

The Anti-Caliph

Ibn 'Arabi, Inner Wisdom, and the Heretic Tradition

Peter Lamborn Wilson

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I.

and Khezr, the Hidden Prophet, the Green Man, King of Hyperborea, wily servant of Moses, trickster-cook of Alexander, Khezr who drank from the fountain of life in the Land of Darkness. Flowers and herbs spring trp in his footsteps, and he strolls across the water, walking toward Ibn 'Arabi's ship, coming closer; his green robe trailing on green waves — or perhaps woven of waves. Or Khezr appears in the desert with water and initiation for the masterless ones, the mad and blameworthy, the unique ones... 'And three things of this life are worthy of the glance: water, green things, and a beautiful face...'

and the Hidden Imam who vanished into a cave, perhaps in Samarra, perhaps in Yemen, who lives beyond the Isthmus of Similitudes in the midst of the sea of Images, on an island all of emerald, with trees of' emerald and flowers of green beryl, palaces of jasper and jade — the young man dressed in black, who appears in dreams to alchemists, who initiates in dreams...

and Ovays al-Qarani, hermit of the Yemen who met the Prophet — but only in dreams — who upheld the Household of All — who appears to the masterless ones in dreams and initiates them into the Order of the Ovaysiyya.

II. The Silsilah

Sohrawardi al Magtul, who was executed for heresy, established for himself a silsilah or Initiatic Chain, consisting of teachers whom he met in visions or dreams — that is, in the Imaginal Realm. Here then follows a list in no particular order, of names each of which constitutes a link in such a chain — Imaginal or imaginary...

- Mansur ibn al-Hallaj, executed for heresy, for preaching ‘I am the Truth’, defender of Satan as ‘the perfect lover and unitarian’, supporter of the Zinjarite Black Slave Rebellion, condemned to the gibbet on a warrant signed by his own sufi master;
- Hafez Shirazi, who recommended that we ‘stain our prayercarpets with wine’;
- Mahmud Shabistari, who said, ‘If moslems really understood Islam, they would be idol-worshippers’;
- Ahmad Ghazzali, Fakhroddin Iraqi and Awhadoddin Kermani, the three poets of Witness Play or ‘contemplation of the Beardless’;
- Shaykh Husayn Kashefi, nay patron alchemist-saint of Herat;
- Lal Shabazz Qalandar, the ‘Red Hawk’ of Sindh, shaykh of the Lawless dervishes and hasheesheen;
- Hassan-i Sabbah, the Old Man of the Mountain of Alamut, founder of the Assassins; and his descendant Hassan II ‘On Whose Mention Be Peace’, who declared that ‘the Chains of the Law have been broken’;
- the Egyptian Fatimid ‘Anti-Caliph’ Hakim, who wrote treatises on alchemy and ordered that day be turned to night and night to day in Cairo, who vanished into the desert;
- Sunan Kalidjaga, who brought esoteric Islam to Java and invented the Wayang Kulit Shadow Puppet play, based on the Hindu epics;
- Mushtaq Ali Shah the mad musician, who was stoned to death in Kerman for playing the call to Prayer on his sehtar;
- Mohiyoddin Ibn ‘Arabi, initiated by Khezr, chased out of Cairo for writing love poems to a fourteen-year-old girl, founder of the School of the Oneness of Being.

By invoking each of these figures to bestow a particular *baraka* on the present undertaking, enough will have been said to those who are familiar with their names, that what follows will be almost superfluous. One meets these shaykhs by pilgrimages to their tombs, or to their books (for cenotaphs and divans are both square dead objects which may seem to hold living spirits) —

or in visions, or dreams — and virtually everything we might say here is already swallowed up by their presence.

‘Catastrophe Theory’ in science deals with sudden and drastic changes in some feature of a system, such as the earth’s crust, or human society. In popular usage the word catastrophe has ‘bad’ connotations, but some sudden changes may well be experienced as positive. Revelation itself might be called a catastrophe. Mystical insight or Wisdom (*hikmah*) can also work catastrophically on the system known as human consciousness.

Scholars generally limit themselves to descriptions of change while mystics and poets prefer to participate in or even to precipitate catastrophes of consciousness. What follows can be classified neither as scholarship nor mystical poetry; it is rather a prolegomena to a study of certain catastrophic potentialities in the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi and the heretical tradition. Here we are concerned neither with facts nor with poetry *per se*, but with *poetic facts* - bits of information which, at a certain density, may cause a sudden breakthrough or catastrophic breakdown of the border between ordinary consciousness and the *alam-i khyyal* or World of Imagination.

What follows is almost more *story* than scholarly text — the idea of ‘fiction’ will help provide an appropriate bezel for our shadowy confusion, hyperbole and rhetoric, palpable orientalismo, scandalous and unfounded assertions. This text may push itself toward the edge of discourse, in danger of a Humpty-Dumpty-like crash into totally arbitrary semantics (‘words mean what I want them to mean!’). As one of the Persian poets (Salman Savaji) said:

Who does not know my bad reputation? like a bath-tub fallen off the roof!

III. Ibn ‘Arabi and the Heretics

In the long and beautiful introduction to his *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, the late Henry Corbin summarized, in effect, an idiosyncratic philosophy of ‘Oriental Wisdom’ which illuminated all his writing. This essay presents itself as rooted in a tradition: Corbin mentions all his favourite figures (many of the same listed in the ‘silsilah’ of the present text as well). Corbin’s essay focusses on certain events in the biography of the Shaykh al-Akbar, but Corbin’s sub-text is in fact his own spiritual autobiography. As he says, he has *lived* certain events, temporal and a-temporal, historical and spiritual. The *ta’vil* in this context serves as more than a tool of the intellect or even of the Imagination: like a bathysphere, it offers to plunge the entire self, body included, into the depths — a Catastrophe Machine!

