the impression of universals that exist outside of matter. The theoretical intellect has different relations to these universal forms: it can be completely potential, relatively potential, or active. When the rational faculty is completely potential, it is called the material intellect (*al-aql al-hayilānī*); this stage of the intellect is common to all humans. As soon as this intellect acquires the primary intelligibles or axioms (e.g., the concept that the whole is greater than its parts), it becomes the habitual intellect (*al-aql bi al-malakā*). Once this intellect begins to acquire the secondary intelligibles (deduced through syllogisms), it becomes the actual intellect (*al-aql bi al-ʿaql*). When the theoretical intellect is actively engaged in syllogistic inquiry and is aware of this activity, Avicenna calls this the acquired intellect (*al-aql al-mustafād*).

According to Avicenna, there are primarily two ways to acquire knowledge. One is through the external world, the world of particulars; the other is through the celestial world (more specifically, through the tenth celestial intellect, called the Active Intellect). The latter form of knowledge, since it is not based on particulars or matter, is regarded as superior to the former. Crucial to the acquisition of knowledge from the external world is the faculty of the imagination. This faculty is able to abstract the material accidents from something (e.g., a particular person named Zayd) and subsequently recombine them to create an image that may not exist in reality (e.g., a man with no head). Such an image, however, will nevertheless remain a particular, since the image that is imagined will still resemble an individual person.<sup>67</sup> Because the internal senses are confined to bodily organs, they can only perceive particulars.<sup>68</sup> For this reason, all sensually produced knowledge requires the body.<sup>69</sup>

Juxtaposed against this is the intellect, which in theory does not require the body, since it has immediate contact with universals. If the intellect were confined to an organ, Avicenna informs us, it would not be able to understand itself.<sup>70</sup> The intellect does not abstract form from matter in the Aristotelian sense;<sup>71</sup> rather, it receives forms directly from the Active Intellect:

And we say that the theoretical faculty (*al-qūwa al-nazariyya*) also moves from potentiality (*al-qūwa*) to actuality (*al-ʿaql*) by means of the illumination of a substance (*jawhar*) that is already in this state. This is because a thing cannot move from potentiality to actuality by its own essence, unless another thing gives it actuality. This actuality that it gives is the intelligible form.<sup>72</sup>

The animal soul, including the faculty of imagination, thus plays a negligible role in this form of knowledge. Despite this, Avicenna does acknowledge that the imagination can help the rational soul acquire knowledge. First, since part of the imaginative faculty's function is to abstract attributes from particulars, the imagination aids the rational soul in the abstraction of single universals.<sup>73</sup> Second, it (along with the faculty of estimation) provides affirmation or negation about these single universals.<sup>74</sup> Third, this faculty aids in the discovery of empirical premises (e.g., if it is light, it is day; if it is not day, it is not light).<sup>75</sup> Fourth, the imagination is useful in the assent (*tasdiq*) of traditional information (*shidāda al-tawātur*; lit. the force of tradition).<sup>76</sup>

Within this Peripatetic paradigm, the imagination fails rather poorly since it cannot provide the rational soul with universals. Indeed, the best that the faculty of the imagination can do is initiate the process of intellection; once this process has begun, however, the imagination actually gets in the way of the intellect's proper operation.<sup>77</sup> In other works—most notably in his *Kitāb al-ishārāt wa al-tanbihāt*, his last major philosophical composition—Avicenna puts a somewhat different emphasis on the imagination. This is particularly apparent in his ninth section of the fourth part, entitled *Fī maqāmāt al-ʿarīfīn* (On the stations of the knowers). Although he nowhere identifies who these *ʿarīfīn* are, historically this term is used to designate the Sufis who possess *maʿrifa* or *ʿirfān*.<sup>78</sup> What Avicenna seems to be doing here, then, is equating the love of God with the wonder that is to be derived from philosophy broadly defined. To begin to undertake this, however, one must properly align one's soul. Music, poetry, as well as thoughtful worship, are the preparatory stages through which the *ʿarīf* begins a process that culminates in the conjunction (*ittiṣāl*) with God.<sup>79</sup> The reason one performs these spiritual exercises, according to Avicenna, is to harness the imaginative and estimative faculties to the rational soul.<sup>80</sup> In other words, such exercises enable the individual to rationalize the imagination, to make it into a faculty that is relevant to philosophy.

Avicenna also recognizes a more other-worldly function of the imagination. He argues that it is the faculty responsible for making the visions of dreams and other inspirations sensible, audible, and visible.<sup>81</sup> For in such dreams and inspirations, Avicenna claims, the individual's imaginative faculty makes contact with an external source that "draws" within the imagination "pictures of things that do not exist but that may be found in the future."<sup>82</sup> We see here that dreams and inspirations are not internal phenomena confined to the body; rather, they represent the contact between the imagination (significantly not the intellect) and the divine world.<sup>83</sup> Within this paradigm, the imagination does not simply

recall or (re)combine past sense data; rather, it actively creates symbols that translate the encounter with the spiritual, incorporeal world.

The imagination is responsible for transferring the data that the intellect receives from its contact with the Active Intellect into the faculty of common sense. Avicenna writes,

If the sense perceptions are reduced and fewer preoccupations remain, it is not unlikely for the soul to have escapes that lead from the work of the imagination to the side of sanctity. Thus, apprehensions of the invisible world are imprinted on the soul, which then flow to the world of the imagination and are then imprinted in the common sense.<sup>84</sup>

This data can then be used either by the intellect or the imagination. The imagination becomes important within this context because of its hermeneutical function. It essentially possesses the ability to focus the attention of the individual on the divine by expressing the incorporeal in corporeal form.

Avicenna further argues that what the rational soul learns in its conjunction (*ittiṣāl*) with the divine Intellect is beyond demonstration.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, Avicenna seems to imply that the imagination is the faculty that is responsible for conveying knowledge of the individual's direct experience with the divine: *wa lā yakshifū al-maqāl ʿan-hā ghayra al-khawāl* ("the intellect cannot uncover it, only the imagination").<sup>86</sup> Knowledge of this experience therefore unfolds through the imagination. Even if the knowledge that one gains from this contact is ultimately syllogistic, rationality cannot fully explain the details of the contact.

