



PEACOCK ANGEL

The
Esoteric Tradition
of the Yezidis

PETER LAMBORN WILSON



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Inner Traditions
Rochester, Vermont

This book is dedicated to the Yezidi martyrs.



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“If as some Yezidis maintain, we are all angels enjoying a temporary existence as men and women, we need no rulers, regulations, or exoteric religions. In *Peacock Angel* a lifelong defender of anarchism blends poetry, erudition, and spiritual insight to honor this misunderstood and persecuted group, perhaps our closest link with the primordial tradition itself.”

JOSCELYN GODWIN, AUTHOR OF *MYSTERY RELIGIONS IN THE ANCIENT
WORLD*

“*Peacock Angel* penetrates the esoteric secrets of Yezidi spirituality. The Yezidi, who believe they are followers of the oldest of religions, likely go back more than 10,000 years. Wilson explores Yezidism as a pure religion that rejects the law in order to be free to choose religious spontaneity, freedom, and passion: the way to be mad for God. Delving into their oral and shamanic roots, Wilson shows how the Yezidi ferociously practiced their love of the divine. This lovely book is a pearl of wisdom that reveals the Yezidi passion to know God in our soulless world. A must-read for spiritual seekers in our times.”

BARBARA HAND CLOW, AUTHOR OF *AWAKENING THE PLANETARY
MIND* AND *THE MIND CHRONICLES*

“Only the heterodox intellect of Peter Lamborn Wilson could expose the deeper truth behind today’s tragic headlines: that one of the world’s most brutally persecuted religious sects, the Yezidis—reduced by the thoughtless to be worshippers of a Satan that the thoughtless neither understand nor wish to understand—may hold

the key to the revitalization of didactic religion. As Wilson's enthralling arcanum reveals, the question is less whether the Yezidis can survive but whether we can survive without them."

MITCH HOROWITZ, PEN AWARD—WINNING AUTHOR OF *OCCULT AMERICA*, *THE MIRACLE CLUB*, AND *UNCERTAIN PLACES*

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATIONS

In this book words from Kurdish, Persian, Arabic, Syriac, and other languages appear, and within quotations from other writers various systems of transliteration are used. Rather than attempting any “scientific” and unified system(s), I have avoided diacritical marks and approximated pronunciations, favoring Kurdish where possible (e.g., *feqir* and not *faqīr*). Some words appear in a variety of spellings (due to differing transliteration systems used in various sources). Scholars will recognize the words, and others presumably won’t care.

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PREFACE

WHO ARE THE YEZIDIS?

The Yezidis comprise an ethnic religious group sometimes included among the Kurds (most of them speak Kurmanji Kurdish) but sometimes considered a separate entity. The name derives either from the second Umayyad caliph Yazid I (d. 683 CE), or from the Old Iranian word *yazata* meaning “divinity.”^{*1} Aside from Caliph Yazid, the “historical founder” of the tradition was a Sufi from Lebanon, Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, of Umayyad descent, who settled in the remote Hakkari mountains of Iraq circa 1111 CE. Sheikh Adi is buried in the holy valley of Lalish, the sect’s chief site of pilgrimage. A popular hypothesis, which I share, is that a pre-Islamic sect already existed in that region, and Sheikh Adi was accepted by them as a teacher. However, either he or his descendants were in turn so influenced by the original sect that, in effect, they departed from Islam, and by the fifteenth century the sect was known to worship the Peacock Angel, Melek Ta’us, a figure often identified as “the devil” or Satan—hence the sect is known as “devil worshippers.” As we’ll see, however, the actual situation is far more complex than this.



Figure 1. The Holy Valley of Lalish.
Photographer unknown

There may be about a million Yezidis in the world today—no one knows. Many have fled from Turkey and recently from Iraq on account of persecution. There are some in Syria, in Germany, and in the United States, and also in the former Soviet regions of Armenia and Georgia. It is believed that Yezidis were once to be found in Iran and in India. There is no doubt that remarkable parallel traditions indeed exist in these countries, and need to be discussed. In Iraq there are two Yezidi population centers, one in the Hakkari region near Mosul, the other in Jebel Sinjar.

After the fall of the Umayyad dynasty, there seems to have existed a restorationist resistance movement that carried out guerilla warfare in the region now inhabited by the Yezidis. But scholars have proposed other “origins” for the sect. For some they comprise a post-Islamic form of Sufism, or a schismatic sect influenced by Sufism; for others they are a gnostic “survival,” or they are Mesopotamian or Harranian pagans, or

crypto-Christians, or crypto-Jews, or crypto-Manichaeans, or Mandaeans, or (recently a popular notion) Zoroastrians, perhaps Mithraists, or even “Hindus.” They are very clearly related somehow to another Kurdish sect of “angel worshippers” called the Ahl-i Haqq (“People of Truth”) found amid Shiite milieux in Iran. Yezidis have been identified as Magians, Assyrians, Hittites, Mittani, Sumerians, and other ethnic and religious groups. In brief, their origins are mysterious.

As for the religion itself, that is the subject of this book, but for a brief and cogent summary, see the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article on Yezidis by Philip Kreyenbroek, the present doyen of European Yezidi studies, whose major writings are a sine qua non for my work.



INTRODUCTION

The Yezidi religion could be considered from any of a number of perspectives—for instance, as an ethnically bound, orally transmitted “folk religion” structurally similar to other isolated Eurasian cults such as the Druse, the Dünmeh, the Alevis, the Asheks, the Mandaeans, the Ahl-i Haqq. (In past times such cults persisted even in Europe—witch covens, for instance, or the Baltic pagans, or, later, the Frankists.) Membership in such “small” religions is usually closed—at least in theory—and this “ethnic” finitude may come to characterize even former “world religions” like Zoroastrianism.

In truth, matters are more complex. For instance, in Kurdistan nowadays many people are not “converting” to Zoroastrianism, but “discovering” that their families were “always” Zoroastrians, practicing “dissimulation” (as nominal Christians or Muslims) to escape persecution. It might happen that al-Qaeda and ISIS give Islam such a bad name that it loses its hegemony in the region, perhaps especially among non-Arab peoples like Kurds, Persians, and Indians.

In this dramatic context, the outside world has grown more aware of the Yezidis since political and religious warfare in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey, and the “Middle East” in general has drawn attention to the suffering of oppressed religious minorities. Once an obscure, marginal folk whose fascinating faith was known only as a rumored “devil worship,” the Yezidis

have in recent years been murdered, oppressed, dispersed, enslaved, and tortured by fundamentalist Islamist bigots and sadists, and have earned the pity of a media-bemused world. The contention of this essay is that admiration would be a more just response to the facts of Yezidism. By all means let us support their resistance to oppression, but let us not define them merely as victims.

I have been writing for some time about the need for a “new revelation” in the sphere of spirituality, a turn toward heresy so to speak, which I identify under the rubric of the *re-paganization of monotheism*. This is not the place for a full-scale critique of institutional religion since the “invention of civilization” in the fourth millennium BCE. For one thing, I’ve already carried this out; for another, the thing is obvious. I’m not alone in dreaming of such a movement; recently, for example, I came across the contemporary Persian philosopher Wahid Azal’s call for a post-Islamic Sufism (based on classical neo-Shiite Babism, heterodox Sufism, and ayahwasca shamanism).^{*2} Such ideas are “in the air” and have been since at least the 1960s. More recently, one might be forgiven for arguing that the need has reached crisis level. My intention here is limited to a discussion of Yezidism as a proto-version of the very repaganization I propose, as an antinomian response to the “killing letter” of monotheist puritanism, and as a “Nietzschean religion” dating back at least to the thirteenth century—a poetic inspiration for a serious movement to save religion from itself, from slavery and death, and (re)turn it to the shamanic values of mastery and life.

This essay (literally, “attempt”) concerns some aspects of the Yezidi religion, and not others. For example, I have very little to say about Yezidi history (which has been dealt with by other writers, e.g., John Guest’s *Survival among the Kurds*) or anthropology (inadequately studied, but see Henry Field, *The Yezidis*, and Birgül Açıkyıldız, *The Yezidis*) or folklore (see Christine Allison’s *The Yezidi Oral Tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan* for marvelous transcriptions and annotated translations of folksongs), or tribal structure, customs, costumes, foodways, and so forth. Having never visited the Yezidis myself, I must leave picturesque descriptions to those who have, such as Layard in the nineteenth century and, Seabrook, Edmonds, and Lady Drower in the twentieth.¹ What I offer is a review of other people’s writings, with an emphasis on the theme of esoteric antinomianism.^{*3}

For the history, folklore, festivals, pilgrimages, and geography of the Yezidi world, the bibliography can be a readers' guide. I intend a different experiment. Yezidism is a religion *with secrets*. (Because it remains largely a nonliterate tradition, some of these secrets are not known even to the majority of believers; moreover, orality leads to variants in the traditions.) I believe that such secrets can be discerned in general terms, if not in specific details, by an *esoteric hermeneutics* (as Henry Corbin put it) in which structural parallels with other esoteric traditions can be used to elucidate the Yezidi *symbolique*. I'll try to show that Yezidism constitutes to a certain degree a conscious critique of orthodoxy and puritanism, that it has always proposed a "re-paganization of monotheism," and that it has developed in a dialectical relation with religion in such a way as to constitute a classical antinomianism. I do not apologize for presuming that Yezidism has a *use* for readers who are not themselves Yezidis, and that it can be experienced as "revelation" through reading. Although not a religion of the Book, and quite clearly on the side of face-to-face encounter rather than action at a distance, Yezidism has accreted (like a pearl) a nimbus of textuality—and it is here that my attention is engaged. Obviously I cannot pretend to offer some sort of final account of Yezidism—or even a very accurate one. Let this text, then, be defined as poetry—as subjectivity—rather than scholarly prose. Any errors are mine—and precious to me.

Regretfully, I must limit my remarks about the current political situation of the Yezidis to a general statement of outrage on their behalf, due to continual Islamist persecution (murder, rape, enslavement) by elements such as ISIS. Fatwas against the Yezidis issued by the Ottoman ulema in the nineteenth century (see the appendix in Sami Said Ahmed's *The Yezidis*) already advocated murder and enslavement of these "unbelievers." Hyper-orthodoxies such as Wahhabism or Salafism may be distortions of orthodox Islam, but they do not violate historical programs. If "moderate" Islam today does not launch an effective critique of Salafism, perhaps this is from fear that the ugliest bigots are not misrepresenting the religion, but are practicing it *to the letter*, "which killeth." Sufism and other heterodox forms of Islam appear to be precluded from making a robust resistance against Islamism—because, as one Sufi shaykh put it, "We believe in peace and love," and not in violence or even militant self-defense. This constitutes, in the classical sense, a true *tragedy*.

As some of my readers will know, I have devoted decades of my life to the study of such heterodox forms. During this time, I have gone from a position of sympathy with Islam per se to a quite different view of the matter. I have waited in vain for a reasoned response from within mainstream Islam to the fundamentalist puritanism infecting it. When I first fell in love with esoteric forms of Islam in Iran, Afghanistan, and India in the 1970s, it often seemed that Sufism was the dominant mode, and that heterodoxies such as Ismailism or the Ahl-i Haqq (whom I also came to know and appreciate) were living limbs, so to speak, of the greater body of faith. In effect, what I liked were the “medieval accretions” and “impurities” that are now being condemned and repressed, from the firebombed Sufi shrines of Pakistan to murdered mystics in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Libya, and to persecuted Druzes, Asheqs, wandering dervishes, Yezidis and other “minorities” everywhere in Dar al-Islam. The time has come to say, finally, that the exoteric religion itself must be held to blame for these horrors.

I agree with Wahid Azal that the age now demands the proclamation of the precedence of the esoteric (*batini*) over the exoteric (*zaheri*).^{*4} Therefore, the aspect of Yezidism that will chiefly concern me is its esoteric essence. In a sense, the religion can be interpreted as a pure form of esotericism and, moreover, an antinomian manifestation of the purely esoteric. For dialectical reasons, which I’ll discuss, Yezidism can be situated and understood *in opposition* to Islam and its law; also, it must be seen as both a pre-Islamic religion and a post-Islamic form of Sufism. In making the argument, I intend not to rely in a final sense on contemporary interpretations of Yezidism, either by scholars or by practicing Yezidis. My sole source of evidence must be Yezidi texts, by which I mean largely transcriptions of oral traditions.