One of these events, Ibn ‘Arabi’s birthday, provokes in Corbin an indulgence in sheer occult synchronicity, the celebration of a coincidence which assumed for him an archetypal importance. According to the lunar calendar, this birthday (17 Ramazan 560/July 28, 1165) marked the first anniversary of the proclamation of the Great Resurrection at Alamut (17 Ramazan 559/August 8, 1164). Corbin’s exquisite hagiography invites us to meditate on this double anniversary, this holiday, but does not stop to explain *why*. A clue has been offered, or perhaps one of Corbin’s obsessions has briefly and rather mysteriously surfaced. What was the Great Resurrection and what connection might it have with Ibn ‘Arabi beside a happenstance of dating?

Corbin himself had plenty to say on the subject in other books, which cannot be too highly recommended. Here however a somewhat different slant is proposed, one based on the literal significance of the Great Resurrection of *Ruz-i Qiyamat*. In brief, Hassan 11, the Ismaili Pir of Alamut, proclaimed on this day a general esoteric abrogation of the Shariah. The veil of dissimulation (*tagiyya*) was lifted from the letter of the Law, and its outer form was shattered. ‘The Chains of the Law have been broken.’ The uncovering of the inner meaning of Revelation results in a *benign reversal* of its outward symbolism; those who participate in this gnosis are freed from both the, literal meaning and the legal stipulations of organized religion. In both senses of the word they have *broken the code*. The Ismailis (or ‘Assassins’) of Alamut signalled this general amnesty from the tyranny of Exoteric Authority by drinking wine for lunch in the middle of Ramazan: thus they broke their Fast forever.

Outward Islam must of necessity view the Qiyamat as antinomian, heretical and revolutionary — and indeed it did so, with good reason. No doubt, as Corbin emphasizes, Ismailism was primarily *gnosis*, Oriental Wisdom — but it also acted with overt militancy and stealthy terror to propagandize itself. In Islamdom, where politics and religion form parts of a seamless life and culture, ‘heresy’ works as both critique and polemic, as discourse and as war. Heresy speaks the same language as its surrounding culture but insists that certain words possess a catastrophic significance: hidden meanings capable of transforming an entire world suddenly from within itself, like a self-resurrecting phoenix.

The Qiyamat, then, represents a radical break with institutional, ritual and traditional Islam — a rupture which cannot be attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi. His autobiographical writings bear witness

to a classical sufi intention to *intensify* the ritual aspect of Islam as part of his practical path. Nevertheless, the hyper-orthodox have always looked on the Shaykh as somehow *risky*, if not downright suspect.

For example, while living in Egypt he published his *Interpreter of Desires*, a book of poems celebrating his love for a young girl he met while circumambulating the Kaaba in Mecca. The local ulema smelled blasphemy; Ibn 'Arabi hastily removed himself to Syria — and we can thank the outraged mullahs for inspiring his next work, the *Interpreter of the Interpreter*, in which he defends his erotic-mystical ambiguities with dazzling scholasticism. Centuries later (a few years ago) Ibn 'Arabi was again in trouble in Egypt: the Muslim Brotherhood and other reactionaries inspired a law banning publication of his *Meccan Revelations*. And scholars like Fazlur Rahman still blame him for the ruination of orthodox sufism.

Ibn 'Arabi's continental mass, so to speak, covers too much territory to fit on any single map. His writings have been used to bolster up the most impeccably orthodox mysticism — as in the North African sufi orders, for example — as well as many other types of Islamic esotericism, some not so orthodox. Treatises such as the *R. al-ahadiyya* (on the hadith 'Whoso knoweth his Lord'), which present a pure and radical monism, might well serve the outlaw purposes of Ismaili metaphysicians. Indeed, Corbin shows that Ismailis did make such use of Ibn 'Arabi's teachings on *ta'vil*, the Perfect Man, the Oneness of Being, etc. The Nizaris of Alamut experienced the Great Resurrection as an historical moment and as a mythic or Imaginal Archetype; what Ibn 'Arabi gave them was a new vocabulary with which to expand their exegesis of the Qiyamat and its radical ramifications.

"I to the Persian poets the Shaykh bequeathed still another map, one which begins its cartomantic project with texts like *The Interpreter of Desires*, and the 28th chapter of the *Fusus al-hikam* (on the hadith "Three things of this world are made worthy of love to tile: women, perfume and prayer"). Here Love is declared the equivalent or perhaps superior of religion; the human beloved becomes a Witness (*shahed*), a Theophany of the Real. Again, the poets received from Ibn 'Arabi a language of discourse with which to expand their comprehension of a complex already central to their very being: *eros*, desire, and the borderland between erotic and mystical consciousness.

Out of such speculation arose a spiritual practice, the 'Witness Game', which uses Imaginal Yoga to transmute erotic desire *into* spiritual consciousness. The means include poetic and musical improvisation, dance, and 'gazing' chastely at beautiful boys (whence the practice was also known as 'Contemplation of the *heartless*'),

This teaching was perfected in the centuries after Ibn 'Arabi's death by a series of gifted poets closely associated with his School — Fakhroddin Iraqi, Awhadoddin Kermani and Abdul Rahman Jami, to name three of the best-known. Without specific reference to the Witness Game, other poets such as Mahmud Shabistari and Shah Nematollah Vali synthesized Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics with a general poetic and romantic symbolism. All this together constitutes what can be called a Persian 'School of Love' within the general context of a School of *wahdat al-wujud*.

Needless to say, although the poets of the Witness Game followed the letter of the Shariah and its sexual code, their dangerous game of Sublimation was condemned as rank heresy by such as Ibn Taymiyya, who complained, "They kiss a slave boy and claim to have seen God!" However orthodox (or not) the sufis might have been in their private lives, their poetry has given much aid and comfort to 'real heretics' like the Ismailis, who would of course take quite literally such lines as Iraqi's:

Forget the Kaaba:

The vintner's gates are open!