Ibn Ezra is, for the most part, primarily interested in this second, less Peripatetic and more intuitive, of Avicenna's two paradigms. However, when we look at Ibn Ezra's psychology, we immediately face a number of hermeneutical difficulties. Generally speaking, Jewish thinkers were forced to confront the biblical text in the light of the various philosophical paradigms that they inherited.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, it is often difficult to know just how these Jewish thinkers employed, let alone engaged, the terminology of the philosophical tradition. Did, for example, they use it unequivocally or metaphorically? Such usage is made even more difficult in Ibn Ezra's *oeuvre*, which, for all intents and purposes, lacks a systematic vocabulary. In particular, it is often impossible to discern, even when he does use technical terms (e.g., *devequt*, *kevod*), whether he employs them technically, as metaphors, or simply as part of a common set of phrases that would have been in vogue among twelfth-century intellectuals.<sup>88</sup>

It is also difficult to isolate a philosophical topic or issue in an author who never wrote a philosophical treatise. Indeed, this is made even

more difficult by the wide array of sources that Ibn Ezra drew upon.<sup>89</sup> For example, Ibn Ezra knew well the work of Saadya Gaon, yet Saadya's work has a set of theoretical assumptions that are radically different from those of thinkers who drew heavily from the work of Plotinus.<sup>90</sup> Although Ibn Ezra's work is certainly greater than the sum of its parts, it is nevertheless unarguable that he took from a number of sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and that often these sources sit together uncomfortably in his work, often showing little or no attempt by the author at systematization.<sup>91</sup> To cite one example relevant to the imagination, Ibn Ezra must essentially reconcile the philosophical system he inherited from the Greeks that potentially represses the visual with the biblical-rabbinic tradition stressing that God can be seen in the text.<sup>92</sup>

Now what are the repercussions of this for Ibn Ezra's theory of the imagination? Or, perhaps more forcefully, does Ibn Ezra even have a theory of the imagination? For obvious reasons, I assume that he does and that it can be retrieved. The way that I go about this is to examine various statements he made in his biblical commentaries and in his poetry and then to situate them in the light of my preceding analysis of Avicenna's discussion of the imagination. In doing this, my goal is not to present an exhaustive survey of Ibn Ezra's psychology,<sup>93</sup> rather, I shall compare and contrast his comments on the imagination with those of Avicenna.

Ibn Ezra did not simply take over Avicenna's account. To argue this would be too reductive and would ignore the contribution of his other sources. The reason that I have chosen to emphasize the Avicennian dimension is because of Ibn Ezra's initiatory tale *Hay ben Meqitz*. To understand this treatise fully, we must, in part, put it in counterpoint with its precursor, Avicenna's *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*. One important distinction between the two thinkers, however, is that Ibn Ezra is not particularly interested in exploring the nature of the relationship between the imagination and logic. We thus do not encounter in his writings the discussion of mimesis, which was so important to Avicenna. This could be the result of two factors: he was not interested in logic; or he was an accomplished poet, for whom the nature and power of the poetic image on the individual's imagination would have been obvious. Ibn Ezra, however, was particularly interested in how the embodied individual is able to grasp the uppermost world (*ha-olam ha-elyon*). Indeed, his concern with this seems to be constant throughout many of his diverse writings. Avicenna, on the contrary, only alludes to this in his later works, such as the concluding sections of *K. al-ishārāt* and his Commentary to the *Theology of Aristotle*.

Of central importance for Ibn Ezra is the nature of the relationship between the human soul and the divine world<sup>94</sup> and, more precisely, the question of how the human soul can know that world. In the cosmological system we encounter in *Hay ben Meqitz*, Ibn Ezra recounts ten

spheres in ascending order: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the sphere of the fixed stars, the all-encompassing diurnal sphere which contains no stars, and the sphere of the unembodied angels.<sup>95</sup> This last sphere, which he alternatively calls glory (*kavod*),<sup>96</sup> is of crucial importance for understanding Ibn Ezra's discussion of the imagination.

It is also worth noting that Ibn Ezra's ontology also consists of a huge gap between the sublunar and superlunar worlds. Indeed, following Avicenna, Ibn Ezra claims that God does not know particulars, except in a universal way.<sup>97</sup> Despite this claim, however, Ibn Ezra is ambiguous about the way in which the embodied individual can attain knowledge of the divine world. In some of his comments, he argues that we can only know this by means of the created order (i.e., through the divine attributes of action).<sup>98</sup> Yet in other places, he claims that one can receive a direct, almost inspirational, form of knowledge if one's soul separates from the body and cleaves to the upper world.<sup>99</sup>

Although common to both of these modes of knowledge is the impossibility of knowing God's essence, they do nonetheless have rather different implications. The first form of knowledge is discursive and is based on rational, empirical, and scientific assumptions. The second form, however, implies a more experiential mode of knowledge. In other words, the latter cannot be grounded in an objective explanation because it is ultimately disclosed by means of non-objective and elliptical tools. It is this non-objective form of knowledge, I contend, that *Hay ben Meqitz* attempts to portray with its use of allegory and myth.

Let me briefly situate the imagination within Ibn Ezra's psychology. In his commentary to Qohelet 7:3, Ibn Ezra distinguishes, as did Avicenna before him, among three souls.<sup>100</sup> The lowest soul is the vegetative (*ha-nefesh ha-somelet*; or, alternatively, the *nefesh*); the intermediate soul is the animal (*ha-nefesh ha-behema*; sometimes referred to as the *ruah*); and the highest is the rational soul (*ha-neshamah*, or *ha-lev*). The function of the animal soul is both to act as an intermediary between the higher and lower souls and then to interact with the sensual world through the five senses and process the data associated with this. The animal soul is crucial since it can either fall victim to the passions of the body or be used in the service of the intellect. Through a combination of theoretical and practical wisdom, one is able to perfect oneself in such a manner as to achieve a union (Heb. *dewqut*; Ar. *ittisāl*) with the Active Intellect:

Wisdom (*'asa*) and ethics (*musar*) lead an individual to put God before him both day and night and thus his *neshamah* cleaves to the Creator before separating from the body [i.e., at the death of the body].<sup>101</sup>

In other passages, Ibn Ezra claims that it is the heart (*lev*) that cleaves to the upper world.<sup>102</sup> For the heart, as the essence (*'iqqar*) of the individual,<sup>103</sup> is the locus in which one loves God and experiences His presence. However, since the heart (=soul or *nefesh*) exists within a corporeal body, it is unable to know the upper world without recourse to vision. It is at this juncture that the imagination, the "eye of the heart" (*'ein ha-lev*) becomes important.<sup>104</sup> For it is this "eye" that allows us to see visions of the upper world: it is the faculty responsible for giving corporeal forms to incorporeal phenomena.