Until recently, the Yezidi caste of *mirids* (commoners), and even most of the Sheikh and Pir castes, were supposed to be deliberately uneducated and unable to read. Western scholars often assumed the rule was meant to keep them “ignorant” and in thrall to the *mir* or ruler. But I see the rule as part of their antinomian praxis. Surely we are post-progressist enough by now to admit that literacy is at best a mixed blessing. The *text* has always (since about 4000 BC) been a means of enslaving humans to a status quo of the state and its official ideology or religion. By refusing literacy, the

Yezidis signified their refusal of *law* as oppression. “The pen is in the hand of the enemy,” as the old Persian proverb puts it. The magic of writing comprises both the blessing and the curse of Hermes-Thoth. According to a legend, when Thoth tells Thamus (= Ammon = Zeus) he’s invented writing, and that from now on humans will never forget anything, Thamus answers, “On the contrary, my son—now they’ll forget *everything*.” Writing is the death of memory, and hence the origin of unknowing. Its spell binds us to the power of the author(ity). In this sense, in adhering to an oral tradition—and not an “illiterate” or “preliterate” one—the Yezidis can be seen as deliberately (not accidentally) *free*. In their so-called scripture, the *Kitab al-Jilwah*, Melek Ta’us the Peacock Angel says, “I lead to the straight path *without a revealed book*; I direct aright my beloved and my chosen ones by unseen means” (italics mine). Islam calls itself the religion of the Book. It acknowledges that Judaism and Christianity are also religions of the Book (and, according to some Sufis, also Hinduism with its Vedas). All others, bookless, are illegitimate. But Yezidism goes further. It *rejects* the Book. It opposes the Book. In this dialectical opposition is formed its true essence and glory.



1 BOOKS

They say our hearts are our books, and our sheikhs tell us everything from the second Adam until now and the future.

APPENDIX TO *MESHAF RESH*

The Yezidi religion appears to possess two revealed books—the *Kitab al-Jilwah* (*Book of Revelation*) and *Meshaf Resh* (The Black Book)—whose author (whether God or Melek Ta’us) maintains that Yezidi teachings are not contained in books, and that the *Book of Revelation* was (as opposed to the Bible or Qur’an) not a revealed text. The two books seem to have been unknown till the late nineteenth century, when versions of them began to appear in the very dodgy manuscript markets of Iraq. Were they forgeries, concocted for sale to credulous Western tourists and scholars? Yezidi legend says no, they are authentic, and that their originals were stolen by the British and hidden in the British Museum. And the texts as received contain real Yezidi teachings. It is true that books cannot be revealed, and that most Yezidis are forbidden to learn to read. Their tradition is canonical *only* as orally transmitted. Yezidism is not illiterate (or preliterate) but *anti*-literate, as we said above. The pen has been in the hand of the enemy ever since writing was invented as a means of magical

control, of propagating ideology and alienation. Writing is paradoxically the sign of absence: when knowledge is reduced to data, it falls into a black hole of cultural amnesia because it is no longer contained in the soul, but merely in books (which can be lost). Only presence assures authenticity. Mediation is separation—and loss.

In the twenty-first century the Yezidi stricture on literacy has loosened, of course, under the influence of whiggish modernism, which has no concept of the positive valence of orality or the inherent “dark side” of the written (and especially the printed) word. “Education” must be good—any other attitude would constitute backwardness and reaction. The existence of what might be called revolutionary anti-progressism—the idea that liberal social control (including literacy and enlightenment) can easily become a form of oppression, and must be dialectically critiqued and in some cases actively opposed in the cause of liberation—this perspective is generally condemned as “Romantic” at best. For the record, then, allow me to say that I perceive an esoteric value in the Yezidi defense of orality. The limits imposed by the very structure of media can only be transcended by breakthroughs into *pre-sentience* and “heart-to-heart” transmission of knowledge—that is, of *wisdom*, which is existential—and not of mere information.

The pure orality of the Yezidi tradition has resulted in a wild polyvalence and delirium of mythopoesis. Answers to theological questions can differ from village to village, and from one believer to another. However, from the scholar’s perspective, coherence is not lost. One benefit (for outsiders at least) of modernity has been the transcription and publication of a great deal of oral material, most importantly the *qewls* or hymns that are memorized by hereditary bards (*qawwals*) and performed during rituals, and the stories that are told to contextualize and comment on the poems. These oral texts have only begun to appear since the latter half of the twentieth century, and they are still concealed by their rather obscure appearances in print, for example, in the English-language translations of Kreyenbroek. These hymns have “come from the sky” in a quasi-revelatory mode: God (or Melek Ta’us) taught them to the angels who transmitted them to the sheikhs, who revealed them to the Yezidi people—or, they are the work of Sheikh Adi—or by the wise and saintly men of Adi’s day.¹

“Let not our hearts be corrupted [by] . . . interpreting books.”*⁵ ²

In one *qewl* it is said that the “Pen of Power” is in the hand of Soltan Ezi, the angel identified most often with the caliph Yazid.³ In a sense, this motif shadows that of the Tablet and Pen in the Qur’an; it represents creation itself as a kind of writing. “In the beginning was the Word”—already the *written* word. Here, however, we must speak of a paradoxical Pen of non-writing, of non-literacy. (It reminds one of the “sword of non-killing,” which is said in Zen to be the highest form of the martial art of fencing.) Again, we are dealing here not with simple preliteracy or peasant backwardness, but with a subtle dialectic. The pen of non-writing reflects the motif of the lost book. In Eliade’s *Shamanism* we read that once upon a time shamans had a “book” in which their secrets were written, but the spirits became angry at its misuse and took it back—similar to the secret identity of soma/haoma, the entheogenic plant of immortality in Indo-Iranian tradition, which was *lost*, just as Gilgamesh lost the magic herb given to him by Utnapishtim.^{†6} The fact is that wisdom is “always already” lost—otherwise it would not be wisdom; whereas simultaneously it is common as dung (as the alchemists say) and can be found in any cheap paperback edition of any decent mystical text—provided one reads *with the angel*.^{‡7}

According to another legend, the Black Book is in reality simply the Qur’an, with every mention of the name “Satan” covered over by *black wax*. This image haunts my thinking about Yezidism, even if it’s not true.⁴ John Guest, who gives the most complete account of the incredibly tangled history of the discovery and publication of the *Jilwah* and the *Meshaf Resh* (most of which need not concern us, since we are interested solely in their esoteric message) remarks that a scholar named Browski in 1884 claimed to have seen the Yezidi “sacred book with seven seals,” and that on its title page was the name Hasan alBasri. Browski’s published articles “contain no direct quotations from the *Meshaf Resh*, but they accurately summarize portions of it.”⁵ Clearly this text “was” the Black Book. But Browski also mentions “traditions about Melek Ta’us advising Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem, rescuing Jesus Christ from the cross and inspiring Caliph Yazid to defy Islam,”⁶ none of which appear in the text we have today

(although they may yet be canonical and subject to esoteric interpretation), suggesting that Browski had a second source, now lost.

Kreyenbroek points out that the *qewls* and other inspired/revealed oral material could have led to the assumption that a kind of Ur-book, the archetype of the *Jilwah* and the Black Book, could have existed and is now “hidden and lost.”⁷ Given Islam’s tolerance of other religions of the Book, and its condemnation of religions *without* books as unbelief, it may be that some Yezidis have wished into existence (at least as legend) a book of their own. Thus, a poem in praise of Sheikh Adi (translated by Badger in *Nestorians and Their Rituals*) mentions a Book of Glad Tidings, “a work which is still referred to by some Yezidis (under the title of *Mijde*) as the ‘original’ Yezidi sacred book, now probably lost” and probably influenced by the Christian Evangelium or “Good News.” Some Yezidis believe “hymns cannot be written”; others believe the true books are destroyed or lost, and “a minority” accept the existing texts as canonical.⁸

As mentioned above, the transference of the Black Book from heaven to earth is attributed to Hasan al-Basri, a historical figure and early mystic predating Sufism. According to Guest, this is a mask-identity for Hasan (Kurdish *Hesen*) ibn Adi, the martyr and reviver of the Yezidi faith who was a great-grand-nephew of Sheikh Adi.⁹ One clan of Sheikhs descended from Hesen, called the Adanis, are the only family of Yezidis enjoined to learn reading and writing, and are the custodians of the Black Book and the teachers of the *qawwals*. They appear in some respects to be the most “Islamicoid” faction within Yezidism, and carry out versions of certain Islamic rituals—which are in turn ritually interrupted by another clan, the Shemsani or “Sun Worshippers,” who represent a preor anti-Islamic or even quasi-“pagan” strain within the tradition.

According to the well-informed colonial administrator C. J. Edmonds, a variant of the origin story of the Black Book concerns Nebuchadnezzar and the destruction of Jerusalem already alluded to—a motif with decidedly antinomian features.¹⁰ In this tale, the ancestors of the Yezidis, the Azayim, comprise a tiny tribe of pastoral nomads. The archangel Jibra’il warns the king of the Jews, Danera, that these folk will some day threaten his power. To prevent this, he must convert the Azayim “by persuasion, not by force.” Danera visits them and tries to get them drunk on arak, offering it first to the tribal elders, who refuse, and then to the shepherds, and finally to the

young boys, who all refuse the drink. Danera and his ministers retire, baffled, to Jerusalem.

Jibra'il now appears to one of the Azayim boys—an orphan who is the young Nebuchadnezzar—and urges him to destroy Jerusalem. He asks how a mere child can accomplish this, but Jibra'il promises that his followers will be magically doubled each day, and that when slain they will be magically revived, and that two angels will sit on the lad's shoulders (like the famous snakes of Azi Dahhak, who will appear later in this essay), and turn into rams with golden horns (an alchemical metaphor), and break down the gates of the city. (The historical Nebuchadnezzar II did of course conquer Jerusalem in 597 BC and took the Jews into Babylonian Captivity.) After the conquest, Jibra'il bestows the Black Book (which was hidden in an oven) on Nebuchadnezzar. Eventually, the Azayim become the Ezdari or Yezidis, and along with Sheikh Shams—founder of the Shemsani clan and a mask for Shamsoddin Tabrizi, who “is” the great antinomian companion of Rumi—become custodians of the Black Book. Thus a tension or rivalry exists between two families representing exoteric and esoteric strains within the faith, each claiming ownership of the Book(s).

Guest gives evidence that the books may be considered, not as late forgeries, but as authentic documents.¹¹ A dying Yezidi told the French priest-scholar Père Anastase that the “sacred books had originally been written in Kurdish (as spoken by God) and handed down . . . in the days of Adam. Long ago they had been translated into Arabic in order to shield the originals from human eyes or touch.” The informant, a custodian of the books, used to keep them in a box of walnut wood, “buried in a cave on the Jebel Sinjar,” the Yezidi heartland. (The image of the Cave, the repository par excellence of the deep esoteric ever since the Stone Age, recurs frequently in Yezidi lore.) The box itself was wrapped in “white velvet stitched with pieces of flat silver representing a peacock, the sun, the moon and other symbols.” The texts were written on gazelle or deer skin. Another account of the Black Book tells of its being kept “upon a throne,” wrapped in red silk. All these practices create the sense of book as *living being*.

Another account of the *Jilwah* mentions symbols in the text: a crescent, stars, bird (peacock?), burning torch, sun disc, plants (which plants!?), and “the head of a man with projecting ears and two horns.”¹² Some of these images also appear in Yezidi shrine-temples and as women's tattoos.