Despite the protests of scholars like Ivanov and even Corbin, the later (post-Alamut) Ismailis did not adopt Persian *dervishi* sufism simply as a mask. They *incorporated* such poets as Shabastari and Shah Nematollah wholesale into their grand synthesis, just as they did with Ibn 'Arabi's more austere metaphysics.

In mapping Ibn 'Arabi's influence on the heretical tradition, we see his language (or landmarks) taken up by erudite cosmopolitan philosopher-rebels and erudite aesthetical/emotional sufi poets. But as this synthesis moves Eastward from Andalusia through Egypt and Persia, it begins to acquire a more popular and cultic aspect as well. Shi'ite sectarians such as the Qizilbashi, Hurufi, Alevi, Bektashi, Ahl-i Haqq, Ali Hahi, Kakhsari, Ovaysi — and the Shi'ite alchemists — all inherit something of the basic mix. In Afghanistan and North India the tradition includes the so-called Lawless (*bi-shahr*) dervish orders such as the Qalandars, the transvestite dancers and hashish-maulangs, heterodox sufi orders such as the Shattariyya ('Rapid Way') and certain offshoots of the Sohrawardiyya; also syncretistic sects such as the Emperor Akbar's Din-i Hahi, as well as various folkish combinations of Ismailism, Tantrik Hinduism, Bakhti yoga, millenarian Shi'ism and dervish madness.

All these names are dropped not merely to disturb the mystico-academic dust but to point toward a project; a tradition has been invoked, but only in order to ask of it whether it still lives, whether it still possesses a practical and soteriological (or 'salvific') vitality. Let us imagine that this tradition, which is no longer to be identified only with Ibn 'Arabi, might be somehow personified or poeticized. Call it 'The Anti-Caliph', with reference to its heretical antecedents and in honour of the Fatimid Ismaili 'Anti-Caliph' of Egypt such as Hakim Billah the alchemist whose name, 'the Wise', echoes the theme of our conference. This fictional character, the Anti-Caliph, who is also a text, will stand for our Imaginal reliving of the tradition it evokes.

The Anti-Caliph will exist only within the confines of this text, where it will act as an oracle, answering certain questions about the past, present and future. The Anti-Caliph may well be antinomian, heretical, mad, 'blameworthy' — but it demands recognition for its own 'traditional authority', and phrases all its answer\$ in reference to its own authentic and coherent past.

We want to know the meaning of that past, but even more — if we can perform a little hermeneutic phenomenology and *live* at least for an hour within the Anti-Caliph's world — we will demand to know what it can teach us here on this most mysterious of planes ('everyday life') at this most precious of moments, the present. When the text is read, we can allow it to slip back into the Imaginal World again — and perhaps retain from it a few poetic facts.

IV. Cyclic Time

For Ismailism, history takes place in cycles. This is a way of valuating Time, of symbolizing the way in which meaning penetrates Time. But Ismailis do not emphasize *decline* (as in the myth of the Ages of Gold, Silver, Bronze and Lead) so much as simply *change* itself. For the conservative mind things always get worse: perfection lies in the Golden past. The radical views matters in a more complex way: the past englobes a certain primordially, origins and revelations, but time can also present certain unfoldings, processes or progressions. The modern notion of ‘progress’ has nothing to do with this unfolding; a cyclic conception of time admits no omega points, no ultimate perfections either in the past or future.

Each sub-cycle in Ismaili gnosis is ‘ruled’ by a *prophet*, who represents the outward aspect of revelation, and a *saint* (or *asas*, whence ‘assassins’), who represents the inner. Moses, for example, brought the Law — Aaron taught its esoteric significance. Jesus spoke in parables — John the Baptist (or some other gnostic figure) unveiled their hidden meaning to the Elect. Mohammed brought the Koran and Shariah; Ali embodied their secret significance.

Orthodox Islam claims — like all established religions — to be the final cycle of revelation. To recognise a prophet after Mohammed is therefore to cease to be a moslem. Ismailis accept this, but they maintain that the cycle of prophecy has been replaced by the cycle of esoteric interpreters: All and the Household. **In** one sense, this represents not a decline in the spiritual quality of time, but rather an advance, or at least a wonderful chance: the inner meaning of revelation formerly taught only to the Elect *will* become the *outer path* accessible to all. Time turns inside out, Revelation and Law disgorge meanings so hidden they seem to turn the very words and ordinances on their heads, to make them their opposites — ‘benign inversion’.

For the Ismailis this unfolding begins with Ali, passes on to the first six Shi’ite Imams, then from Jafar al-Sadeq to his son Ismail, the seventh Imam — thence to the Egyptian ‘Anti-Caliphs’, the Fatimid dynasty.

The Fatimids believed their caliphs to be blood descendants of Ali and the Prophet through Fatima’s line: these were the Imams, rulers of the secular world and simultaneously of the spiritual world: king/saints. The higher-ranking initiates were taught the esoteric secrets of Ismailism but outwardly the Shariah was still followed. For the inner circle, this outward conformity was called *tagiyya* or ‘permissible dissimulation’; the Fatimid *dais* or missionaries (such as Nasir-i Khusraw) were also permitted to practice *tagiyya*, pretending to be Sunni or Orthodox Shi’ite when necessary.

The Persian or Nizari Ismailis, the so-called Assassins, split away from the Fatimids originally over a question of legitimacy — i.e. of succession to the Caliphate/Imamate. Here looms up a confusing issue: the present day Aga Khan, head of the Nizari Ismailis, claims actual blood-descent from the Fatimid Pretender Nizar, who in turn claimed blood-descent from Ali. The Nizaris maintain that their founder, the notorious Hassan-i Sabbah, secretly spirited out of Cairo the infant son of Nizar, took him to Alamut and raised him in secrecy. This very hidden Imam married and had a son who married and had a son (a secret process involving various cradle-

substitutions and devious stratagems of byzantine complexity) who was Hassan II ‘*ala dhikrihi’s-salam*, ‘Upon Whose Mention Be Peace’, the proclaimer of the Qiyamat in 1164. According to the Aga Khans, the abrogation of the Shariah thus coincided with the open manifestation of the blood-legitimate Imam. This claim, incidentally, was upheld by a 19th century British court in Bombay.