This upper world, the world of the unembodied angels, cannot be perceived by corporeal beings without the aid of a certain faculty. Corporeality thus puts limits on our ability to discern the structure of abstract reality. However, images provide a non-explanatory contact with this reality. For example, Ibn Ezra claims that

When the soul is directed toward the glory<sup>105</sup> then it receives new images, forms and visions by the word of God.<sup>106</sup>

Here Ibn Ezra seems to be arguing that when the soul of the righteous cleaves to the upper world, it is able to encounter that world in an unmediated way. This disclosure, however, can occur only through the mediation of the imagination, with its images becoming the symbols by which reality reveals itself. As a result, an intelligible portrait of the celestial realm can only occur through the familiar images of the world that is lived and experienced. The human soul is able to perceive the celestial world because it is composed of the same essence of the disembodied angels.<sup>107</sup> However, it cannot do this without the images provided by the corporeal world, for these images represent the sum and substance of our experience with the world. This is why, for example, Ibn Ezra portrays the Active Intellect in *Hay ben Meqitz* as an old man with a youthful appearance. But, of course, one must try to present this in such a way that the image is not mistaken for the reality behind it.

According to his commentary to Psalm 139:18, there are open to the individual two paths by which to obtain divine knowledge: one occurs through the various channels associated with the ratiocination that we engage in while awake; the other, by contrast, occurs during special dreams:

[This] is like the appearance of God when the body sleeps and when man's *neshamah* cleaves to the upper *neshamah* so that it sees beautiful images (*temunot mifla'ot*) . . . and this is not the path of all dreams.

These special dreams are those in which the soul of the wise man cleaves to the beings associated with the upper world (*ha-elyonim*) that

exist without bodies. In *Hay ben Meqitz*, Ibn Ezra makes this explicit when he claims that one can only experience this world internally, through the "eye of the heart":

It happened that when we came to its borders  
We approached to cross it.  
I saw wonderful forms (*shrot mifla'ot*)  
Awesome visions (*mar'ot nor'a'ot*).  
Angels stood guard  
They were mighty ones.  
Cherubim  
Enormous and many.  
Seraphim standing  
Praising and announcing His unity.  
Angels and ofanim  
Lauding and singing.  
Souls (*nefashot*)  
Consecrating.  
Spirits (*ruhot*)  
Glorifying.

I was afraid and said  
"How awesome is this place that I see."  
He replied: "From your feet  
Remove the sandals,  
From the matter of your corpse  
Lift your soul.  
Forsake your thoughts  
Relax your eyelids!  
See by the eyes of your interior  
The pupils of your heart (*be-ishonei levavekha*)."<sup>108</sup>

It is up to the imagination to give these incorporeal entities an appropriate form. This is something that the intellect cannot do since its epistemological currency is that which exists without image.

What Ibn Ezra intimates, then, like Avicenna and others who came before him, is that the intellect needs the imagination because it is the faculty responsible for supplying images necessary for thought. These images, to quote his commentary to Psalm 17:15, do not occur through a "vision of the eye" (*mar'eh ha-'ein*), but through a "vision of wisdom" (*mar'eh shiqul ha-da'at*). This latter vision is the vision that occurs when the imagination, in close association with the intellect, encounters the Active Intellect and subsequently transfers the perceived images to the intellect. In typical fashion, Ibn Ezra only alludes to his sources: "These are truly visions of God (*mar'ot elohim*) and these are matters that are not appropriate to reveal except to one who has studied psychology (lit. the science of the soul)."

Of our three authors, Ibn Tufayl's discussion is probably the most straightforward—only because he does not write very much about the imagination in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*. We should not be surprised to find that he is, at first blush, generally mistrustful of this faculty. Despite this, however, his entire tale is premised on the notion that the intellect is ultimately closed to the highest echelons of knowledge. At the beginning of his treatise, Ibn Tufayl acknowledges that he decided to compose this tale in order to intimate to a disciple "a state so wonderful that the tongue cannot describe or explain it, for it belongs to another order of being, a different world."<sup>109</sup> He describes this state in rich experiential, as opposed to discursive, terms: it is full of splendor (*bahya*), happiness (*surūr*), pleasure (*ladhāḥa*), and joy (*hubūr*), and it is a state that (here he employs a Sufi term) is characterized by taste (*dhawq*).<sup>110</sup> Ibn Tufayl subsequently claims that on one level this state is certainly similar to the one that philosophers (here symbolized by Ibn Bajja) mention:

The level to which Abū Bakr [Ibn Bajja] refers is reached by speculative science (*ʿilm al-naẓar*) and mental investigation (*al-baḥṭh al-fikr*). No doubt he reached it—but he did not surpass it. The level of which I spoke at the outset is something quite different, although the two are alike in that nothing revealed here contradicts what is revealed by reason. The difference is an increase in what is seen and in the fact that this is experienced through what I must, only figuratively, call a faculty. For neither in popular language nor in specialized terminology can I find an expression for it.<sup>111</sup>

If the line between mysticism and philosophy was a fine one in the thought of Avicenna and Ibn Ezra, we see it here very much in a state of collapse.<sup>112</sup> In particular, Ibn Tufayl stresses the concept of *dhawq*, the direct experience of the divine, that was so central to the medieval mystics.<sup>113</sup> Although he nowhere addresses directly the concept of the imagination, he alludes to it once he begins to emphasize this metaphorical "faculty," whose function is to create a metaphorical "seeing" (*mushāhadat*) in the individual.<sup>114</sup> For as Ibn Tufayl is at pains to remind the reader, his intention in writing *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* is essentially to discuss the nature of this "seeing" in a non-discursive manner.<sup>115</sup>

Once we progress beyond Ibn Tufayl's prologue and enter into the narrative, our first encounter with the imagination is primarily negative. It occurs when Ḥayy comes to the realization that, although the world must have an incorporeal (*laysa bi-jism*) cause, such a cause can neither be perceived nor imagined:

But if He cannot be perceived He cannot be imagined (*yataḥayyja*) either, since imagining (*takḥayyul*) is no more than the mind's projection of

sensual images (*al-ṣūr al-maḥsūsāt*) that are no longer present. Furthermore, if He is not a material body, then it is impossible to apply to Him any of the predicates of physical things.<sup>116</sup>

Although this passage is generally quite critical of the imagination, as Ḥayy progresses up the *sala naturae* he comes to a fascinating realization: in order to know God, he must essentially become like the imaginative faculty! As Ḥayy ascends the various cosmological levels, he understands that his body is a hindrance. He describes it as dark (*zulam*), dull (*kaṭīf*), and beholden to sensory phenomena.<sup>117</sup> In order to try to free his soul from his body, Ḥayy realizes that he must engage in mimetic activity (*tashbih*), the main function of the imagination:

Ḥayy had learned that his ultimate happiness (*saʿāda*) and triumph over misery would be won only if he could visualize (*mushāhadat*) the Necessarily Existent Being (*al-mawjūd al-wājib al-wujūd*) so continuously that nothing could distract him from it for an instant. He had wondered how this might be achieved and now came to the conclusion that the means would be to practice these three forms of mimesis (*tashbihāt*).<sup>118</sup>

While Ibn Tufayl is quite critical of the imagination, he also acknowledges that mimesis is the only way embodied creatures can apprehend the divine. Most significant for my present purpose is his description of the third and final type of mimesis, which is an attempt to become as like the Necessarily Existent Being as possible:

The third sort of imitation (*tashbih*) is the attainment of a pure and all-consuming vision (*mushāhadat al-ṣarf wa al-istighnāq*) of Him alone. Whose existence is necessary. In this vision the self vanishes; it is extinguished, obliterated—and so are all other subjectivities. All that remains is the One, the Truth, the Necessarily Existent—glory, exaltation, and honor to Him.<sup>119</sup>

In order to achieve such a state, here described in highly visual terms, one must engage in ascetic praxis. This type of mimesis leads Ḥayy to the height of human perfection, a stage described in terms of a metaphorical "seeing." Although I will describe the content of this vision in the following section, suffice it to say here that Ibn Tufayl is ultimately forced to fall back on the activities of the imaginative faculty:

Still I shall not leave you without hints (*shārāḥ*) as to the wonders Ḥayy saw (*shāhad*) from this height, not by pounding on the gates of truth, but by coining symbols (*mithāl*), for there is no way of finding out what truly occurs at this plateau of experience besides reaching (*wagūf*) it [yourself]. So listen now with the ears of your heart (*samʿ al-qalb*) and look sharp

with the eyes of your mind (*basar al-'aql*), for what I shall try to convey to you. Perhaps in what I say you will find guideposts to set you on the main road. My only condition is that you now demand of me no further oral explanation (*mushāfaha*) than what I have set down in these pages. For it is dangerous to make pronouncements on the ineffable, and the margins in which I work are narrow.<sup>120</sup>

The faculty that is ultimately responsible for this—for interpreting the unknown, putting it into corporeal images—is the imagination, not simply the intellect. Here it is worth reiterating that the imagination is an active faculty, one that is ultimately responsible for the creation of images that embody the individual's experience with the intelligible world. As such, the imagination is able to invest or divest images, as the case may be, that mediate between the corporeal individual and the incorporeal spiritual world. The imagination, in other words, mediates, puts into form, an otherwise unknowable encounter. The "ears of the heart" and the "eyes of the mind" here work as synonyms for the imagination.

#### THE BEAUTY IMAGINED IN THE TEXT

Philosophy possesses an existential dimension. It cannot be completely objective, but must also be grounded in the particulars of human experience. To phrase this somewhat differently, humans can only think with the contents of their imagination, their memories, and their experiences. We can only apprehend that which exists without form by means of form, the incorporeal through the corporeal. In this section, I argue that the initiatory tale functions as a type of meditation manual, providing a sequence of events or places that are not only highly structured but also function to structure the experiences of the reader. These tales construct a spatial journey by means of which the reader can connect and compare the text to his or her own experiences. It is primarily this use of images and the imagination that helps explain the highly visual nature of medieval Neoplatonism, which culminates in the intellectual vision of spiritual or incorporeal forms. Here it is important to keep in mind that the medievals conceived of the memory as a physical structure in which the individual places images that the imagination locates at a later date.<sup>121</sup> I want to suggest here that the *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* cycle represents the textualization of this process.

According to Aristotle, memory belongs to the same part of the soul as does the imagination.<sup>122</sup> Both are intimately connected to the formation of mental images or pictures that, in turn, order and categorize our

interactions with sense data. This process is subsequently responsible for further thinking. In her discussion of the use of memory in the medieval Christian monastic tradition, Mary Carruthers argues that

The art of meditation is fundamentally an art of thinking with a well-furnished memory. Though the goal of spiritual life is the unmediated vision of God, divine *theoria*, one can only get there by traveling through one's memory. A person's entire memory is a composition among whose places, routes, and pathways one must move whenever one thinks about anything.<sup>123</sup>

Within this context, the *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* cycle embodies a synergy between imagination/memory, an imaginative journey through a structured, textual space, and a distinct theory of aesthetics. Although this cycle's relationship to aesthetics is the subject of chapter 5, let me begin to articulate here how it plays out in terms of these other two features. Each tale produces both a repeated and repeatable sequential journey that functions as a structured background through which the imagination moves. Reading these tales enables the individual to develop the craft of meditation by means of which one becomes self-conscious and self-reflexive of making an inner journey among various places, situated on a vertical hierarchy. These tales, consequently, are compositions that guide the individual to a specific and pre-stated goal. It is, of course, up to the individual reader to develop the wherewithal to proceed on this journey.