These last were noticed and sketched by Lady E. S. Drower, the first Western scholar of the Mandaean, who may or may not be the Sabaeans of the Qur'an—the sole remaining Gnostic dualist sect, once found in the southern riverlands of Iraq, horribly persecuted by the Muslims and nowadays reduced to a few thousand refugees. They venerate a peacock angel, but only as a minor figure; thus Lady Drower was curious to visit the Yezidis, and wrote her charming travel book, *Peacock Angel*, in 1941 while parts of the Middle East still basked in the retreating shadow of the Ottoman past:

We talked of tattooing. The women never admit that tattooing has a magic purpose, and tell you that they submit to the process for *zina* (decoration) or *hilwa* (beauty). Here and there, however, marks have been tattooed to keep off pain, and the floriated cross and cross with a dot in each arm, both common designs, are undoubtedly magical and health-preserving signs.^{[13](#)}

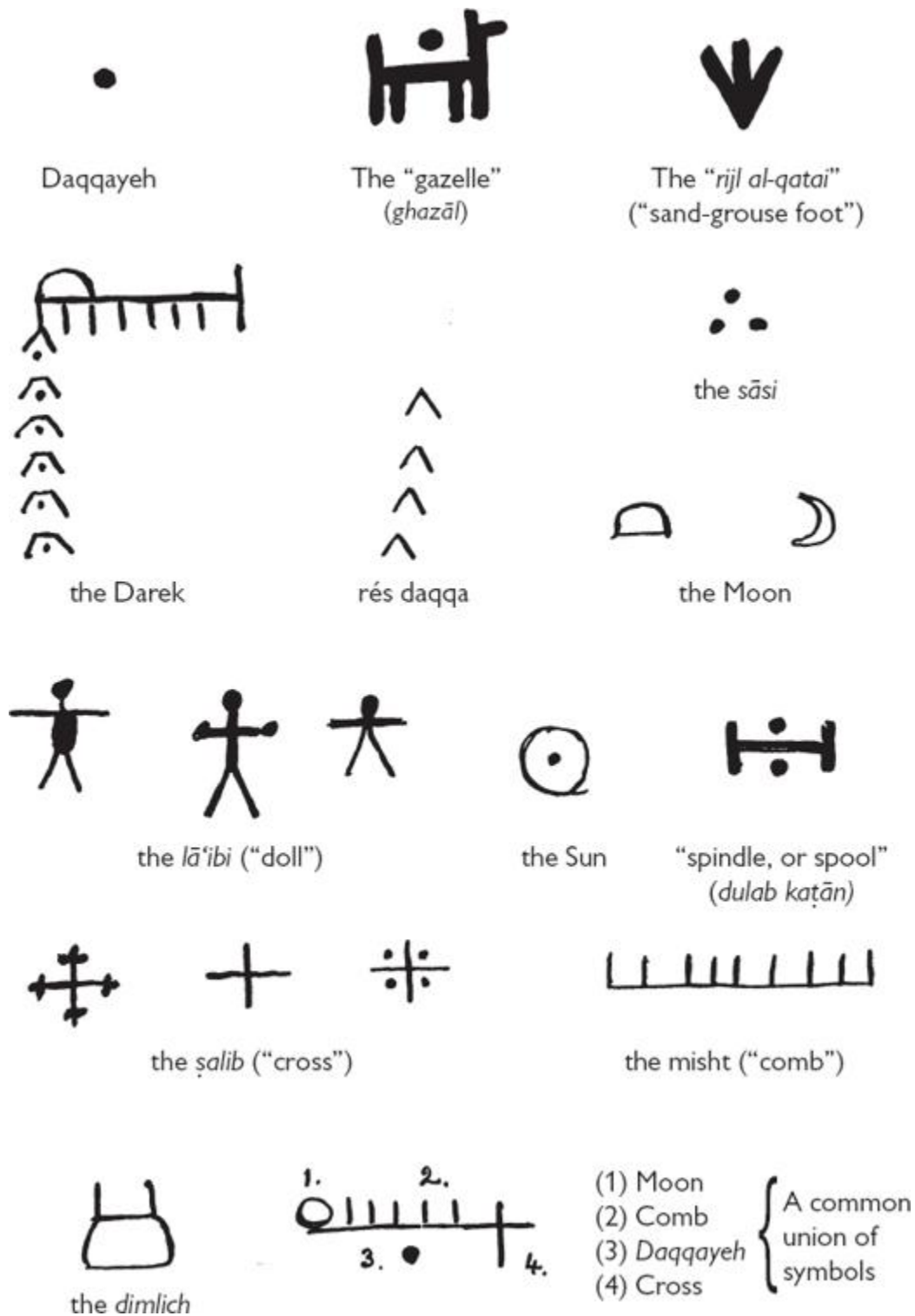


Figure 2. Women's tattoo designs.
From E. S. Drower, *Peacock Angel*, 1941

The cross is either a Christian borrowing, or an archaic metaphysical symbol—nearly universal—signifying the penetration of matter by spirit, or of the world by the spirits. Melek Ta'us rescued Jesus from the Cross—or, Melek Ta'us *is* Jesus on the Cross, the crucified snake of alchemy. Similarly, the other marks can be given spiritual interpretations, or genealogical significance (Carl Schuster's thesis, for which see the end of chapter 8), or both, or neither. My point is that the body is a book just as the book is a body, a living entity, that can dictate directly to the heart; and this must be so even (or especially) if the book is *spoken* rather than (or as well as) written. And this *fact* precedes even the content of the book—to which we now turn.



2

COSMOGONY

It's not easy to find the texts of the two holy books, the *al-Jilwah* and the *Meshaf Resh*, so I present them, or parts of them, here. The translations are by Isya Joseph from *Devil Worship: The Sacred Books and Traditions of the Yezidis* (29–46). The rest of my essay can be taken as a commentary on these texts, as well as

1. The poetry attributed to Sheikh Adi
2. Other relatively untrustworthy but interesting texts
3. The *gewls* and other oral texts, mostly collected and translated by Kreyenbroek
4. The poetry attributed to Caliph Yazid ibn Mu'awiya

Initially, we need to pay attention to Yezidi cosmogony, the narrative of “first things,” which will provide us with a set of symbols that will reappear in all the texts and contexts relevant to our major themes. I begin with *al-Jilwah* and the *Meshaf Resh*, and after each chapter or paragraph I will interrupt the text with notes to clarify difficult or obscure points, reserving full commentary for later chapters.

PREFACE

In the Name of the Most Compassionate God!

With the help of the Most High God, and under his direction, we write the history of the Yezidis, their doctrines, and the mysteries of their religion, as contained in their books, which reached our hand with their own knowledge and consent.

In the time of [Caliph] Al-Muktadir Billah, AH 295 [CE 907–8], there lived Mansûr-al-Hallâj, the wool-carder, and Sheikh Abd-al-Kâdir of Jîlân. At the time, too, there appeared a man by the name of Sheikh Adî, from the mountain of Hakkari,^{*8} originally from the region of Aleppo or Baalbek. He came and dwelt in Mount Lalis, near the city of Mosul, about nine hours distant from it. Some say he was of the people of Harrân,^{†9} and related to Marwân ibn-al-Hakam.^{‡10} His full name is Sharaf ad-Dîn Abû-l-Fadâ'il, Adî bn Musâfir bn Ismael bn Mousa bn Marwân bn Al-Hasan bn Marwân. He died AH 558 (AD 1162–63). His tomb is still visited; it is near Ba'adrei, one of the villages of Mosul, distant eleven hours. The Yezidis are the progeny of those who were the *mirids* (disciples) of Sheikh Adi. Some trace their origin to Yezid, others to Hasan-Al-Basri.

AL-JILWAH (THE REVELATION)

Before all creation, this revelation was with Melek Tâ'ûs, who sent Abd Tâ'ûs to this world that he might separate truth known to his particular people. This was done, first of all, by means of oral tradition, and afterward by means of this book, *Al-Jilwah*, which the outsiders may neither read nor behold.

Abd Ta'us, “servant of the Peacock (Angel),” is said to be Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, sometimes called the founder of Yezidism, although as we shall see this idea is as questionable as most facts about the tradition. E. G. Browne (whose translation of *al-Jilwah* appears in Oswald Parry’s *Six Months in a Syrian Monastery*, 367–87) rendered “particular people” as

“chosen people,” and “outsiders” as “strangers.” (There is some *frisson* involved for strangers such as ourselves in being able to read a forbidden book of so-called devil worshippers; this easy access to secrets is at once a blessing and a curse of modernity. Have we deserved this “revelation”?)

CHAPTER I

I was, am now, and shall have no end. I exercise dominion over all creatures and over the affairs of all who are under the protection of my image. I am ever present to help all who trust in me and call upon me in time of need. There is no place in the universe that knows not my presence. I participate in all the affairs which those who are without [i.e., outside the faith] call evil because their nature is not such as they approve. Every age has its own manager, who directs affairs according to my decrees. This office is changeable from generation to generation, that the ruler of this world and his chiefs may discharge the duties of their respective offices every one in his own turn. I allow everyone to follow the dictates of his own nature, but he that opposes me will regret it sorely. No god has a right to interfere in my affairs, and I have made it an imperative rule that everyone shall refrain from worshiping all gods. All the books of those who are without are altered by them; and they have declined from them, although they were written by the prophets and the apostles. That there are interpolations is seen in the fact that each sect endeavors to prove that the others are wrong and to destroy their books. To me truth and falsehood are known. When temptation comes, I give my covenant to him that trusts me. Moreover, I give counsel to the skilled directors, for I have appointed them for periods that are known to me. I remember necessary affairs and execute them in due time. I teach and guide those who follow my instruction. If anyone obey me and conform to my commandments, he shall have joy, delight, and goodness.

Melek Ta'us says he participates in affairs that outsiders will call evil simply because the nature of such affairs is not approved by them. Nowadays, it is fashionable to deny that the Yezidis are “devil

worshippers,” either out of pious political correctitude, or to shield them from the wrath of Sunni extremists. I will take issue with this denial, first because I will argue that the Yezidis (like the Vedic Indians) worship *daevas*; and second, because I am convinced that Melek Ta’us “is” Azazel or Lucifer, the character sometimes known as Satan, the fallen (arch) Angel, who in the Yezidi telling is pardoned and restored by God to his viceregal position. He is certainly Lord of the World, and bestower of all good, but is himself beyond good and evil. He “allows everyone to follow the dictates of his own nature,” or as Rabelais put it, to “do what thou wilt.” E. G. Browne translated this passage: “I am thine evil in all those events which strangers name evils because they are not done according to their desire I grant indulgence according to the [just] merits of those qualities wherewith each disposition is by nature endowed.”¹

CHAPTER II

I requite the descendants of Adam, and reward them with various rewards that I alone know. Moreover, power and dominion over all that is on earth, both that which is above and that which is beneath, are in my hand. I do not allow friendly association with other people, nor do I deprive them that are my own and that obey me of anything that is good for them. I place my affairs in the hands of those whom I have tried and who are in accord with my desires. I appear in divers manners to those who are faithful and under my command. I give and take away; I enrich and impoverish; I cause both happiness and misery. I do all this in keeping with the characteristics of each epoch. And none has a right to interfere with my management of affairs. Those who oppose me I afflict with disease; but my own shall not die like the sons of Adam that are without. None shall live in this world longer than the time set by me; and if I so desire, I send a person a second or a third time into this world or into some other by the transmigration of souls.

CHAPTER III

I lead to the straight path without a revealed book; I direct aright my beloved and my chosen ones by unseen means. All my teachings are easily applicable to all times and all conditions. I punish in another world all who do contrary to my will. Now, the sons of Adam do not know the state of things that is to come. For this reason they fall into many errors. The beasts of the earth, the birds of heaven, and the fish of the sea are all under the control of my hands. All treasures and hidden things are known to me; and as I desire, I take them from one and bestow them upon another. I reveal my wonders to those who seek them, and in due time my miracles to those who receive them from me. But those who are without are my adversaries, hence they oppose me. Nor do they know that such a course is against their own interests, for might, wealth, and riches are in my hands, and I bestow them upon every worthy descendant of Adam. Thus the government of the worlds, the transition of generations, and the changes of their directors are determined by me from the beginning.

Yezidism is a closed religion—really an ethnic group; it does not accept converts. As we'll see, “descendants of Adam” may well refer *only* to the Yezidis, who are descended from Adam but *not from Eve*. Readers may be interested to know, however, that in recent times, Hindus who worship Murugan (Sanat Kumara) the son of Shiva in the form of a Peacock Angel have been accepted as related to the Yezidis; and that an Order of the Peacock Angel has appeared to take in those “strangers” who wish to worship Melek Ta'us (see appendix on India).

CHAPTER IV

I will not give my rights to other gods. I have allowed the creation of four substances, four times, and four corners; because they are necessary things for creatures. The books of Jews, Christians, and Moslems, as of those who are without, accept in a sense, i.e., so far as they agree with, and conform to, my statutes. Whatsoever is contrary to these they have altered; do not accept it. Three things are against me, and I hate three things. But those who

suffer for my sake I will surely reward in one of the worlds. It is my desire that all my followers shall unite in a bond of unity, lest those who are without prevail against them. Now, then, all ye who have followed my commandments and my teachings, reject all the teachings and sayings of such as are without. I have not taught these teachings, nor do they proceed from me. Do not mention my name nor my attributes, lest ye regret it; for ye do not know what those who are without may do.