Since the Mongols burned the great library at Alamut, Ismaili history yawns with lacunae. No real evidence exists to support the story of Nizar’s infant son. Some historians believe these claims of legitimacy to be later fabrications. But who would have fomented such a hoax? Hassan-i Sabbah? Apparently he preached only in the name of the murdered Pretender Nizar, and never mentioned any rescued infant. Was the hoaxer then Hassan II, Master of the Qiyamat? No. In the earliest descriptions of the Qiyamat, he presents himself as speaking on *behalf of* the Imam. Apparently only after- his violent death — a few years after the Qiyamat — was he openly proclaimed Imam.

These vexing historical problems must be addressed if the true nature of the Qiyamat is to be uncovered. Corbin believed, with justification, that the Qiyamat was a purely esoteric event, and had nothing whatsoever to do with legitimacy. He felt that the later blood-line claims constituted in effect a betrayal of the Qiyamat’s deepest sense, an attempt to force pure free spirit into the forms of dogma, cult and history.

In opposition to the concept of blood-legitimacy Corbin emphasizes that of *adoption on the spiritual plane*, the initiatic vision which can link two souls as kin, even though they be separated in time, space and genetics. Moreover, Corbin introduces the typically Ismaili concept of ‘the Imam -of-one’s-own-being’: whoever has gnosis of self has gnosis of the archetypal Imam and in effect ‘becomes’ the Imam.. In Corbin’s hypothesis, such a theophanic vision allowed Hassan II to speak ‘on behalf of’ the Imam, to lift the veil of *tagiyya* forever and for all gnostics, to abrogate the Shariah and proclaim its hidden meanings. Indeed, even if the Qa’im or Saheb-i Qiyamat had spoken of himself as the Imam, he could have done so with perfect right according to the doctrines of spiritual adoption and the realization of the inner Imam. An event such as the Qiyamat consists of an intersection between history and the timeless ‘Nowever’; to drag it down to the level of blood again is to ruin it. In a sense, anyone can be the Imam; in a sense, everyone already is the Imam.

With all respect to the Aga Khans (especially the third, that *bon vivant* and gambler who gave away his weight in diamonds, and wrote a gem-like treatise on Hafez) the present text prefers to follow the Corbinian version of the Qiyamat: a total opening-up of esoteric truth which liberated its celebrants from all outward forms of authority, whether of Revelation, Law — or blood.

Each adherent of the Qiyamat does not suddenly and miraculously become a perfect saint. But the chains of Law have been broken for *all* who adhere and hear, for all who know. A new Cycle has been inaugurated; those who realize it are *in* it; time has a different value for them. Within this Cycle of course different seekers attain different degrees of realization. However, for each one the path now *begins* with esoteric interpretation (*ta’vil*). The meanings of. Koran and Shariah are now interiorized as *a first step*.

Prayer becomes any process or act which serves to open the conscious self to the Imam-of-one’s-own-being;

Fasting becomes the avoidance of anything which impedes this enlargement of awareness;

Pilgrimage signifies major efforts to unify individual consciousness with its ultimate manifestation as the Self;

Belief in Allah, Prophets and Angels means the esoteric understanding of theology as symbolic; *Almsgiving* means generosity of self, the open interdependence and mutual realization of all life (especially consciousness, which can be given and shared);

Justice (the 'Sixth Pillar' of Shi'ism) means the simultaneous realisation of the Self in oneself and in others, in all life, and giving it its due in every situation;

The Last Judgement means Resurrection Day as taught by Pir Hassan II. Hell and Heaven are seen as present and interior states; eschatology in its literal sense is either denied or ignored.

This new Cycle portends upheavals in politics as well as theology. If every person is potentially the Imam, and partakes through the Qiyamat directly in the Imam's authority, then each individual is his or her own ruler — a system which might be called paradoxical anarcho-monarchism! We can scarcely imagine what this might have meant to the people of Alamut, who in any case enjoyed no more than a few years of total revolution. Hassan 11 was probably murdered by conservative elements within the Ismaili community, unable to share his utopian vision.

But for this text — *The Anti-Caliph* - the Qiyamat signals the beginning of a Cycle which is still in the process of unfolding. Following Corbin, we can experience the Qiyamat in the *alam-i mithal* or Imaginal Plane, and receive its gnosis direct and unmediated. The Qiyamat survives, and we can participate in it.

Through it, the 'Nowever' remains always accessible; moreover, history itself is now defined for us by our Qiyamat-consciousness. Thus we appear as authentic interpreters of the Qiyamat, able to explain its past and present unfolding, its ever-changing strategies, its perpetually revolutionary energies.

For example: what would the Qiyamat today 'say' about... sexual liberation? about the social revolution? about an authentic contemporary spiritual path? Using these questions as examples, let us treat *The Anti-Caliph* as a crystal ball, and entrance ourselves with Imaginings, flashes of prismatic light.

V. Sexuality and Hermeneutics

Most antinomian sects have been accused of sexual license, polymorphous and perverse, and many such cults have indeed practiced variations of 'free love'. The Adamites and Families of Love took 'no marriage in heaven' to mean no marriage here on earth, since for them the Millennium had arrived. For Alamut also a Millennium had arrived, and although we know almost nothing about love amongst the Assassins, we can easily extrapolate. The Qiyamat philosophy leads logically to a contemporary position outwardly similar to that held by the most radical of sexual liberationists.

One of the commonest misapprehensions about antinomianism claims that it causes (or is synonymous with) libertinism — doing 'whatever you want' regardless of other peoples' values or lives. Luckily Nietzsche (that Islamophile) settled this point once and for all for everyone, no matter what their sect or belief: 'beyond good and evil' means nothing without that 'self-overcoming' or 'sublimation' which utterly rules out the banality of a pointless and self-defeating 'evil'. The antinomian may commit crimes in the eyes of society or the Law, but only out of a personal ethics which reaches unimaginably higher than any moral code. Antinomian ethics does this precisely because it is Imaginal, 'made up' by the individual, personal and central.