It is at this point that aesthetics become so important. Influenced by Plotinus's discussion "On Intellectual Beauty,"<sup>124</sup> the medieval Islamic and Jewish Neoplatonists argued that physical beauty is an image that issues ontically from a non-physical source and is not a mere shadow or pale imitation as it was for Plato. Explicit in this discussion is the claim that the arts both contain and convey knowledge of the intelligible world. In experiencing tangible beauty, the individual is presented with a corporeal or physical form by which he or she can contemplate and observe proportion, integrity, and clarity.<sup>125</sup> This, in turn, allows him or her to recognize those principles in his or her own soul that are also reflective of the harmony within the universe.<sup>126</sup> Physical beauty, then, like the imagination, represents the presence of absence, the cloaking of the incorporeal within corporeal form. Aesthetic theory, then, was based on the notion that one encounters in physical objects an unmediated reflection of the divine. It is thus important not to circumscribe aesthetics to the domain of "literature" by claiming that "philosophy," by nature, is devoid of artistic or emotive expression. Explicit in this is the awareness that literature, unlike philosophy, has the

ability to address the particular concerns of human beings by addressing such concerns in their totality and in all their possibilities.<sup>127</sup> Within this context, aesthetics bridges the gap between philosophy and literature because its focus is on the universal significances of particular objects or forms of contemplation (e.g., harmony, balance, order). This discipline of aesthetics, as developed by the medieval Neoplatonists, was inseparable from broader ontological and metaphysical concerns. These philosophers were not interested in artistic and literary creativity *per se*; rather, they investigated how this creativity related to a specific noetic development.<sup>128</sup> Consequently, they made explicit, as Deborah Black has demonstrated, the interconnections between mimesis and the faculty of the imagination.<sup>129</sup>

In his *Risāla fī al-ʿishq*, for example, Avicenna argues that both the rational and the animal souls "invariably love what has beauty of order (*ḥusn al-nizām*), composition (*al-taʿrif*), and harmony (*al-fitāḥ*).<sup>130</sup> For Avicenna, both the animal and the rational souls are attracted to beautiful objects that are defined by their order, composition, and harmony. The goal is that the individual will be able to align his or her imagination with his or her rational soul in such a manner that the former will resemble the latter.<sup>131</sup>

Beauty was not something based on mere artistic sentiment. On the contrary, it is an intelligible principle founded upon the ontology of emanation.<sup>132</sup> By encountering and recognizing the way in which images reveal a certain moment or manifestation of the divine, the individual is able to relate the order, composition, and harmony of the contemplated object to its universal significance. Plotinus, as the harbinger of medieval aesthetics, argued that beautiful objects and images create a tranquility in the soul that enables it to perceive a transcendent beauty otherwise inaccessible to the senses.<sup>133</sup> In encountering artistic beauty, the individual intuits and apprehends immaterial truth.<sup>134</sup> This encounter, in effect, enables the individual to reverse the emanative process by translating the particular image and relating it back to its ontic source.

Significantly, Avicenna wrote not just one, but two commentaries to Aristotle's *Poetics*.<sup>135</sup> He wrote the first, found in his *Kitāb al-majmūʿ* and entitled *al-ḥikma al-ʿarāḍiyya fī maʿāni kitāb al-shāʿr*, fairly early in his career. The other is found in the logical section of his magnum opus, *al-Shifāʾ*.<sup>136</sup> Two things become clear from this. First, as was typical of the Alexandrian commentators, the Islamic philosophers included the *Poetics* as part of Aristotle's *Organon*.<sup>136</sup> Second, the fact that he wrote two commentaries to this work shows that Avicenna, as one of the few Islamic philosophers who wrote allegories and poetry,<sup>137</sup> was intimately

concerned with the nature of the logical relationship between literature and philosophy.

The starting point for Avicenna's interest in poetry and literature, as for Aristotle before him, is that humans possess a universal instinct for both engaging in mimetic activity and for taking pleasure in observing its representations. He writes in the commentary from *al-Shifāʾ*:

What is delightful is not the form itself nor what is portrayed but its being a precise imitation of something else. For this reason, learning is pleasant not to philosophers alone but to common people due to the imitation that is in it, and because learning consists of a certain representation of a thing in the "seat" of the soul. Men, therefore, find great delight in portrayed forms if they can well relate these to their originals.<sup>138</sup>

Mimetic representations, according to this passage, evoke an active participation on the part of the individual. This, in turn, throws into relief the importance of the imaginative faculty in the acquisition of knowledge. For the individual—as a listener, reader, or viewer—must effectively use the imagination in the service of the intellect in order to draw comparisons either between particulars or between particulars and universals. It is through the contemplation of the subsequent configuration or juxtaposition that we take pleasure. There thus exists within the mimetic arts an important aesthetic quality that is in the service of reason. This pleasure that comes from the tranquility of the soul leads to the subsequent acquisition of knowledge.

Since he inherited the *Poetics* as part of the *Organon*, Avicenna spends a great deal of time analyzing the formal structures behind the poetic syllogism. For Avicenna, both demonstrative and poetic utterances share a similar logical structure. Although the poetic utterance, unlike its demonstrative counterpart, is ultimately unconcerned with the truth or falsity of a statement, it nevertheless requires an assent (*tasdiq*) that is based on the pleasure (*ladhāḥa*) and awe (*taʿajjub*) we experience in it.<sup>139</sup>

Like Alfarabi before him,<sup>140</sup> Avicenna divides syllogisms into different types: demonstrative, dialectical, rhetorical, and poetic. Each type of syllogism implies, respectively, a different degree of conviction: certitude, strong opinion, persuasion, and imaginative assent.<sup>141</sup> The last one is not conviction properly speaking because it is based on wonder (*taʿajjub*) as opposed to strict analytical assent. In his later commentary, Avicenna writes:

Both imaginative assent and conviction are [kinds of] compliance. Imaginative assent, however, is a compliance due to the wonder and pleasure that are caused by the utterance itself, while conviction is a

compliance due to the realization that the thing is what it is said to be. Imaginative assent results from the utterance itself, conviction from what is spoken of, i.e., the focus is on the matter being conveyed.<sup>142</sup>

Despite this statement, Avicenna does see a similar structure in poetic and demonstrative syllogisms. Only the former is contingent on its ability to affect the imaginative faculty. Poetic syllogisms occupy a position far below that of the other forms of syllogistic reasoning. Nevertheless, conclusions still follow formally from a poetic syllogism. Thus when we read a poem or another piece of literature, we are essentially reading imprecise or non-traditional philosophical conclusions, to which we must intuit the minor and major premises.