Browne translates the second sentence above as “The seasons are four, and the elements are four.”² This elucidates the obscurity of Joseph’s version, but leaves out the “four corners.” These, I suspect, correspond to the four major Archangels, chiefs of the Seven (being those “skilled directors” who [re]incarnate in each age to direct the faithful). No one can explain the “three things” opposed to and hated by Melek Ta’us; perhaps they are the three monotheist religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which perpetrate the slander that Satan is cursed rather than redeemed.³ The stricture against “mention[ing] my name” includes not speaking the word Shaytan or anything that sounds like it—but the name Melek Ta’us is also rarely mentioned, even in the two books. Names have power in magical systems; the taboo is another pointer to the esoteric essence of Yezidism. The occult is the secret, the unspoken. These themes are underlined again in the fifth and final chapter of *al-Jilwah*:

CHAPTER V

O ye that have believed in me, honor my symbol and my image, for they remind you of me. Observe my laws and statutes. Obey my servants and listen to whatever they may dictate to you of the hidden things. Receive that that is dictated, and do not carry it before those who are without, Jews, Christians, Moslems and others; for they know not the nature of my teachings. Do not give them your books, lest they alter them without your knowledge. Learn by heart the greater part of them, lest they be altered.

Thus endeth the book of *Al-Jilwah*, which is followed by the book of *Mashaf Resh*, i.e., the Black Book.

The *Meshaf Resh* is “black” because it is seen as holy and esoteric. Black is in a sense the sacred color of Yezidism. Red comes close, as we’ll learn. Black and red are “satanic” colors, and the heraldic tints of anarchism as well. It has often struck me that black and red were the first “artistic” colors of the Stone Age: carbon and ocher, usually—the palette of the caves. (See chapter 9 on “Color and Alchemy.”) Meanwhile, the Black Book will introduce the cosmogonic themes of Yezidism; without knowing its doctrine of *origins* we cannot contemplate the sect’s *becoming*, its foliation into systems of initiation, the *symbolique*, the path, and so on.

MASHAF RESH (THE BLACK BOOK)

In the beginning God created the White Pearl out of his most precious essence. He also created a bird named Angar. He placed the White Pearl on the back of the bird, and dwelt on it for forty thousand years. On the first day, Sunday, God created Melek Anzazîl, and he is Tâ’ûs-Melek, the chief of all. On Monday he created Melek Dardâel, and he is Sheikh Hasan. Tuesday he created Melek Israfel, and he is Sheikh Shams (ad-Dîn). Wednesday he created Melek Mikhâel, and he is Sheikh Abû Bakr. Thursday he created Melek Azrâel, and he is Sajad-ad-Din. Friday he created Melek Shemnâel, and he is Nasir-ad-Dîn. Saturday he created Melek Nurâel, and he is Yadin (Fakhr-ad-Dîn). And he made Melek Tâ’ûs ruler over all.

The White Pearl on the back of the *Angar* or *Anqa* bird, a kind of giant roc I suppose, or phoenix, or rooster, or indeed peacock, reminds me of the pearl in the mouth of the Chinese dragon. It is the pearl of great price, the pearl of the Gnostic “Hymn of the Pearl”; it is the world itself in pre-manifest form, like the Orphic Egg of Chaos: it contains everything, like Hun Tun in *Chuang Tzu*, who is also a kind of dumpling or wonton, full of good bits, or a Humpty-Dumpty, destined to be smashed in order to put an end to primordial perfection and give birth to “the 10,000 things,” the “1,001 colors” of existence.

Can we identify the seven angels here with the seven Mesopotamian planets according to the days of the week? Is Melek Ta’us the sun? But

Sheikh Shams (Israfil) is said to be the sun. Sheikh Hesên is sometimes called Sheikh Sin, and Sin or Sinn was the old Harranian moon god—and so Massignon thought that (Monday being “moon-day”) Dardael must be the moon.^{*11} But perhaps *Sin* is just dialect for *Hesên*, and not a secret identity. If the Yezidis once had a Mesopotamian angelology, it seems too confused now to be recovered. (Note, moreover, that the Angels’ names are all Semitic.) Zoroastrianism has Seven Amesha Spentas, India has seven rishis, yoga has seven chakras, and the constellation of the Bear has seven stars. The Pleiades are seven stars, and play a major role in Yezidi lore (where Melek Ta’us is sometimes the polestar). The Persian Kurdish religion of the Ahl-i Haqq or “People of Truth,” who share many interesting motifs with the Yezidis (and even have a subset of Satan worshippers) have also seven angels. Even the Greeks had Seven Sages. Was there once a widespread cult of seven spirits that spread over the whole of Eurasia? Perhaps a Neanderthal religion of the cave bear and the shamanic axis of the North Star?^{*12} The Yezidis say they believe in one God, but that He is a *deus absconditus* who has left the work of the universe to his viceregent, Azazel (here “Anzazil,” Melek Ta’us) and his six co-rulers, who are like lamps and candles each one lit from the other.^{†13} They are also “sheikhs” on earth, companions or descendants of Sheikh Adi. (The Ahl-i Haqq angels also [re]incarnate in “every age.”)

Azazel is first heard of in the Book of Enoch, where he is a chief of the mysterious “Watchers,” the “sons of God” or Angels who mate with the “daughters of men” and produce a race of giants. Azazel teaches humans the arts of metals, that is, he “invents” alchemy. Later he degenerates into the demon associated in Judaism with the ritual “scapegoat” who is driven out of the city bearing all the year’s sins, to perish in the desert—and yet “rules over all.” In other words, Azazel “is” Satan.

After this God made the form of the seven heavens, the earth, the sun, and the moon. But Fakhr-ad-Din created man and the animals, and birds and beasts. He put them all in pockets of cloth, and came out of the Pearl accompanied by the Angels. Then he shouted at the Pearl with a loud voice. Thereupon the White Pearl broke up into four pieces, and from its midst came out the water which became an ocean. The world was round, and was not divided. Then he created

Gabriel and the image of a bird. He sent Gabriel to set the four corners. He also made a vessel and descended in it for thirty thousand years. After this he came and dwelt in Mount Lalish. Then he cried out at the world, and the sea became solidified and the land appeared, but it began to shake. At this time he commanded Gabriel to bring two pieces of the White Pearl; one he placed beneath the earth, the other stayed at the gate of heaven. He then placed in them the sun and the moon; and from the scattered pieces of the White Pearl he created the stars which he hung in heaven as ornaments. He also created fruit-bearing trees and plants and mountains for ornaments to the earth. He created the throne over the carpet. Then the Great God said: “O Angels, I will create Adam and Eve; and from the essence of Adam shall proceed Shehar bn Jebr, and of him a separate community shall appear upon the earth, that of Azazîl,” i.e., that of Melek Tâ’ûs, which is the sect of the Yezidis. Then he sent Sheikh Adi bn Musafir from the land of Syria, and he came (and dwelt in Mount) Lalish. Then the Lord came down to the Black Mountain. Shouting, he created thirty thousand Meleks, and divided them into three divisions. They worshiped him for forty thousand years, when he delivered them to Melek Tâ’ûs who went up with them to heaven. At this time the Lord came down to the Holy Land (al-Kuds), and commanded Gabriel to bring earth from the four corners of the world, earth, air, fire, and water. He created it and put in it the spirit of his own power, and called it Adam.

In variant cosmogonies there are fourteen levels, that is, seven heavens and seven earths; all this is very reminiscent of shamanic systems, but also of any archaic cosmology. The fourteen “spheres” are described in detail in the “Prayer and Hymn of Sheykh Shems [Shams].”⁴ Fekhredin (Fakhr-ad-Din) is the master of these levels, which include the Sphere of the Crown, the “Descent to Earth,” of Heaven (“in which history has its place”), the ethereal sphere of the path or *tariqa*, the dervish way; the sphere of red agate, and so forth. All fourteen “are standing up without columns” and are ruled by various angels. The speaker of the hymn is a kind of Dante or Muhammad giving a tour of cosmic levels—but here there appears to be no Hell. (Elsewhere a Hell is spoken of, but as we shall see, its ontological

status is questionable.) The sphere of red agate will reappear in the discussion of color and alchemy in chapter 9.

Fekhredin now assumes a major role as Demiurge; many *qewls* are dedicated to him. As “Saturday” perhaps he can be seen as a Saturn, that is, a *Sat*-an figure. (This homonym could be related to Set[h], the ancient Egyptian god of confusion, through Coptic Ethiopia.)

“The Shout” plays a major role not only in Yezidism but also in Manichaeism, the Ahl-i Haqq, and in Sufism, where it expresses an ecstatic “state” (*hal*) beyond language.⁵ An amir of the Yezidis from the Chol family, Ismail Beg, expanding on this passage, says God permitted Melek Ta’us “to go and shout into all souls.”^{*14} Each soul (the size of a blackberry or sesame seed) heard the cry, but the Yezidi souls responded first.⁶ Melek Ta’us still shouts to his people on grand feast days; Sami Said Ahmed says, “An educated Yezidi told me that he heard this voice once which sounded like a roaring lion and frightened him.”⁷ It has been pointed out that the Shout is an extremely archaic motif, perhaps related to “ritual laughter”; indeed, although Jehovah and Christ are not known for their laughter, other deities are not so dour.⁸ G. R. S. Mead tells us, “The creation is figured in one Egyptian tradition as the bursting forth of the Creator [Ptah?] into seven peals of laughter;—a sevenfold ‘Ha!’”^{†15} ⁹ God also creates with a shout 30,000 angels, in three ranks, and places them at the command of Melek Ta’us; this is as much as to say that everything in creation “has its angel,” that things (even ideas and abstractions) are personae, that matter itself is imbued with life (light) and has responded *in illo tempore* to the cry. If this were not so, nothing could symbolize anything else; but the echo of the Shout, so to speak, links all Being in series or correspondences that are occult resonances. Hence magic and alchemy become “permissible,” since all things can be made to harmonize and act creatively.

In a disorderly way (perhaps on purpose, to force the hearer to think) the text now introduces the subject of Adam’s creation and that of his son, progenitor of the Yezidis, “Shehar ibn Jebr,” or more correctly, Shahid ibn Jarr: “Witness, son of the Jar,” or “son of the Alembic.” Gabriel collects the four elements from the four corners of creation, and an alchemical operation is undertaken.



Figure 3. Ismail Beg, circa 1930.

Photographer unknown

Then he commanded Gabriel to escort Adam into Paradise, and to tell him that he could eat from all the trees but not of wheat. Here

Adam remained for a hundred years. Thereupon, Melek Tâ'ûs asked God how Adam could multiply and have descendants if he were forbidden to eat of the grain. God answered, "I have put the whole matter into thy hands." Thereupon Melek Tâ'ûs visited Adam and said "Have you eaten of the grain?" He answered, "No, God forbade me." Melek Tâ'ûs replied and said, "Eat of the grain and all shall go better with thee." Then Adam ate of the grain and immediately his belly was inflated. But Melek Tâ'ûs drove him out of the garden, and leaving him, ascended into heaven. Now Adam was troubled because his belly was inflated, for he had no outlet. God therefore sent a bird to him which pecked at his anus and made an outlet, and Adam was relieved.

The opening up of the Pearl that is, so to speak, the mind of Khuda (God), manifests the Macrocosm, the universe; the creation of Adam, the Microcosm. The ban on wheat eating (also in Islamic lore) suggests, to my mind, a pastoral distrust of agriculture: civilization itself is the forbidden fruit, whereas the earthly paradise (originally the land between the Upper Tigris and Euphrates where the Neolithic first begins to emerge, e.g., at Göbekli Tepe) represents the claims of nature over culture. In a Yezidi variant, the forbidden "Tree" is the vine. Wine and bread equal civilization, the "cooked." The "raw" is meat, the diet of the hunter/pastoralist. Cain (or his descendant Tubalcain) was perhaps one of the Watchers, avatars of forbidden arts and skills for humans who were meant to remain "primitive." However, if humans are to exercise free will and earn salvation by their own merits, there must be a Fall—a *felix culpa* or fortunate sin—and this dynamic motion out of mere static perfection is provided by Azazel (in the guise of a peacock or snake, according to Islamic folklore). Like the Gnostics, the Yezidis see Lucifer as a light-bringer—or, if he is the principle of darkness, then (as we'll hear Mansur Hallaj say in the *Tawasin*) light cannot be known without contrasting dark. Black is not only all colors, but in itself the essential color.

The scatological detail of the bird who pecks an anus for poor Adam—on one level a dirty joke—also provides a mirror for humanity's salvation in the flesh, not merely as some disembodied spirit. Adam is tempted by

forbidden fruit; he sins and is punished; but rescued by a bird, Melek Ta'us, or one of his feathered angels.