Islam begins as one of the very few pro-sexual-pleasure religions known to civilized humanity. Paul may say it is better to marry than burn, but the Prophet advises a follower to 'marry a young woman so that you may enjoy life' — and says, 'Three things of this world I love, women, perfume and prayer.' He married eleven times, allowed his followers each four wives and countless concubines; at one time he instituted 'temporary marriage', which is still practiced, by the Shi'ites. He permitted birth control (but not abortion). This high valuation of sexual pleasure has led to a 'tantrik' aspect in Islamic spirituality, exemplified by Ibn 'Arabi's exposition (in the *Bezels of Wisdom*) of sexual intercourse as the supreme form of contemplation:

But as tile (Divine) Reality is inaccessible in respect (of the Essence), and there is contemplation only in a substance, the contemplation of God in women is the most intense and the most perfect; and the union which is the most intense... is the conjugal act.

... God causes the forms of the world to blossom by the projection of His Will and by the Divine Command... which manifests itself as the sexual act in the world of forms constituted by the elements, as the spiritual *will* (*al-himmah*) in the world of the spirits of light, and as logical conclusion in the discursive order, the whole thing being but an act of love of the primordial ternary reflecting itself in each and all its aspects.

People know well that I am in love; Only they do not know with whom...

This applies well to he who loves only voluptuousness, that is to say he who loves the support of voluptuousness, the woman, but remains unconscious in the spiritual sense of that which is really in question. If he knew it, he would know by virtue of what he enjoyed it, and who (really) enjoys the voluptuousness; then, he would be (spiritually) perfect.

(Burckhardt trans.)

Revolutionary as this may be, Ibn 'Arabi still writes from the essentially masculinist point of view which permeates the Koran and hadith. Women are seen in themselves as individuals with souls, but as virtual property in relation to men. The 'Feminist Principle' is notoriously hard to locate in Islam. True, on the mystical or popular and syncretistic level, all sorts of hints and echoes of the Anima are found: the cult of *Buraq*, the cult of the Beloved in Persian poetry. The veiled and secluded woman becomes the symbol of all that is esoteric and hidden. But, outwardly, in contemporary terms — women are simply suppressed. Examples of this bias are already well-known and constitute a major charge against orthodox Islam. How would a contemporary Qiyamat-mystic deal with this problem?

A freedom or pleasure that rests on someone else's slavery or misery cannot finally satisfy the self because it is a limitation or narrowing of the self, an admission of impotence, an offense against generosity and justice. Our freedom depends on other people's freedom, for our fates are inextricably interwoven with others', especially with those we love. Our text — *The Anti-Caliph* — would doubtless recommend (along with the abrogation of the Shariah) the abolition of all forms of marriage, temporary marriage, concubinage and slavery, all human relations expressed in terms of owner/property (including the parent/child relation). Now, according to orthodox Islam, the result of this liberation would be simply a state of unbridled sin and disorder. But, by reversing the Shariah, the esotericists have in fact interiorized its meaning, not simply discarded it. They no longer wish to take refuge in empty form when the essence of a relation (love, friendship, mutual advantage) has been poisoned by enmity and possessiveness. The spiritual meaning of sexual pleasure precludes for them all uncaring or selfish attitudes, all violence, all brackish resentment and cold fetishism — in short, all *libertinage*.

Moreover, the polarity masculine/feminine can now be seen and experienced as reversed; the Anima now gains a certain ascendancy (and this is the meaning of Islamic syncretist sects in Bengal and Java which worship goddesses like Kali or Loro Kidul. It is said that at one time the Prophet contemplated allowing two pagan goddesses to survive as Allah's 'consorts' — so perhaps this 'feminine' Islam could be viewed as authentic and even 'pre-Koranic'!). In practice, this feminization of Islam or reversal of polarities must involve a code of sexual behavior both highly ethical and highly humane, including a strong valuation of both pleasure and conviviality ('living together') as spiritual practice, as the 'good life', virtually as purposes in themselves.

'The Shariah bestows many privileges on the adult heterosexual male, but few on anyone else. Homosexuality for example is strictly forbidden. The devotees of Witness Play in theory remained chaste, arguing that *desire* for a boy was permitted even if sexual union were forbidden. Certain hadith seem to support this point of view; for instance it is said that those who love but remain chaste and die as a result of frustration, must be considered holy martyrs. Iraqi and Kermani believed also in the yogic or alchemical efficacy of chastity — but clearly from a psychological perspective their path must indeed have seemed a sort of martyrdom... and their poetry does contain elements of repression and melancholy.

Such poetry, however, often attains the opacity of code; moreover, many heretical texts have vanished. Did any mystic ever hit upon the idea of combining the Witness Game with the Qiyamat, the abrogation of the Shariah? Some dervishes boasted of enjoying far more than 'glances', or even kisses. Why should they not have enjoyed a philosophy — a spiritual hermeneutics of sex — with which to understand their practice and construct their *apologia*?

Such a philosophy might of course interest *all* believers in sexual freedom, not merely a few mystical boy-lovers. If we combine Ibn 'Arabi's 'tantrik' teachings with the actual practice of

the Witness Game (the yoga of music, poetry, dance, wine and love) under the sign of the Qiyamat, we arrive at a new valuation of all and every variety of sexuality — both as ‘permissible voluptuousness’ and as spiritual practice.

This valuation uproots all orthodox morality — but even from the usual modern ‘Sexual Liberation’ standpoint it appears highly radical as well. Religious morality condemns non-ordinary sex as sinful and criminal, but vulgar materialism condemns sexuality itself to joyless commodification, the fetishization of desire, the proliferation of a pornography of violence and advertising. Without a ‘spiritual dimension’, the sexual revolution can only betray itself into libertinage and other distortions.