Let me now relate this discussion specifically to the *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* cycle. These tales represent the creative synthesis of poetry and philosophy, something that was well-suited to medieval Neoplatonism. To interpret these tales solely as poetry or simply as philosophical treatises misses the mark. Indeed, our authors' philosophical expression cannot be separated from their loyalties to poetics, literature, and aesthetics. Metaphors, allegories, and myths—as I argued in the last chapter—become more than simple literary devices: they are important keys that unlock the unfolding structure of the universe. These devices—because they point beyond themselves and are more than what they appear—are what allow an individual to glimpse a reality that is otherwise unknowable or ungraspable. This is precisely what these initiatory tales do: they provide an account or map of reality, and its structures, in spatial and corporeal terms.

The central plot of the *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* cycle is the human soul's attainment of perfection. This is based on the ontological unfolding of the universe from a single source and the subsequent return of the perfected human soul to its point of origin. Within this context, the ontological system of Neoplatonism is all about hierarchies, one above the sphere of the moon and one below it. The former concerns the emanation of the celestial spheres, intellects, and planets from the One; the latter concerns mineral, plants, animals, and culminates in humans. Significantly, humans, in particular human souls, are essentially the only entity that is afforded a certain mobility within these hierarchies. If one purifies the soul, it can ascend the celestial world until it reaches its source. The imagination plays an important role in this process since it is the faculty that makes the absent present and, as a result, is ultimately responsible for producing or translating images to help the rational soul transcend particulars.

The *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* cycle represents a non-factual presentation, expressing, without fully capturing, that which is inherently ungraspable.

In other words, because the universe discloses itself in a manner that is distinctly non-objective, it cannot be grounded in objective explanations.<sup>143</sup> Sense phenomena are necessary conditions for our knowledge of both the transcendence of the world and what is transcendent to the world. From the embodied human perspective, Neoplatonic articulations are layered in such a manner that the higher are founded on the lower, and in such a way that this foundation can always be brought to light. Images, then, are what allow a finite individual, composed of form and matter, to gain access to that which exists without matter. As a result, the supralunar world cannot be explained discursively or objectively, since we have never experienced it in such ways. It is at this point that literature is of the utmost importance. For literature acts upon us in such a way that it clears a space and subsequently discloses the universe intuitively and in such a way that things present themselves to us.<sup>144</sup>

Our three authors present their tales as works of literature in both this aesthetic and phenomenological sense, thereby providing a particular insight that recognizes our inability to grasp the nature of the supralunar world objectively. In so doing, these tales present the structure of the ideal journey through which the individual soul ideally moves. It is precisely for this reason that the imagination becomes so important, since it is the faculty responsible for the creation of images of incorporeal and spiritual beings. These tales encourage the reader to form the correct images and also provide the spaces or loci in which they should be located. Through linguistic devices such as metaphor and allegory, the imagination is drawn to the aesthetic dimension of particulars, thereby focusing the soul's gaze upon the truth/universal behind the particular.

To illustrate this point, let me provide a series of examples from our three authors. In the following section of Avicenna's tale, *Ḥayy* informs the unnamed protagonist of a specific cosmographical region, near the king (*malik*),

[He] who succeeds in leaving this clime enters the clime of the angels (*malā'ika*), among which the one that marches with the earth (*al-ard*) is a clime in which the terrestrial angels (*al-malā'ika al-ardīyyin*) dwell. These angels form two groups. One occupies the right, and they are the angels who know and order. Opposite them, a group occupies the left side: they are the angels who obey and act.<sup>145</sup>

On one level, this is a description of the theoretical and practical intellects of the individual.<sup>146</sup> Having subsumed the faculties of the animal soul (including the imagination) into the rational faculty, such an individual is able to think with the theoretical intellect and put this knowledge into praxis with the practical intellect. However, such a

passage is more than just an allegory. In effect, it intimates non-discursively and non-objectively a situation or a process that is unknowable without images. By using images to produce a coherent picture of the rational soul, this portrait is more effective than an analytical account. Avicenna graphically and effectively portrays the nature of the rational soul and its division into theoretical and practical components. Significantly, though, this portrayal can only be fully understood by means of the imagination. In the section immediately following, Avicenna describes what the aforementioned state can lead to:

a certain road leading out of this clime and he who is able to accomplish this emigration will find an exit to what is beyond the celestial spheres. Then he will see (*raʿā*) the heavens (*samāʾ*) of the primordial creation (*al-Khalq al-aqdam*), over whom rules a King (*malik*) who is obeyed (*mināʿ*). There, the first border is inhabited by servants (*khādām*) of their sublime King, they pursue the work that brings them near to their king. They are a pure people (*ʿimmā*), who respond to no solicitations of greed, lust, iniquity, or laziness. They attend to the edifice of the empire where they live. They live in a metropolis (*ḥāḍirā*), dwelling in lofty castles and magnificent buildings, whose clay (*ṭīn*) was mixed with such care that it does not resemble the clay of your clime.<sup>147</sup>

In this passage we essentially have an allegorical description of the standard Avicennian notion of the soul's fate after the death of the body.<sup>148</sup> Here the account is much more descriptive and vivid than the one we encounter in his more analytical treatises.<sup>149</sup> Since we have no objective or discursive knowledge of what this fate is about, what better way is there to describe it? Again, the sight that the soul sees cannot be described without recourse to familiar images. These particular images—which appeal to the imagination—provide an understanding of what the fate of the soul *is like*. The imagination, therefore, translates this knowledge into the intellect in such a way that the force of the images is not lost. Because this fate is beyond all particular descriptions, a proper account of it should not pretend to be purely descriptive. Such a con-figuration allows the imagination, which is connected to the lived experiences of the individual, to grasp intuitively the intentionality behind this presentation. Here, I concur with Heath, who argues that

Philosophical discourse could represent, indeed was the best representational mode for, the first and greater part of Avicenna's philosophical program: logic and most of metaphysics. But it could not adequately portray the crucial climax of his program, *maʿād* [afterlife], as understood not in terms of conventional Muslim eschatology, but in the specific Plotinian sense of "journey of the alone to the alone."<sup>150</sup>

Initiatory tales thus provided Avicenna with a vehicle in which he could push beyond the accounts we witness in his standard, more analytical presentations. His *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* provides a non-transferable inspiration to the imagination, which is grounded in the existential concerns of the embodied individual. The transparency of this tale, its non-referential use of language, is consistent with limitations of human corporeality. Implicit in this is the notion that it is impossible, on any level, to escape this use of mythic or allegorical language precisely because such language speaks to individuals as humans, as composites of soul and body. Although there exists an ontological gap forever separating human from divine, the language of the initiatory tale tries to overcome this separation by pointing beyond the here and now of this world.