Now Gabriel was away from Adam for a hundred years. And Adam was sad and weeping. Then God commanded Gabriel to create Eve from under the left shoulder of Adam. Now it came to pass, after the creation of Eve and of all the animals, that Adam and Eve quarreled over the question of whether the human race should be descended from him or her, for each wished to be the sole begetter of the race. This quarrel originated in their observation of the fact that among animals both the male and the female were factors in the production of their respective species. After a long discussion Adam and Eve agreed on this: each should cast his seed into a jar, close it, and seal it with his own seal, and wait for nine months. When they opened the jars at the completion of this period, they found in Adam's jar two children, male and female. Now from these two our sect, Yezidis, are descended. In Eve's jar they found naught but rotten worms emitting a foul odor. And God caused nipples to grow for Adam that he might suckle the children that proceeded from his jar. This is the reason why man has nipples.

Only the Yezidis possess this variant of the Adam and Eve story. (I believe it's no accident that the experiment of the "jar" foreshadows Paracelsus and the Homunculus.^{*16}) Clearly Adam is portrayed here as the ideal androgyne (his breasts give milk—just as an old Yezidi told W. B. Seabrook in 1927), the alchemical symbol of the *insan-i kamil* or Perfect Human: the Child, Shahid ibn Jarr. Here the sealed alembic produces a mate for Shahid; in a variant he marries one of the houris or angelic nymphs of Paradise, named Layla, "Night." From this union, and not from Eve, the Yezidis alone of all humans are descended. "After Shehid, we have no prophet," a Yezidi dervish said in an interview in 2003.¹⁰

One level of interpretation of the tale might reveal a "patriarchalist" chauvinism, but, frankly, I would consider such an exegesis a dead end. Another more provocative reading might acknowledge modern "queer theory." But ultimately the esoteric truth revealed here is the alchemical one. As the Bible says (in one possible translation), "male and female

created He *him*,” rather than *them*. Adam is the rebus, the male/female. For him the Chymical Wedding is an interior mystery, for he himself is both Sulphur and Mercury, both alembic and athanor, vessel and oven, and his destiny is a tantric union with a celestial dakini—(i.e., with Wisdom, Sophia).

After this Adam knew Eve, and she bore two children, male and female; and from these the Jews, the Christians, the Moslems, and other nations and sects are descended. But our first fathers are Seth, Noah, and Enosh, the righteous ones, who were descended from Adam only.

Seth, Noah, and Enoch—that is, the bearers of the *esoteric* aspect of “Western” tradition.

It came to pass that trouble arose between a man and his wife, resulting from the denial on the part of the woman that the man was her husband. The man persisted in his claim that she was his wife. The trouble between the two was settled, however, through one of the righteous men of our sect, who decreed that at every wedding a drum and a pipe should be played as a testimony to the fact that such a man and such a woman were married legally.

This section seems like an intrusion from a set of rules, and moreover appears to make little sense, but in fact refers to an important doctrine adumbrated, for example, in the “Hymn of the Faith.”^{[11](#)}

Seven hundred years after Adam’s creation, the Seven Mysteries (*Sirr*) or Angels appear from “the Pearl of the Cup” and find that the body of Man has remained inert. Why do you not enter the body? they ask the soul, which answers that it cannot join with the flesh without the music of “the *def* and *shibab*,” tambourine and flute—the sacred Yezidi instruments played by the *qawwals*, especially in the presence of the *sanjaks* or statues of Melek Ta’us. Once the soul hears this music, “the light of love” enters his body: “the Prophet Adam drank from that cup, the miraculous power of that cup came and reached him, he became intoxicated and trembled, flesh

grew on him,” blood and breath entered him and he became full of life. Thus music equals love and wine, a kind of Sufi praxis without which life itself (as Nietzsche said) would be meaningless. Spirit and flesh are not separate, as in Gnostic dualism, but one, as in alchemy—thanks to *ecstasis* (or *enstasis*). Hence the rite of music at marriage, the Unio Mystica.

The next paragraph of *Meshaf Resh* says that Melek Ta’us “then came down to earth for our sect,” and goes on to name some “Yezidi” kings—actually Assyrian kings, with whom the Yezidis identify, and we can skip this list. The descent of Melek Ta’us, however, is commented on in a tale recorded by a Russian traveler, one Aleksandr Eliseev in 1888—a tale with profound esoteric implications, and beautifully expressed. Is it authentic? This question is of secondary importance, and beyond my competence.

A little star fell from heaven, said an ancient Yezidi legend, and hid in the depth of the then still dark earth. In that little star a bright beam of the nocturnal sun illuminating paradise fell on earth, and the earth became light, clear and warm; a particle of endless light illuminated it, inflamed life in it, gave it strength, reason and breath. That beam, that particle of endless light, was the great and glorious Melak-Tauz; through love for the dark earth he exchanged the realm of endless light—the blue sky flooded with the sunbeams and thirty-three thousand stars; along with endless light Melak-Tauz lost the grace of the great radiant god ruling in heaven... The creator most high became angry at Melak-Tauz and cast him down from the height of the throne. . . . [I]t took him [Melak-Tauz] a long time to fly down, with no place to stay and rest; there was not a star, or moon or sun to lend him support. Loyal to the will of the most high, they drove away the fallen spirit, being afraid to anger the one who cast Melak-Tauz down. Only earth did not deny shelter to the exile, accepting him with open arms. Having fallen on the green earth covered with sweet-smelling flowers, the incomparable Melak-Tauz lay motionless: battered, sick, dejected, he was alone in the world, for all disdained him. . . . Even people whom he loved so much, to whom he brought the bright hope and blazing fire, were so mean that they did not want to alleviate the heavy sufferings of the exile. Passing by and seeing him helpless, they jeered at him, beat him

with sticks, spat in his face and cursed the one to whom they owed their life and their senses. All those insults were patiently born by Melak-Tauz in silence; he believed and hoped that a spark of the better light that had been brought by him would not be extinguished even among cruel and corrupt people, and the bright hope did not deceive Melak-Tauz.

There came about kind people, pure in heart, who had preserved the un-extinguished spark of endless light falling on earth as a bright star of heaven; they recognized and welcomed Melak-Tauz, fearing not what other people would say or in what way Allah would view their kind deed. Gathering around the fallen angel, they washed his body with the water of pure springs, sprinkled him with the incense of the colourful mountain flowers, covered him with the best garments woven by the hands of their beautiful daughters. Melak-Tauz then revived and woke up for the new life on earth; he raised his hands to heaven, as if to bid farewell to him, and the everlasting one rolled thrice in the roaring storm.

The creator of the world, the source of grace and limitless love, condemned not the kind people for what they did for the miserable Melak-Tauz, and showed his blessing with the sign of the rainbow. And the poor people of the mountains received that sky-sign as the command of the most high never to abandon the downcast and rejected Melak-Tauz in distress or affliction. Those people were the Yezidis; until now they go after Melak-Tauz, hated and cursed by the whole world.^{[12](#)}

“The King was lonely in the Pearl.”^{[13](#)} Here is the doctrine of the *deus patheticus* which Henry Corbin discussed so often: the god who needs his worshippers in order to come fully into being—the transactional god, or “Thou,” as Martin Buber put it—who takes the form in which the believer believes, the lover loves, as the Sufis insist. “The King was lonely in the Pearl / He loved to make pilgrimage to his own light.”^{[14](#)} Or, as God says in the *hadith qudsi* quoted incessantly by the Sufis, “I was a Hidden Treasure, and I desired to be known; so I created the world that I might be known.”

Meshaf Resh continues:

Before Christ came into this world our religion was paganism. King Ahab was from among us. And the god of Ahab was called Beelzebub. Nowadays we call him Pir Bub. We had a king in Babylon, whose name was Bakhtnasar; another in Persia, whose name was Ahshurash; and still another in Constantinople, whose name was Agrikalus. The Jews, the Christians, the Moslems, and even the Persians, fought us; but they failed to subdue us, for in the strength of the Lord we prevailed against them. He teaches us the first and last science.

Jesus is one of the Yezidi Mysteries or Angels—perhaps a manifestation of Melek Ta’us himself, or else his companion and quasi prophet. (Despite the denial of “other prophets” by some Yezidis, the traditional Sufi number of 124,000 prophets is also quoted.) But the Yezidis also embrace “evil” figures from hiero-history, such as Beelzebub, “Pir Bub.” The Persian “king” may be Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian god, or Ahasuerus from the Book of Esther. All “first and last science”—that is, esoteric knowledge—and, by definition, beyond good and evil.

And one of his teachings is:

Before heaven and earth existed, God was on the sea, as we formerly wrote you. He made himself a vessel and traveled in it in *kunsiniyat* of the seas, thus enjoying himself in himself.^{*17} He then created the White Pearl and ruled over it for forty years. Afterward, growing angry at the Pearl, he kicked it; and it was a great surprise to see the mountains formed out of its cry; the hills out of its wonders; the heavens out of its smoke. Then God ascended to heaven, solidified it, established it without pillars. He then spat upon the ground, and taking a pen in hand, began to write a narrative of all the creation.

Our esoteric teaching is a “deeper” version of the cosmogony we’ve already learned. God (or Melek Ta’us) makes an ark and sails on the sea of not-yet-being “for 40,000 years,” as variants say. Perhaps he’s *bored* by the Pearl—here as well as a shout there’s a kick. Sometimes Adam is animated by divine spittle. In Sufism, initiations are sometimes given by the shaykh

spitting in the disciple's mouth. Spit is essence, a cover for semen or rather for alchemical Mercury. And the pen is a penis, a *lingam*, and Earth is pregnant.

In the beginning he created six gods from himself and from his light, and their creation was as one lights a light from another light. And God said, "Now I have created the heavens; let some one of you go up and create something therein." Thereupon the second god ascended and created the sun; the third, the moon; the fourth, the vault of heaven; the fifth the *fargh* (i.e., the morning star); the sixth, Paradise; the seventh, Hell. We have already told you that after this they created Adam and Eve.

Here it seems that Yezidism teaches an emanationist system, rather like the Platonism of Pseudo-Dionysius (who, however, enumerates nine rather than seven angelic ranks). If we follow the angelic list in paragraph 1, we now get this concordance:

Sun	Sunday	Azazil (Melek Ta'us)	?
Moon	Monday	Dardael (Sheikh Hesén)	Sun
Mars	Tuesday	Israfil (Sheikh Shamsoddin)	Moon
Mercury	Wednesday	Mikha'il (Sheikh Abu Bekir)	Heaven
Jupiter	Thursday	Azrael (Sejadin)	Morning star
Venus	Friday	M. Shemnael (Nasiroddin)	Paradise
Saturn	Saturday	M. Nurael (Fekhredin)	Hell

This chart contradicts other systems of correspondences, which usually identify Shams as sun and Hasan as moon, and so forth. The "original" system (if there ever was one) appears to have been lost long ago. Bits of it seem to survive as variants in different texts, oral and written. Other lists are given by Kreyenbroek in "A Survey of Prominent Yezidi Holy Beings."¹⁵ Suffice it to say that a celestial hierarchy is envisaged, and that

the Yezidis' experience relates more intimately to the earthly incarnations than to their corresponding asterisms.

And know that besides the flood of Noah, there was another flood in this world. Now our sect, the Yezidis, are descended from Na'umi, an honored person, king of peace. We call him Melek Miran. The other sects are descended from Ham, who despised his father. The ship rested at a village called 'Ain Sifni, distant from Mosul about five parasangs. The cause of the first flood was the mockery of those who were without, Jews, Christians, Moslems, and others descended from Adam and Eve. We, on the other hand, are descended from Adam only, as already indicated: This second flood came upon our sect, the Yezidis. As the water rose and the ship floated, it came above Mount Sinjar, where it ran aground and was pierced by a rock. The serpent twisted itself like a cake and stopped the hole. Then the ship moved on and rested on Mount Judie.

The second flood appears to affect only the Yezidis—thus it is an esoteric flood, a return to the condition of pre-eternity in the ocean of preexistence, (i.e., the mystic state). Hence the geography of Yezidi places is a hierotopography. The rock/peak of Mt. Sinjar is the *prima materia* of creation or being. The snake can be compared with the Kundalini serpent of Tantra—it “saves the ark from sinking,” that is, it connects the universal plenum with individual human consciousness. The snake is so important in Yezidism that the sect could almost be seen as a kind of Ophitism—and who knows? perhaps there was a historic link with that ancient Gnostic sect. The Black Snake carved on the gate at Lalish, the tomb of Sheikh Adi, reveals the great “public secret” of Yezidism: snake and peacock are one, and are the Savior.