The Anti-Caliph dares to assert that its new valuation of sexuality transcends both religious morality and vulgar materialism. It affirms the reality and centrality of physical love, and at the same time identifies this love with the highest form of spiritual experience. It frees every amorous individual from the myriad varieties of repression, whether chains of the Law or numbness of alienation. Its touchstone is joy, and the agreement of two sovereign monarchs to share it. Body and soul are one — the erotic constitutes the essence of spirituality.

VI. Social Justice

With the exception of the Caliphate of Ali (and certain other brief periods in Islamic history) the Shi'ites have generally existed as a powerless minority within Islam, and consequently have elaborated a particularly interesting teaching on Social Justice, even going so far as to call it the Sixth Pillar of Islam. In political terms (although one can never wholly separate theological from political terms in Islam) Shi'ism begins as a form of mystical monarchism, a line of deposed Pretenders to the Caliphate who claimed not only bloodline legitimacy but also spiritual preeminence. Socially Shi'ism consisted of Hashemite aristocrats and marginalized groups such as the Aryan Persians, pockets of the rural poor, 'primitive communists' (such as the Qarmatians, who at one point managed to steal the Black Stone from the Kaaba in Mecca); unofficial mystics and dissident intellectuals (such as the alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan or the secretive sect of scientists called the Brethren of Purity, *Ikhwan al-Safa*). Revolution, or at least the hope of revolution, became a Shi'ite principle. After Ali, none of the orthodox twelve Imams ever ruled — but the black banners of Shi'ism were carried by the Abbasids in their successful uprising against the Ommayyids, by the Fatimids who conquered Egypt and built Cairo, by the victorious Safavids in Iran, by innumerable less successful rebels in North Africa, Syria, Persia and India.

The Assassins established a revolutionary Shi'ite 'state' which consisted not of a single land ruled by a king but a network of autonomous castles and mountain strongholds, separated by thousands of miles, defended not by armies but by fedayeen-terrorists, by bribery, secret propaganda; dedicated to science and learning, and ruled by a hierarchy based on spiritual attainment. With the total abrogation of the Shariah and the teaching of the Imam-of-one's-own-being under the Qiyamat, this 'state' or web of armed communes must have attained a height of libertarianism unknown elsewhere or elsewhere in Islamdom. The Caliphs of Baghdad failed to destroy them — only the Mongol avalanche succeeded in burying Alamut and its scattered allies.

In the 20th century Sunni modernists and reformers have tended to look toward such Western models as Protestantism and Democracy for inspiration. Shi'ite thinkers however have shown an interest in more revolutionary philosophies. Dr Ali Shariati, who is said to have been murdered by SAVAK, attempted a brilliant if somewhat tendentious rapprochement between Shi'ism and Socialism which inspired many Iranians to revolution: the Mujaheddin or Holy Warriors, despised equally by the Shah, the Ayatollah and the U.S. State Department. Khomeini's revolution demands 'pure' Shi'ism, unmixed with foreign influence or heretical Ismaili-like extremism. Khomeini himself was considered something of a wild-eyed mystic (he wrote a treatise on Ibn 'Arabi) and rebel in his youth and exile, but in power he has enforced the Shariah with public executions of loose women, dissidents, Mujaheddin, homosexuals, drug addicts, Bahais, sufis, Jews, Ismailis, Christians, Kurds, monarchists, communists... an almost endless list of scapegoats. Most traces of utopian Shi'ite social experimentation have been outlawed or 'postponed' due to endless war in Kurdistan and Iraq, which now consumes thirteen-year-old children like a demented Moloch. Theater, music, painting, dancing and subversive poetry are banned. Shi'ism in triumph

has turned out as dismal and terrifying as if Cotton Mather and Dr Mengele had cooked it up to torment a conquered foe.

What other forces in the Islamic world might attract an esotericist interested in social justice? Pakistan and the Reformist movement? Saudi 'Arabia, with its oil and Wahhabiism? Qaddafi? Perhaps the Afghan rebels?

Some mystics may perhaps even feel a twinge of nostalgia for old-time corrupt venal dim monarchs like Farouk of Egypt or Zahir Shah of Afghanistan or Idris of Libya or the Persian Qajars — bad as they were, at least they had no ideology to push and no urge to 'purify the Faith'! Indeed, traditional monarchism still finds favour with certain mystics such as the Guenonian sufis or the Javanese adherents of the 'Just King' — but even granting them sincerity and humane intentions, their ideas are impractical, and repugnant to the libertarian spirit of the Qiyamat.

One might derive a great deal of enjoyment from contemplating — imagining — a contemporary version of the concept of social justice propagated at Alamut. The abolition of Law characterizes only one other 'political system': anarchism. Moreover, the idea of the Imam-of-one's-own-being implies the idea of self-rule, autarky: each human being a potential 'king', and human relations carried out as a mutuality of 'free lords'. Of course, Alamut retained a hierarchy — but so did Nestor Makhno's anarchist army. Moreover, the economic 'communism' and the cooperation between autonomous strongholds which characterized Nizari society somewhat resembled certain ideas such as syndicalism and 'council communism'. Altogether, a curious blend of individualist anarchism, Bakuninism and antinomian mysticism sums up Alamut in modern political language.

In 'up-dating' the Alamut revolution we might also try to imagine a workable contemporary version of the Alamut-concept itself — the protected autonomous enclave of free spirits, warriors and scholars. In an age of airplanes, bombs and universal state control of land and resources, the notion seems quite impossible. Gold and daggers no longer entice or terrify a world grown numb with endless commodities and megadeaths; deserts and mountains all are mapped, not one remote valley or island remains unguarded or untaxed. What about survivalist hide-outs? artificial islands? underground computer networks? Antarctica? submarines? orbital L-5's? the asteroid belt?