I certainly have no desire here to replace Avicenna's philosophical *oeuvre* with a vague sort of mysticism. On the contrary, I only draw attention to the role of the imagination within his *oeuvre*. Equally, this is not an imposition since there exists ample evidence in his own writings, most notably his *Kitāb al-ishārāt wa al-tanbīhāt*. By only focusing on Avicenna's scientific and discursive treatises, however, we tend to overlook his other forms of understanding and engagement with the world. Although no one would argue that the analytical tradition is paramount for the pursuit of knowledge, we also have to acknowledge, as Avicenna himself did, that the analytical tradition is unable to traverse beyond a certain point because it runs into the limits of human finitude. In contrast, imaginative representation—its ability to bring form to the formless and corporeality to the incorporeal—attempts to overcome such limits by addressing the various dimensions and experiences of the individual.

*Ḥayy ben Meqiz*, like *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, is a literary-aesthetic work that attempts to describe that which is ultimately beyond description. For example, the unnamed protagonist explains to the reader the nature of the element of air:

He made me cross these lakes  
He brought me to a large boundary.  
I saw winds and gusts  
Exhaling  
Fluttering.  
Storms, horrors, tremors  
Dismantling mountains, laying bare rocks.  
Their lightning bolts appear  
Thunder roars.  
Clouds screen  
Showers pour down.<sup>151</sup>

Here we are presented with an account of air as it exists on its own, unmixed with the other elements. This, however, is certainly anything but an abstract discussion. On the contrary, we have a very vivid description, in which this element, imperceptible to the senses on its own, is described by means of imagery associated with the natural world. Ibn Ezra essentially uses our experiences of air in storms (i.e., winds, gusts) to enable us to understand the destructive capacity of this element. The description is much more forceful and experiential than an abstract account. For instance, the verse "clouds screen" invokes Lamentations 3:44, wherein God's anger ("You have screened Yourself off . . .") is described as a cloud preventing the accessibility of prayers. Paradoxically, in using such images to describe air, the reader apprehends its nature without being able literally to perceive it.

Another example that illustrates the importance of image in these novels occurs when Hay first speaks to the unnamed protagonist:

In words he answered me  
 Full of stones and gems.  
 In words arranged  
 Like *thummin* and *urim*.  
 . . .  
 "Hay ben Meqiz is my name  
 The Holy City is my home.  
 My work is what you see  
 I toil and do not grow weary.  
 I wander throughout cities and states  
 Searching every nook and cranny.  
 My father guides me in the way of wisdom  
 He teaches me understanding and counsel.  
 I am with Him as a confidant  
 In Baal Hannon.  
 In the coolness of his shade  
 I delight to sit.  
 I will not leave Him  
 For His fruit is sweet to my mouth."<sup>152</sup>

In this passage, Hay essentially explains who he is and describes his activities. This is an allegorical way of alluding to the fact that he represents the Active Intellect, or the principle by which knowledge is imparted to individuals. To show that this is no ordinary conversation, Ibn Ezra compares it to the *thummin* and *urim* that, according to Exodus 28:30, were placed inside the high priests' breastplate in order to designate some kind of oracle. In many ways *thummin* and *urim* symbolize the narrative, since the conversation between these two individuals is not so much discursive as it is allusive or oracular.

When Hay describes his occupation of wandering throughout the earth, he alludes to the fact that his occupation is that of a philosopher (e.g., a "peripatetic").<sup>153</sup> The ultimate source of the wisdom that arises from these wanderings, however, is God, who has taught Hay both theoretical and practical wisdom ("understanding and foresight"). Significantly, the terminus of this knowledge blends both philosophical and mystical terms, and biblical and Sufi images. This knowledge, conjuring up Solomon's vineyard in Song 8:11, is described in luscious and graphic terms. It is described as a tasting (Ar. *dhawq*; Heb. *ta'am*)<sup>154</sup> that is pleasant to the senses.

Probably the best example of the way in which his tale intimates at the unknowable occurs when the protagonist glimpses God:

I said to him, "Can I see everything with my eyes?  
 Is there anything I cannot perceive with my pupils?"  
 He replied  
 . . .  
 "From an abundance of greatness  
 His knowledge is hidden from men.  
 From the greatness of His appearance  
 Seeing Him is prevented.  
 Since the sun is hidden by its light  
 We cannot know it.  
 When it rises at dawn  
 We barely visualize it.  
 In this way souls are unable to know Him  
 Hearts unable to perceive Him.  
 He has neither shape nor likeness  
 He has no image by which one can compare Him."<sup>155</sup>

In this passage, Hay tells the protagonist that God is essentially unknowable. Despite this, the protagonist speaks of his vision of God. This vision, however, does not seem to have come from the vision of the eyes, but through the vision of the imagination. Although he can never perceive the actual structure of the divine world he is, nonetheless, provided with images that describe what it is like. These images, as I have suggested throughout this chapter, bridge the gap between the incorporeal and the corporeal, the invisible and the visible, by giving form to a transcendental truth. By ascending the various celestial realms, the protagonist's soul (re)ascends the ontological hierarchy. Just as Hay reveals to the protagonist the geometric and spatial structure of the universe, we, too, as readers, apprehend this journey and experience. Likewise in his *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, Ibn Tūfayl employs a series of literary devices, symbols, imaginative accounts, and aesthetics to push the

reader to gain access to truth for himself or herself. These meanings, according to Salim Kemal, "are cumulative, and the sense gained from a complex of terms is unlikely to be preserved if we try to translate the complex into a series of simple meanings."<sup>156</sup> The goal of his narrative, as Ibn Tufayl constantly reminds us in his prologue, is to push the reader to "a state so wonderful that the tongue cannot describe it, for it belongs to a different order of being, a different world."<sup>157</sup>

The entire narrative is an attempt to bring a certain form to the otherwise unknowable or unapprehensible experience that the individual attains at the epitome of his or her journey. This is a stage, as I showed earlier, that Ibn Tufayl conceived of as greater than that which the philosophers of his day could acquire. It is a stage that he describes in the following way:

Passing through a deep trance to the complete death-of-self (*fanaʿ*) and real contact (*wasil*) with divine, he saw (*shāhada*) a being corresponding to the highest sphere, beyond which there is no body (*lā jism lahu*), a subject free of matter, and neither identical with the truth (*al-haq*) and the One nor with the sphere itself, nor distinct from them. Just as the form of the sun appearing in a polished mirror is neither sun nor mirror, and yet distinct from neither. The splendor, perfection, and beauty he saw in the essence of that sphere were too magnificent to be described and too delicate to be clothed in written or spoken words. But he saw it to be the pinnacle of joy, delight, and rapture, in blissful vision of the being of the truth, glorious be His majesty.<sup>158</sup>

This account is replete with highly sensual and imaginative descriptions. This state, which the narrator describes as the "pinnacle of joy," is one of vision.<sup>159</sup> It is a seeing into the divine. Such a seeing or vision, however, cannot simply be one of the sense of sight. On the contrary, it is an internal seeing, which, as I have argued, occurs internally through the faculty of the imagination. Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, then, is essentially a road map through which the ideal reader ascends through the structure of the text, which reflects the divine cosmology. Indeed, the entire narrative is an attempt, as Ibn Tufayl himself readily admits, to help "restore the sight" of those who truly love God and yearn to apprehend Him.

### CONCLUSIONS

The subject of this chapter is what I consider to be one of the great paradoxes of Western philosophy: the imagination. The paradox turns on the fact that, in theory, we are truly ourselves only when we employ

our intellects or engage in intellectual activity. Despite this, every philosopher from Plato onwards realized that images and the faculty in which they are produced are absolutely necessary for cognitive activity. This paradox has resulted in the traditional formulation that although the philosophers need the imagination for certain activities, they are quick to constrain and delimit its activity. This delimitation takes its most extreme form in the Platonic criticism of mimesis. Yet already in Plato's student, Aristotle, we see this criticism begin to wither: Aristotle realized that humans are mimetic creatures and that certain types of mimetic activity are essential to our ability to function as humans. The medieval Neoplatonists inherited these contradictory theories of the imagination, not to mention the highly enigmatic comments found in Plotinus's *Theology*, which was circulated under the name of Aristotle.

I have attempted to provide an in-depth historical and phenomenological analysis of the imagination as it relates specifically to the initiatory tale. The former has allowed me to try and reconstruct the imagination as the medievals conceived it. Where, for example, is it located? And how does it relate to the intellect, on the one hand, and to the body and the senses, on the other? The phenomenological, by contrast, allows us a glimpse into why, despite their initial hesitance regarding this faculty, all three of our authors ultimately fall back on the ocular model that the imagination provides. They do this, I have argued, because they realized that the imagination has the ability to produce images that are necessary for both the conceptualization and the visualization of incorporeal and spiritual forms. These images, in turn, are symbols that allow the spiritual and the incorporeal to appear in human consciousness. Even though the philosophers realized that God is without form and cannot be contained by matter, they nonetheless concede that form and corporeality are essential to the Neoplatonic vision.

The imagination is, then, primarily hermeneutical. It presents the absent, it makes the incorporeal corporeal, and it gives the formless form. Rather than regard the imagination as a passive faculty, I have argued that these three authors acknowledge that it is active and responsible for the creation of appropriate symbols. The imagination becomes crucial for understanding transcendent truth, since it is what ultimately mediates between the invisible and the visible. It is at this juncture that I argued that the initiatory tale becomes so important. For these tales presuppose a way of uncovering the world that is fundamentally different from more analytical presentations. These tales are the textual counterpart of the imagination and are well suited to the activity of this faculty and its quest to apprehend the divine. To use Heidegger's language, these tales open up a "clearing" wherein the individual gains access to and

apprehends Being. However, this is not to make the claim that the tales conjure up some form of vague or enigmatic "Oriental Wisdom." On the contrary, I have stressed that even if the knowledge that these tales impart is not necessarily and qualitatively different from analytical works, they nevertheless proceed in a fundamentally different manner. This difference is contingent on the fact that the authors recognized the limitations of the embodied human to grasp that which is essentially immaterial. In so doing, these tales disclose a coherent picture of the universe that is connected to the way in which humans, as composites of body and soul, interact experientially with the world around them. By providing the supralunar world with spatial and geometric extension, these tales allow the individual to experience the transcendent world in terms of the particular images of this world of lived experience.

Chapter 4 builds on the present one by suggesting and examining various ways in which the initiatory tale affects and transforms the reader. I contend that these tales are so effective because they force the reader's imagination, much like the actual textual protagonist, to undergo a form of symbolic ritual activity. This activity is what is ultimately responsible for inscribing specific truths, whether cultural or intellectual, onto the individual. It is at this point that we witness the initiation of the philosopher.

## 4

### The Initiation of the Philosopher: Ritual Poetics and the Quest for Meaning

IN A CLASSIC DEFINITION, CLIFFORD GEERTZ ARGUES THAT RELIGION constitutes a complex system of symbols, offering both a context and an order for various moods and motivations.<sup>1</sup> Religion provides an interlocking set of codes by which a community, and the individuals within that community, formulate an "order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes of human experience."<sup>2</sup> Religious symbols and their semantics not only reflect particular social situations, but they also reshape such situations in the light of the problems of meaning that arise in real human experiences.

Ritual activity is an essential component within this construction of meaning. In ritual, according to Geertz, "the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world."<sup>3</sup> Rituals function in at least two ways. On the one hand, they give bodily activity and motion cosmic significance. On the other, they provide an awareness, a form of consciousness, that is central to the formation of meaning.<sup>4</sup> Ritual activity is, thus, interpretive. Such activity provides a focusing lens through which the individual perceives and reflects upon his or her own situation in the light of an ideal.<sup>5</sup>

The present chapter explores key features of ritual activity in order to illumine the *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* cycle from another dimension. Whereas other chapters in this study have examined or will examine the literary, aesthetic, and psychological facets of these tales, the focus now switches to their sensual and kinesthetic apparatus to show how these generate meaning. For even a cursory reading of these texts reveals a fullness of ritual vocabulary and a conceptual framework in which it is expressed. In each of these three narratives, we encounter for example