No commentator known to me has explained Na'umi (who appears to be a son of Noah) or his descendant the angel Miran. In Kreyenbroek's appendix on holy beings, however, a figure named Nau is mentioned as a son of Sheikh Hasan and progenitor of a great hero called Miran.¹⁶ Often this paladin is spoken of as Chel Miran, or “Forty Saints.” This is a common trope in Sufism; I used to visit a shrine in Shiraz with a number of anonymous graves, known as the Chel-Tan or Forty Bodies. Perhaps the

Yezidi Miran has the strength of forty men? In any case he is also identified as Sherefeddin, a messianic figure much revered in the Sinjar and praised in the *gewls* and tales.^{[*18](#)}



Figure 4. The doorway to the mausoleum of Sheikh Adi, 1929.

Photo by Rosita Forbes

Now the species of the serpent increased, and began to bite man and animal. It was finally caught and burned, and from its ashes fleas were created. From the time of the flood until now are seven thousand years. In every thousand years one of the seven gods descends to establish rules, statutes, and laws, after which he returns to his abode. While below, he sojourns with us, for we have every kind of holy places. This last time the god dwelt among us longer than any of the gods who came before him. He confirmed the saints. He spoke in the Kurdish language. He also illuminated Mohammed, the prophet of the Ishmaelites, who had a servant named Mu'âwiya. When God saw that Mohammed was not upright before him, he afflicted him with a headache. The prophet then asked his servant to shave his head, for Mu'âwiya knew how to shave. He shaved his master in haste, and with some difficulty. As a result, he cut his head and made it bleed. Fearing that the blood might drop to the ground, Mu'âwiya licked it with his tongue. Whereupon Mohammed asked, "What are you doing, Mu'âwiya?" He replied, "I licked the blood with my tongue, for I feared that it might drop to the ground." Then Mohammed said to him, "You have sinned, O Mu'âwiya, you shall draw a nation after you. You shall oppose my sect." Mu'âwiya answered and said, "Then I will not enter the world; I will not marry."

It came to pass that after some time God sent scorpions upon Mu'âwiya, which bit him, causing his face to break out with poison. Physicians urged him to marry lest he die. Hearing this, he consented. They brought him an old woman, eighty years of age, in order that no child might be born. Mu'âwiya knew his wife, and in the morning she appeared a woman of twenty-five, by the power of the great God, and she conceived and bore our god Yezid. But the foreign sects, ignorant of this fact, say that our god came from heaven, despised and driven out by the great God. For this reason they blaspheme him. In this they have erred. But we, the Yezidi sect, believe this not, for we know that he is one of the above-mentioned

seven gods. We know the form of his person and his image. It is the form of a cock which we possess. None of us is allowed to utter his name, nor anything that resembles it, such as *sheitân* (Satan), *kaitân* (cord), *shar* (evil), *shat* (river), and the like. Nor do we pronounce *mal' ûn* (accursed), or *la' anat* (curse), or *na' al* (horseshoe), or any word that has a similar sound. All these are forbidden out of respect for him. So *khass* (lettuce) is debarred. We do not eat it, for it sounds like the name of our prophetess Khassiah. Fish is prohibited, in honour of Jonah the prophet. Likewise deer, for deer are the sheep of one of our prophets. The peacock is forbidden to our Sheikh and his disciples, for the sake of our Tâ'ûs. Squash also is debarred. It is forbidden to pass water while standing, or to dress up while sitting down, or to go to the toilet room, or to take a bath according to the custom of the people [of other religions]. Whosoever does contrary to this is an infidel. Now the other sects, Jews, Christians, Moslems and others, know not these things, because they dislike Melek Tâ'ûs. He therefore, does not teach them, nor does he visit them. But he dwelt among us; he delivered to us the doctrines, the rules, and the traditions, all of which have become an inheritance, handed down from father to son. After this Melek Tâ'ûs returned to heaven.^{[*19](#)}

Like other “seven-angel” sects such as the “Sevener” Ismailis or the Ahl-i Haqq, the Yezidis believe in cycles of hierohistory “ruled” by interventions of the angels. Here the book refers to the present cycle of Melek Ta'us, who illuminated the saints and the Prophet Muhammad (who fell away from the truth).

We now hear the folktale of the Magical Birth of Yazid. Mu'awiya is of course the first Umayyad caliph, coming after the four Rightly Guided Caliphs (Abu Bakr, Omar, Uthman, Ali), and often seen as comparatively worldly and secular. He moved the seat of the Caliphate from Medina in Arabia to Damascus in Syria. In the tale, he is shown as loyal to Muhammad and even subservient. By licking the blood he is “seeded” with a potential heir who will oppose Islam, a kind of antiMuhammad. The scorpions' poison (Scorpio symbolizing the genitals or *muladhara* chakra in Kundalini yoga) potentiates this seed, and by a miracle the old woman

conceives, like Sarah in the Bible. Yazid ibn Mu'awiya was the historical second Umayyad caliph, reviled by Shiites to this day as a wicked villain responsible for the death of Muhammad's grandson, the Imam Husayn, at Karbala. Yazid's supposed tomb in Damascus is still ritually stoned, like the monolith that represents Satan in Mecca. But for the Yezidis he is a divine avatar of Melek Ta'us, the "cock" depicted in the bronze *sanjaks* or idols of the sect. He is said to be the fallen archangel (i.e., Satan), but in fact he has been pardoned and redeemed by God and put in charge of the universe, and Yazid is his earthly form. Although he is virtually ignored by commentators, in this essay Yazid plays a major role.

This text, the Black Book, must have been written by a non-Yezidi, otherwise it would not contain the forbidden name Satan, or the other taboo words in the passage. The paradox whereby an esoteric and antinomian faith possesses taboos is explained by Corbin (in his book on Ibn Arabi): A moment of pure formless esotericism, such as the Qiyamat or "Resurrection" of the Nizari Ismailis, when "the chains of the law" are broken, is very soon englobed in a newly secreted shell of exoteric form, and becomes a new religion, complete with strictures on that which is forbidden. According to the Sufis, the same thing happened to Christianity: Jesus abrogated the Mosaic law and esotericized it. But in order to make this pure mysticism into an established religion, it adopted Roman law (and structural form) to replace Jewish law. To succeed utterly in esoteric transcendence of form is to court martyrdom, like al-Hallaj, or Suhrawardi, or Jesus. In a sense the messiah always fails—otherwise there would exist no messianic moment.

No doubt each of the Yezidi taboos originally possessed an esoteric meaning, which is now lost in the mists of custom and lore. It is impossible to say exactly when this esoteric/messianic moment occurred in Yezidi "history," because in effect there is no Yezidi *history*, only story or hieronarrative. According to some legends it occurred under Sheikh Adi himself, or Sheikh Hesên, but the accounts are contradictory. Another possibility would support Yazid ibn Mu'awiya as the "apostate messiah" whose "sin" is transmogrified into esoteric illumination, like Sabbatai Sevi's apostasy, or Jacob Frank's, or for that matter Jesus Christ's. From a "history of religions" perspective I like this theory for structural reasons: namely, it fulfills the *shape* of the esoteric/messianic event. The ban on lettuce for example: the old god Adonis died in a bed of lettuce; the

Manichaeans approved of lettuce, its whiteness suggesting it held a spark of spiritual light; the ithyphallic Egyptian god Min loved lettuce, which was thought to be an aphrodisiac; the wicked god Set(h) ate lettuce bedewed with the sperm of Horus and gave birth to Thoth from his head; lettuce is said to be soporific and anodyne, like opium.^{[*20](#)}

One of the seven gods made the *sanjaks* (standards) and gave them to Solomon the wise. After his death our kings received them. And when our god, the barbarian Yezîd, was born, he received these *sanjaks* with great reverence, and bestowed them upon our sect. Moreover, he composed two songs in the Kurdish language to be sung before the *sanjaks* in this language, which is the most ancient and acceptable one. The meaning of this song is this:

Hallelujah to the jealous God.

To associate the *sanjaks* with Solomon is to emphasize their magical qualities. Although it has been claimed that the *sanjaks* are not “idols” in the sense of being indwelt by the spirit, in the telestic or theurgic sense, it often appears so in actual practice.^{[17](#)} In theory, one of the seven *sanjaks* is taken ritually to each “clime” where Yezidis dwell, shown to the faithful, who kiss the statue, make donations, and listen to *qawwals* chant and preach on the essentials of the faith. (In actual practice it is said that only four *sanjaks* remain, and they may not do much traveling nowadays due to political upheavals and persecutions.) The swashbuckling dialectical flavor of Yezidi spirituality is nicely encapsulated in Yazid’s epithet of “Barbarian.” I am unable to identify the “Two Kurdish songs” attributed to Yazid, although Kreyenbroek suggests “The Hymn of the Resurrection” as typical of the kind of material performed on such occasions:^{[18](#)}

[I]t will be a terrible day:
The Seat of the King will come down,
The judge will truly be the Almighty,

and so on.

The next paragraphs of *Meshaf Resh* give details on the procession of *sanjaks* that need not detain us. The rest of the main text deals with holidays and rituals (which we will discuss in a separate chapter), and customs, further taboos, marriage rites, property rights, and so on. This is all fascinating stuff, but not quite relevant to our theme, which is esotericism. Readers who wish to pursue other topics should look into Joseph's *Devil Worship* and also into John Guest and other works listed in the bibliography. Just one sentence pertains to the mystical quest: "The worship of any idol, such as Seyed-ed-Din or Sheikh Shams, is better than fasting." I'm reminded of the line from Shabestari's Sufi classic *Rose Garden of Secrets*: "If the Musulman but knew what is faith,/ He would see that faith is idol-worship."¹⁹ Here the idol is exoterically a statue, as in Egyptian magic or Hindu *puja*—but inwardly the idol is the *human beloved*, whose beautiful features are given hermeneutic exegesis in this masterpiece of heterodoxy. The Yezidi "Mysteries" (*Sirr*) or "secrets" (as in Shabestari) or Angels are *incarnate*. They take on flesh—as human beings. These constitute the true religion of the mystic, not empty formalisms such as fasting. As spiritual exercises, such practices have a place—but in the fire of *presence* they are as nothing.

The "appendix" to *Meshaf Resh* in Isya Joseph's *Devil Worship* appears nowhere else that I have seen. Obviously I cannot vouch for its "authenticity," but as I've already explained, I'm more interested in "poetic facts" than canonicity, which in oral tradition is a dubious category. The appendix begins, "They say our hearts are our books . . ." Exactly so.

They say our hearts are our books, and our sheikhs tell us everything from the second Adam until now and the future. When they notice the sun rise, they kiss the place where the rays first fall; they do the same at sunset, where its rays last fall. Likewise they kiss the spot where the moon first casts its rays and where it last casts them. They think, moreover, that by the multiplication of presents to sheikhs and idols they keep troubles and afflictions away.²⁰

“They say.” This again implies that the writer of this text is *not* a Yezidi, but a well-informed outsider. Later in the appendix the speaker says “we,” perhaps recalling that he is supposed to be posing as an insider, or perhaps directly quoting his authentic source. Kissing sunbeams and moonbeams is often said to be “the only” Yezidi prayer—a very paganish gesture, to be sure. Offerings to idols and gurus also reek of “infidelity” (to monotheism).

The sect’s officers, known as *Kocheks* or “little ones,” must possess certain gifts unobtainable by mere ritual observance—notably the shaman-like ability to communicate with and learn the fate of the dead—to be certain they will be reincarnated *as Yezidis*, ideally, and not as outsiders or animals. “Some believe that the spirits of many righteous people travel in the air. Those spirits make revelations to the *kôchaks*.”²¹ They reveal spiritual truths, for example, that Jesus Christ “was” Sheikh Shams, that Jesus was sent down to earth and appeared “only to our sect,” that he made “seven circles” in Lalish—presumably the shrines of the Angels?