Outside of a Science Fiction story and short of some catastrophic change in the general world order, none of these versions of Alamut seems practical or feasible. However, some shards of praxis do survive amid the rubble of utopian fancies. One may always attempt as much insight, love, freedom of thought and expression, justice and tolerance as possible for oneself and the very few people who share one's truest life. To be a 'free lord' in secret is better than being a public slave, a willing accomplice of repression and injustice. As for a more general struggle, Ismaili history provides an answer to the question of revolutionary tactics in times of outward powerlessness: *propaganda*. According to the doctrine of *tagiyya* or Concealment, Ismailis are allowed to pretend or disguise themselves at will in order to propagate the message to keep it alive. In such a situation the attentat or political assassination, terrorism and propaganda of the deed may be deemed tragically counterproductive. What counts is action on the personal and cultural level — 'poetic terrorism' if you like — but also simply bearing witness.

Above all, the latterday devotee of Alamut might feel almost an obligation (if a free spirit may admit of any duty whatsoever) to experience joy, and not postpone it to an afterlife or some utopian future. In this 'imperative' lies the need of doing *justice to oneself*, for those who cheat themselves can scarcely expect to know how to deal fairly (i.e. beautifully) with others. Here

again the esotericist is capable of imagining an ethics much more demanding than any moral or civil law, precisely because it is based on expansion of self to include others rather than denial of self, resentment and hopeless longing. The practice of this sort of politics-of-eros cannot be totally suppressed even by our present technarchies, mandarins of snoop or commissars of hysterical greed.

To liberate 'everyday life', to seize back our own history from the society of the Spectacle — the Empire of Lies — this project begins with the individual and

spirals outward in love to embrace others. From the ruins of Alamut *The AntiCaliph* creates a catastrophic archaeology of desire — and out of this, our insurrection creates itself.

VII. Taste

Here, words like ritual, mysticism and religion cannot be taken in their usual exoteric meanings of obligatory sacrifice, unreasoning piety and organized endarkenment'. *The Anti-Caliph* esoterizes these terms, turns them inside-out, wreaks upon them a benign inversion. It models itself on some Paleolithic language which has not yet differentiated between ritual and art, between mysticism and personal awareness, between religion and the harmonious life of the tribe. Only such no-longer-extant ur-words would really fit our precise needs. (And only poetry can hope to re-create them.)

In a society which used such a language, the artist (as A.K. Coomaraswamy pointed out) would not be a special sort of person, but every person would be a special sort of artist. In effect, as a Javanese *pamong* or teacher of the Sumarah sect exhorted me with permissible hyperbole, 'Everyone must be an artist!' In Javanese and Balinese society, this maxim amounts to a cultural axiom. Tremendous prestige attaches to the arts of shadow-puppetry, dance, gamelan, batik, etc. — to *participation* in these arts. The *kebatinan* or 'pure esoteric' cults (which have cut themselves off from orthodox Islam and Hinduism alike) often teach their devotees nothing more than meditation techniques and art-appreciation. The trance-dance epitomizes this path: complete identification of self with aesthetic action. "The Javanese or Balinese who lacks talent is like a Lakota Sioux without a vision-quest, or a Malaysian Senoi who cannot dream, or an African pygmy deaf to the music the forest makes. In Java this ideal has survived since Independence as at least a partial reality thanks to the renaissance-like efforts of esotericists to keep the culture alive, comprehensible and accessible to all. Rather than aping the West, many young Indonesian artists experiment with elegant new syncretisms of traditional and modern (the Balinese 'Monkey Dance' for example was introduced in the 1930's); the pure Classical forms are seen as sources of inspiration which must be fostered rather than dead weight to be tossed aside.

Such paleolithic culture-remnants were long ago buried among us occidentals by Church, Empire and Machine. Our cliché of the artist is the alien and isolated individual, who continually betrays or exposes our cultural ideals as sham, or else kowtows to them by producing expensive pap and elitist rubbish. With the Romantics — the first completely marginalized artistic group — we can begin to trace the idea of the artist as revolutionary (whether progressive or reactionary), the voice saying No to that society whose vision the artist no longer embodies or creates. By our century *all* art, for whatever reason, stands against modern society — in fact, this very movement constitutes what is called Modernism. Even the Futurists who loved machines wanted a revolution — as for the others, each tried to heap up a few shards of something or other, whether from the past or the future, against the present ruin. With Dadaism, art is pronounced dead and simultaneously announced as the only possible revolution. The Surrealists picked up this idea but then sold it for a mess of Vienno-Moscovian pottage. In the 50's and 60's the Lettrists and Situationists unearthed the notion again and polished it into a statement of the artist as a model of revolutionary consciousness — still a close relation to Shelly's 'unacknowledged legislator'. To say that our Consensus Art is dead — and this school of thought says so — means that

now *everyone must be an artist*. The paleolithic credo reborn. Modernism and tradition like an ouroboros.

Once again (as with Alamuti utopianism) our era seems particularly unsuited to this dream, which appears as yet another hopeless desire to add to our list of miseries. How can we turn our cities into Java and Bali? Not even Bali is Bali anymore, but is now polluted with Kentucky Fried Chicken and mass tourism. After all, artists do not choose alienation — they *want* to add to the tribal image-hoard — that is their vocation. But modern society itself decrees this alienation by teaching its children that play and work are mutually exclusive and hostile realities, that vision and practice are forever at odds. Where can one see hope (outside the legendary past or the exotic orient or the Future Perfect) for a society of artist-visionaries, a world with no separate words for work and play?

As with questions of social justice, each era creates some possibilities and destroys others, offers certain tactics and withdraws others. The chances for action here are exactly the same as in the field of justice: work on the self — and propaganda.

Art-work on the self includes art as meditation and meditation as art; it includes shaping the personal environment; it includes direct and beautiful communication with close comrades or chosen collaborators as a deep primary purpose in life; it includes both visible and invisible artifacts as expressions of spiritual states, as ‘self-expression’; it includes adopting the *code of the artist*, which has about it something of the antique ludicrousness of a code of honor or a code of duelling, but also bestows experience and grace in all the unconventional freedoms.