There is a great difference among *kôchaks*, they contradict one another. Some say, “Melek Tâ’ûs appears to me and reveals to me many revelations.” Others say, “We appear to people in many different ways.” Some believe that Christ is Sheikh Shams himself. They say that they have had prophets in all times; the *kôchaks* are the prophets. One of the *kôchaks* says in one of his prophecies: “I was in Jonah’s ship, where a lot was cast in my presence. It fell on Jonah; and he was thrown into the sea, where he remained forty days and nights.” Another said: “I was sitting with the Great God, who said, ‘I hope the time will come when I shall send Christ to the world.’ I said to him, ‘Yes.’ Then he sent him. After making a sign in the sun, Christ came down to the earth.” He appeared to our sect only, and made for us seven circles, which are at Sheikh Adi. Now he appeared to us because we observe the necessary order, which the other sects do not observe. Their origin and race are unknown; ours are known. We are emirs and sons of emirs; we are sheikhs and sons of sheikhs; we are *kôchaks* and sons of *kôchaks*, etc. But Christians and Moslems make priests and mullahs for themselves out of those who had none of their kindred in those offices before, and never will have afterward. We are better than they. We are

allowed to drink wine; our young men also may desire it when they, in company with women, engage in religious dancing and playing. Some of the *kôchaks* and *sheikhs*, however, are not allowed to drink it. When one is about to die, he is visited by a *kôchak*, who places a bit of Sheikh Adi's dust in his mouth. Before he is buried his face is anointed with it. Moreover, the dung of sheep is placed on his tomb. Finally, food is offered on behalf of the dead. The *kôchaks* pray for the dead at the graves, for which they are paid. They tell the relatives of the dead what they see in dreams and visions, and the condition of their dead, whether they have been translated to the human or to the animal race. Some people hide their silver or gold coins that they plan to take out in case they are born a second time in this world.^{[22](#)}

“We are better than [the Moslems]; we are allowed to drink wine” and to dance in “religious play” with women. Such boasts have led to the Yezidis being accused of orgiastic behavior, though in fact no such excesses have ever been observed by trustworthy reporters. Other heterodox and schismatic movements (and other religions) in countries like Syria, Iraq, Iran, and so forth, allow the drinking of “wine” or even include it in their ritual: Christianity obviously, but also Bektashi Sufism, for instance. Because of Islam's ban on wine, its drinking takes on a certain dialectical aspect for these other groups—and such is certainly the case for Yezidism, as we'll see. According to Yezidi lore, it was the caliph Yazid who gave them “permission to drink wine,” which is sometimes referred to as “the Cup of Jesus.”

The next paragraph of the appendix introduces the very important concept of *the abrogation of Hell*.

According to Yezidis, hell has no existence. It was created in the time of the first Adam, they say, when our father Ibrik al-Asfar, was born. By reason of his generosity and noble deeds, Ibrik had many friends. Now, when he viewed hell he became very sad. He had a small *bakbûk asfar*, into which, as he kept weeping his tears fell. In seven years it was filled. He cast them into hell, and all its fires were put out that mankind might not be tortured.^{[23](#)}

Ibrik al-Asfar, as we see, is a savior figure and an avatar of Melek Ta'us. The name means “the Yellow Pitcher” or “Jar”—recalling Shahid ibn Jarr. The *bakbuk asfar* is a narrow-necked pitcher, such as is used to serve wine (a flagon). One Yezidi taboo forbids the use of jars or pitchers which gurgle when poured from—“*bak-buk*” is onomatopoeia for such a sound—and in the popular miracle tale of the reincarnation of al-Hallaj, a pitcher plays a major role (see chapter 5, “The Redemption of Satan”). Now, that which is *haram* (forbidden) is also sacred (*haram*). Wine is both, simultaneously and paradoxically. And so is this flagon. According to another version of this tale, Melek Ta'us himself weeps for 40,000 years and fills seven compendious jars with his tears, with which he extinguishes the fires of Hell.^{*21} (I found this, among other places, on YezidiTruth.org.) Here we have the essence of Yezidi antinomianism. There exist Islamic hadith to the effect that Hell will be extinguished *at the end of time* (“watercress will grow in the streambeds of Hell”)—and the Prophet Muhammad is quoted as enjoining his close disciples to keep this doctrine secret, “lest I be stoned to death”! But *here and now* Yezidism abolishes “eternal punishment” and damnation for “sin.” This is the very kernel of the seed of the esoteric. “Love, and do as thou wilt,” as Saint Paul says (in his “gnostic” mood)—*Fay çe que voudras* (Rabelais)—or “Do as thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law” (Crowley’s Thelemite credo). But as Nietzsche says, only a fool would think this means to do evil! Evil itself is abolished by the tears of Satan. (See chapter 10, “Esoteric Antinomianism.”)

After a few more paragraphs of interesting information about customs, holidays, beliefs, folk history, and so on, we come to a section dealing with another major esoteric teaching:

They have a story explaining the word “heretic.” It is this: When the great God created the heavens, he put all the keys of the treasures and the mansions there in the hands of Melek Tâ'ûs, and commanded him not to open a certain mansion. But he, without the knowledge of God, opened the house and found a piece of paper on which was written, “Thou shall worship thy God alone, and him alone shall thou serve.” He kept the paper with him and allowed no one else to know about it. Then God created an iron ring and hung it in the air between the heaven and the earth. Afterward he created

Adam the first. Melek Tâ'ûs refused to worship Adam when God commanded him to do so. He showed the written paper which he took from the mansion and God said, "It may be that you have opened the mansion which I forbade you to open." He answered, "Yes." Then God said to him, "You are a heretic, because you have disobeyed me and transgressed my commandment."

. . . When one criticizes such a story as this by saying that God drove Melek Tâ'ûs from heaven and sent him to hell because of his pride before God the most high, they do not admit that such is the case. They answer: "Is it possible that one of us in his anger should drive out his child from his house and let him wait until the next day before bringing him back? Of course not. Similar is the relation of the great God to Melek Tâ'ûs. Verily he loves him exceedingly. You do not understand the books which you read. The Gospel says, 'No one ascended up to heaven but he who came down from heaven.' None came down from heaven but Melek Tâ'ûs and Christ. From this we know that the great God has been reconciled to Melek Tâ'ûs, who went up to heaven, just as God came down from heaven and went up again."²⁵

This story is based on Islamic texts and lore about the creation of Adam and Eve and the refusal of Iblis/Shaytan to bow to them at God's command out of alleged pride. For Eden and its Tree, a cosmic "mansion" has been substituted, with the ban on opening just one room (a motif that is present in the *Thousand and One Nights*). Here, however, the motive for the Peacock Angel's refusal to bow is respect for God's oneness (*tawhid*). It is noteworthy that in order for him to receive the message, it was necessary for him to transgress God's interdiction and enter the forbidden mansion. God's prohibition was, it seems, an esoteric and secret command all along.

Kreyenbroek notes that the redemption of Melek Ta'us was preceded by the rehabilitation of Iblis by certain Sufi teachers:

The question of Sheykh Adi's teaching about the question of Evil, and particularly about Satan, is of course of interest to students of Yezidism. As is well known, as early as the tenth century there were Sufis whose views in this matter differed radically from those of

mainstream Muslims. Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 921) claimed that Iblis was more monotheistic than God. Sheykh Adi's contemporary Ahmad al-Ghazali, who is sometimes regarded as "the classical representative of Satan's rehabilitation," said, "He who does not learn *tawhid* from Satan is an infidel." And the great Persian poet Farid al-Din Attar (d. 1220) also spoke of the devil in terms of approval.²⁶

Al-Hallaj and the other Sufis who defend Iblis interpret his refusal to bow as indication of his *love* for God; he is "the perfect monotheist" and prototype of the Sufis. "Heresy" is the only true faith, and, by reciprocation, God loves His lovers. God, *deus patheticus*, needs love and can scarcely be said to exist (to emerge from nonbeing) without it. God the trickster tests his angels by his order to worship Adam; all fail the test but one—the Peacock Angel. According to another tradition Iblis is not strictly an angel (made of light) but a *djinn* made of fire—but that fire is the fire of love. Without it, no becoming; and that is the secret of alchemy.

They believe in the transmigration of souls. This is evinced by the fact that when the soul of Mansûr-al-Hallâj parted from his body when the Caliph of Bagdad killed him and cast his head into the water, his soul floated on the water. By a wonderful chance and a strange happening, the sister of Mansûr went to fill her jar. The soul of her brother entered it. Without knowing what had happened, she came with it to the house. Being tired, she felt thirsty and drank from the jar. At that moment, the soul of her brother entered her, but she did not perceive it until she became pregnant. She gave birth to a son who resembled Sheikh Mansûr himself. He became her brother according to birth and her son according to imputation. The reason why they do not use drinking-vessels which have narrow mouths, or a net-like cover, is that when one drinks water from them they make a sound. When the head of Sheikh Mansûr was thrown into the water it gurgled. In his honor they do not use the small jars with narrow necks.²⁷

This tale of incest and reincarnation is told in different versions; here it is used to explain the taboo on “gurgling” vessels. The echoes of the story of Orpheus are clear and suggestive. Other parallels can be found in the *Puranas* and European folklore. Sibling incest (as in ancient Egypt) is a sign of divine origin; the gods by definition do what “mortals” can or should not—thus to break the law in a sense is to apotheosize oneself. God becomes human in order that humans should become gods.

They assert that they expect a prophet who will come from Persia to annul the law of Mohammed and abrogate Islam. They believe that there are seven gods, and that each god administers the universe for ten thousand years; and that one of these gods is Lasiferos, the chief of the fallen angels, who bears also the name Malek Tâ'ûs. They make him a graven image after the form of a cock and worship it. They play the tambourine and dance before it to make it rejoice with them.²⁸

I don't know who the Persian prophet is meant to be, but Lasiferos is obviously Lucifer, “the chief of the fallen angels.” Of course anyone can argue that this text is not authentic, and insist that the Yezidis are not “devil worshippers” because they do not worship a principle of Evil. My argument—in defense of Yezidi esoteric antinomianism—is that they do indeed “worship the devil”—but that it is a devil *saved*, redeemed, forgiven, and put back in charge of “the world,” of all Creation. With this, we leave the appendix to the Black Book to the deeper research of future scholars.

One more “holy book” remains to be investigated. *The Yezidis* (1974) by Sami Said Ahmed is itself a highly esoteric work, “edited” (i.e., badly typewritten and sloppily collated) and published by the skull-measuring anthropologist Henry Field (of Field Research Projects, Coconut Grove, Florida). In appendices to this untrustworthy but fascinating gallimaufry, Ahmed includes the texts of two recensions of a Yezidi quasiscripture said to be the true *Kitab al-Jilwah*, which he obtained from an anonymous Yezidi informant he calls “our friend” throughout. The title of this work is the Book of Roj, and it was revealed by an angel called Malek Salem, translated into Old Persian by Zoroaster, then into Kurdish by Sheikh

Adi.^{*22} “Our friend” also claims it as the primordial scripture of Abraham, and the esoteric teaching attributed in the New Testament (Acts 18) to a Johannine visionary named Apollos of Alexandria who was “fervent in spirit.” The friend recounted an elaborate history of the text (hidden, lost, re-revealed, burned, saved, etc.) and Ahmed—though not convinced of its “authenticity”—nevertheless finds it suggestive.²⁹

The Book of Roj speaks of not one but a host of fallen angels whom God forgives and restores. The two Floods are described; the second one starts from an oven (a popular Yezidi motif). After the waters recede, Noah and his family settle at Lalish. On the whole the Roj is very exoteric and even moralistic, emphasizing rules and taboos over any mystical transports, although God (speaking in the first person) promises a transformation of Earth back to its paradisiacal form (rocks and dust will become pearls and carnelians, etc.) for his loyal Yezidis.³⁰ “God comes to the world [as Malek Ta’us, personally] to cure the broken hearts. Light from light will appear and the angel of Time . . . will reach the city of peace and he is dear to the Shamsanis,”³¹ namely, sun worshippers, that is, those Yezidis who existed *before* Sheikh Adi’s mission to Lalish.³² “My light is like the bloom of a white flower,” and by its illumination all will be saved and “earth will become like heaven.”³³ Sherefeddin is the Messiah, and on the Day of Resurrection the Muslims will be massacred.³⁴

The “profession of faith” is that God is one, and “the Angel Master of Beauty is justifiably the beloved of God.”³⁵ One of the pillars of the faith is secrecy;³⁶ there are numerous references to caves; there exists more than one Pearl (perhaps three?); one is the Green Pearl from which the material elements proceed. Now, “five deities” are mentioned, “angels of old”—thus repaganizing monotheism.³⁷ “Malek the Shamsani” (i.e., Melek Ta’us) says, “I am the wine of warmth and love is the cupbearer of the [Gnostics]. With my cups I am the wine—but not the redness”—that is, the Essence before the attributes. “I am the God of men in my taverns”—thus the Sufism of intoxication is adapted to heretical ends.³⁸

The text now veers into one of the many Yezidi folktales of Abraham, then into what appears to be a survival of motifs from Gilgamesh and his attempt to overcome death;³⁹ this melds with the Islamic legend of Ibrahim

bin Adham (adapted from the life of Buddha), who discovers death, renounces the world, and obtains enlightenment.