This new art involves a certain ‘spiritual childliness’, what the Zen dramatist Zeami called the ‘First Flower’ — the ‘Beginner’s Mind’ - the ability to see and act with spontaneous directness; all() thus it holds out the promise of a genuine maturity, rather than the sort of deadly adulthood that now prepares the world for robotic mindlessness and/or hellish war.

At this level, art has little to do with *made things*, but rather concerns a state of mind, a way of being, a gesture that cannot be betrayed, a life.

When we consider art as *made things* however, the possibility of a teleology arises — the possibility of a purpose, a usefulness of the artwork. For the paleolithic tribe this purpose remains transparent and unquestioned: all made things have purpose, all made things are art. Such a culture possesses neither useless ugly commodities nor useless beautiful commodities, nor does it possess the concepts ‘utilitarianism’ or ‘art for art’s sake’. We however have lived with all this clutter to the point of suffocation and claustrophobia, weighed down with excremental monuments and mausoleoid museums, crushed with separated alienated isolated immobile chunks of *dead art*. Aside then from the charming personal esoteric cult of the artist outlined in the last few paragraphs, what purpose can be served now by our art? Why are we making it? and for whom?

If we fall back now on the word ‘propaganda’ it should be obvious that we intend to freight the term with more than its usual load of meaning. In totalitarian nations censorship works by fiat; in democratic nations the Market accomplishes the same end, since anything which fails as a commodity cannot conceivably damage the Empire. The avant-garde and the ‘folk’ have both been reduced to suppliers of imagery for advertizing; the lag-time between the birth of a new artform and its appropriation by the Consensus Media has almost ceased to exist. In, such a situation, any art which manages to slip between the cracks of the monolith or eke out an existence on the margin can only have one purpose: propaganda, insurrectionist propaganda.

This does *not* mean ‘art in the service of the revolution’ — an impossible tyranny — nor ‘Social Realism’, nor any recognizable form of ‘political art’. Garbage is garbage, no matter how pure its intentions. No, for *The Anti-Caliph* art is politics, art is the revolution, art is religion. Art which succeeds in beauty and cannot be absorbed by the Machine is already propaganda for the truth, no matter what its style and content, because it is already a manifestation of the truth in cognizable and ordered form. Please do not take these words in their platonic sense: by ‘truth’ we do not mean an abstract and bodiless Ideal, nor even an unspeakable mystical sentiment. This is something much simpler and yet more difficult to explain or define, something for which we might use the ‘Arabic/Persian word *zawq* and the Sanskrit/Javanese term *rasa*:

TASTE — INTUITION — FELLING — AESTHETIC CATEGORY — the interiorization of a perception (‘becoming the bamboo’ as *The Mustard Seed Garden* puts it) — hence a kind of mystical/aesthetic state of consciousness — a sense of what ‘fits’ — the faculty of choice or discrimination, choosing *this* color or note or word and not *that* one — artistic appreciation, ‘good taste’ — the quality of a performance or artwork — ‘tasting’ as direct experience, experiential certainty...

Here we reach the keynote of this entire exercise in esoteric propaganda, the key term of the text and the closest approximation to an actual spiritual path ‘recommended’ by *The Anti-Caliph*: the cultivation of *taste* both as work-on-the-self and as propaganda for the esoteric ‘cause’. To awaken in others the *desire* for that which can scarcely be spoken at all except in booming clichés or divine names — the desire for desire, for Eros son of Chaos — the taste for life itself and none of its cheap representations or lying substitutes: the desire to *be* art, spontaneously and absolutely.

For the future, then, *The Anti-Caliph* recommends that everyone be an artist. First, certain traditional arts might be taken up, such as Persian and North Indian classical music, poetry, Far Eastern martial arts, Javanese dance, music and puppetry, calligraphy, illumination. Such traditions do not deserve preservation for any inherent goodness or godliness, but as living possibilities. Like speaking another language they help us get outside our own cultural skins — and they provide ground for powerful new cross-fertilizations and syncretisms. All of Oriental Wisdom has been made accessible to our century; the rootless cosmopolitan culture of the future will create endless mosaics and mandalas out of ten thousand tribes and civilizations.

Adab, which means both good manners and aesthetic cultivation as well as literature and also the spiritual path, is a quality which seems appropriate to the artist and the anarchist as well. Emma Goldman once said that in an anarchist society everyone would be an aristocrat: ‘Radical Aristocratism’ as Nietzsche put it.

The art of love as adjunct of the other arts and also their chief ‘Muse’: the sufi *sama*’ interpreted as an aesthetic-erotic love feast; the intoxication of music, poetry, dance, the presence of the beloved.

Hospitality as an artform. The Javanese give so-called ‘Peace Banquets’ (*slametan*) to appease spirits, celebrate luck or *rites de passage*, any excuse for good food and entertainment, but with a spiritual slant. Neighbours and passersby invited in a spirit of conviviality and openness.

Salons, musicales, symposia, pilgrimages to spots of geomantic beauty or baroque and eccentric spiritual potency; public celebrations of great works of art or exquisite folly — finally the creation of shrines dedicated to moments of aesthetic breakthrough and mystical ‘taste’.

‘Poetic Terrorism’ — art as propaganda of the deed — aesthetico-Assassinism. Powerful propagandistic art should produce powerful emotion or *rasa* - as powerful as terror or joy — forcibly ripping aside the veils of inattention, anaesthetized dullness, self-betraying egotism and forgetfulness by *acts of unexpected art* - a sort of ‘theatre of Cruelty’ without walls.

And as a final suggestion (before *The Anti-Caliph* slips back into the World of Archetypes): the creation of holidays, pure acts of celebration. For example, the 17th of Ramazan, Ibn 'Arabi's birthday and the Anniversary of the Qiyamat — a banquet to proclaim the Oneness of Being, the Inner Wisdom, the breaking of the chains of the Law.

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Peter Lamborn Wilson
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