Appendix 12 to Ahmed, *The Yezidis* comprises a second version of the Book of Roj, not much different from the first.⁴⁰ However, there is one chapter we should read for esoteric significance, chapter 3: “The Sun and the Moon are brothers. The earth stands by itself and their [?] original substance is from these spirits. God appointed Fakhr al-Din to guard the Moon, wherein he imprisoned these spirits which will descend afterward and assume animal shapes in different grades. The worlds of the spirits, sun, moon, and the earth were originally one, and those (spirits) were the Angels whose hearts hid evil and desired to be gods like God. God assigned them cycles in order that they be purified and had them later assume their original shapes, lights.”⁴¹ Here we see that the Moon, playing a role somehow reminiscent of the lunar doctrines of George Gurdjieff (who discusses the Yezidis in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*), serves as a clearinghouse for the redemption of the fallen angels.

The Yezidis by Ahmed contains many more treasures, including poetry by Sheikh Adi, Yezidi prayers, and endless bits of lore. We’ll return to it again, more than once or twice.



3

THE DELIRIUM OF ORIGINS

The category “origin” has been attacked by post-structuralist postmodern theorists as a predicate of essentialism. Indeed it seems difficult and rather absurd to stand up for any single origin of a mythopoeic phenomenon—for example, to maintain that religion originates solely in fertility, or in solar symbolism, or in sexual repression. (So nineteenth century!) However, to throw the baby of origin out with the bath of, say, “primordial monotheism,” or existential dread, or even irrational joy, appears to me an impoverishment of our human story. Surely there could exist a multiplicity of origins—a palimpsest of origins. This notion is perhaps more acceptable now than in the extreme anti-essentializing post-structuralist heyday of Big Theory. But I’d suggest going even further in rejecting both essentialism and antiessentialism. I’d prefer to speak of a *delirium of origins*. This notion could be considered in the light of Surrealism, say, rather than of rationalistic philosophy. As Blake says, “Everything possible to be believ’d is an image of truth.”¹

The student of Yezidism will discover a history of origins, starting with the assertion of the Yezidis themselves that their religion is the *original* and oldest of all religions; and/or that it is the original religion of the ethnic group who espouses it. Now, every religion must see itself in some sense as

originary, no matter how recent its actual historical and separate emergence. Thus there exists a Christianity *before* Christianity; since Christ is God, obviously he has an origin but no beginning, no limitation in mere temporality.

To recapitulate: Yezidism presents no single dogmatic stance on anything. It is a multidimensional complex (net of jewels) of “variants,” like an anonymous folk-ballad tradition, rather than a canonical scripture. In fact Yezidism rejects the whole idea of scriptural literacy, which it associates with oppression—the burden of Islam and its religion(s) of the Book. Like shamanism, Yezidism has no “Book,” although it does have “texts.” We who are literate tend to overvalue literacy, and assume ourselves to be the apogee of human development (or “evolution”)—but we’d do well to recall that literacy brought with it (circa 4000 BC) the tyranny of the state, of separation (into literate and illiterate, for example), into the oppression of caste, the loss of memory, the relegation of a million years to an “unconscious” that is no longer accessible. In the written word—the Book—we have always been slaves, whether of the tyrants, the oppressors, the priests, or ideologues and their “magic of the state.” True, we have dethroned the text, liberated it (as *poiesis*, as *song*), and bent it to our dream and memory of original freedom—of liberation. But in its origin, writing is a technology of constriction, restriction—a binding, a *spell*.

Most Yezidis are, in theory, supposed to remain nonliterate. One clan, the Adani clan, was allowed to practice writing, so as to maintain relations on that level with the outside world. Apparently they have also for some time acted as guardians of secret books—the Black Book and the *Jilwah*, which we have been reading—that only emerged in the late nineteenth century, via a tangled transmission involving manuscript thieves, forgers, dubious antiquarians, and such romantic scholars as E. A. Wallis Budge and E. G. Browne (see Guest for details). The books themselves refuse to be read as scripture. They say so explicitly. The oral tradition of songs and stories, transmitted by other clans of dedicated memorizer-performers (*qawwals*) has in very recent times been transcribed to some extent by both Yezidis and sympathetic scholars (notably Kreyenbroek). These texts provide us with material for an esoteric hermeneutical exegesis or *ta’wil*, which is the Shiite/Sufi term for “tracing something back to its source or origin” as a mode of explication.

But these texts have nothing to say about the actual historical/ structural origin(s) of Yezidism. As I read them, from the perspective of the history of religions, a pattern seems to suggest itself; and before delving deeper into the esoteric exegesis of the books and hymns, I want to try to imagine a plausible diachronic theory of the delirium of Yezidi sources.

As noted above, the Yezidis in a certain sense constitute their own “race” or ethnicity—which explains why, in theory, no outsider can convert to Yezidism. The religion is closed, like Zoroastrianism. One is born Yezidi or not, in theory. In practice, matters may once have been otherwise—and may be so even now. For example, if Yezidism is the original Kurdish religion, then any Kurd might recognize him or herself as a lost/found Yezidi. Or Yezidism may be “the same” as Zoroastrianism (so say some modern Yezidis anyway). Or anyone might be a reincarnated Yezidi! Or a “spiritual” Yezidi. And so on. We know that in the past whole tribes became Yezidi.

In any case, leaving genetic (or spiritual) ethnicity aside, Yezidis speak Kurdish (except for a few who speak Arabic) and are generally considered to be Kurds. Kurdish is a western Iranian language, and Iranian is an Indo-European language family. (Some Yezidis call themselves Aryans, which might shock PC-minded Westerners—but this is simply the IndoIranian word for “noble” and the etymology of the name Iran). If the Kurds are “western Iranians,” they may have descended from the Medes (or some other group such as the Mittani, Kassites, etc.); if they were Medes, then they were Magians, the original magicians.^{[*23](#)} (Local legend says the three kings or Magi of the New Testament came from this area; hence some Yezidis claim they first recognized Jesus as messiah.)



Figure 5. A boy with a peacock tail, a depiction of Murugan.
Artist unknown

Another myth connects the Yezidis with India. Their chief angel, Melek Ta'us, is a peacock (or a boy with a peacock tail), and peacocks originate in India, not Kurdistan. The present Baba Sheikh or Yezidi "pope" (= *papa* = *Baba*) has recognized the Indian god Murugan, son of Shiva, whose vehicle is a peacock (or who is a youth with a peacock tail) as identical with Melek Ta'us. In the old days, they say, there were Yezidis in India, and some day they may return there. (See the appendix, "India.")

At some point in prehistory the Iranians and Indians were one people with one language and one religion. Then at some later point they split. The original Indo-Iranians worshiped two classes or types of divinity: *daevas* and *asuras*. When the group split, one part (Iranian) decided the asuras were good (Ahura Mazda) and the daevas were evil, while in the other part (India) the daevas were held to be the good, and the asuras were the devils.

And an early Iranian sect of Daevayama, *daeva* or devil worshippers, is mentioned in the Avesta, according to Sami Said Ahmed.³

My hypothesis: In remote parts of the western Iranian world, groups of *daeva* worshippers must have held out against the new religion—which eventually became Zoroastrianism—and went on adulating the “devils.” There are today groups of Ahl-i Haqq, another Kurdish sect, who openly worship “Shaytan” (*Shaytan-parastiyyan*). My old friend Martin van Bruinessen visited them in the 1970s and found them drinking wine and roasting pigs; their greeting was *Ya zhat-i Shaytan*, “Hail to the Essence of Satan!” Now the Ahl-i Haqq, as we’ll see, are in many ways closely related to the Yezidis, especially in the shared cult of Seven (Arch) Angels. The sophisticated Ahl-i Haqq I knew in Tehran were far removed from the rural/peasant *Shaytan-parastiyyan*, but some of them were curious about their distant co-religionists. Ostad Elahi, the master in Tehran, used to tell them, “Don’t worry about Shaytan, but about the *Shay-i Tan*”—a pun meaning “the thing of the body,” that is, the ego.

Later we’ll mention other forms of “devil worship” in the Iranian world and in Sufi tradition. For now, I simply want to suggest that Yezidi “devil worship” may belong to an exceedingly ancient tradition—devotees of the *daevas*. How ancient?

The existence of the cults of Seven Angels suggests a deep antiquity prior even to the emergence of the Indo-Iranian tradition. We have already seen how many “sets” of seven there are in ancient Eurasia. Other sets, the constellations of Ursa Major and Minor and the Pleiades, are almost universally important, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, because one of the Bear’s stars is the North Pole star. The Wain or Wagon constellation is widely seen as a bear (*ursa*). Many cultures share the symbolism. The Bear Cult is exceedingly ancient, and takes such various forms as the worship of Artemis (the bear goddess) and King Arthur, the Bear King.^{*24} The North Star is the axis mundi of shamanism, the tent pole of the sky (an image also found in the Rig Veda and its rituals as described in the Brahmanas); the whole universe revolves around this star, and is symbolized by the other six stars of the constellation. The Taoist “dance of seven stars” recapitulates this dynamic. The bear sacrifice as a rite is found in widely separated cultures in amazingly similar form. For example the famous bear sacrifice of the Ainu (a non-Japanese tribal people in Hokkaido) can be paralleled

point for point in the bear sacrifice among the Algonkian Indians in northeastern “America” or Turtle Island.^{*25} But how could this be?! Japan and upstate New York?—*the same ritual?*

The Persian Sufi Ruzbehan Baqli of Shiraz, according to Henry Corbin, used to spend nights ecstatically stargazing from his roof; one night the angels came down to him and brought a feast: they “dipped their bread in oil of the Celestial Bear”—the same imagery again. In my opinion, crazy as it seems (even to me), this symbolism is so old it’s literally prehuman (pre-*Homo sapiens sapiens*), dating back to the Neanderthals and their bear cult, for which see *The Cave Bear Story* by Björn Kurtén, a serious study of archaeological evidence for Neanderthal religion based on the remains of the giant, now-extinct ancestor of our contemporary bears. I’ve defended the notion elsewhere and will not repeat myself here. I just want to add that the Seven Angels of Yezidism can be identified as the seven stars of the Bear because, according to Yezidi myth, Melek Ta’us, the Peacock Angel, *is the polestar*.

So when the Yezidis claim that theirs is the oldest religion in the world, they may well be correct.

I thought it might amuse the reader if I raked through the scholarly studies and present the delirium of origins in a delirious style. But this is not just a game. There’s no doubt that Yezidism is a supremely syncretistic religion—it admits this itself and boasts of it in numerous texts. Our madness can serve as a kind of heuristic method.

An early scholar, W. Francis Ainsworth, following the pioneer archaeologist Austen Henry Layard, in 1861 votes for an Assyrian origin. The Yezidis are found today near Mosul and the remains of ancient Assyria. Yezidi tomb towers resemble ziggurats. Motifs of Assyrian rock carvings at Bavian, near Lalish, resemble Yezidi symbols—rams’ heads, bulls’ heads, pine cones. “Melek” Ta’us could be “Moloch.” Nergal (Mercury) is represented by a cock. Again following Layard, Ainsworth mentions the Assyrian queen/goddess Semiramis as a “founder” of Yezidism. She was daughter of the fish goddess and after her death became a dove. Ainsworth even thinks the Yezidis look like ancient Assyrians.⁴

Lady Drower votes in 1941 for a Mandaean connection, due to the undeniably intriguing fact that this sect also venerates a peacock angel,

Malka Tausa, a spirit of light and prince of the world who “plunges into the darkness of matter.”⁵ Thus she sees the Yezidis in the light of Gnostic dualism, in which opinion she is not alone. Eszter Spät, author of *Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition* (2013), also bends sympathetically toward a theory of Gnostic origins.

But she is not dogmatic about it. She lists possibilities such as: Melek Ta’us as Gnostic Demiurge (though her Demiurge is “evil,” not “saved”); Gnostic sects close in time and space to Yezidi heartlands, such as the medieval Bogomils and Paulicians; but also a hypothetical “Kurdish paganism.” The lost tribes of Israel have been trotted out as proto-Yezidis, as have the Manichaeans, Bardaisan of Edessa, the Sabaeans of Harran, the Chaldaeans, and of course the Zoroastrians. In her book Spät tends to frown on all these except Gnosticism, and mentions the Pearl as a motif linking it to Yezidism. In the end she comments wisely that a “common cultural substratum” could account for this, and she uses the term “popular religion” in the technical sense to describe this phenomenon. Later she comments on the “mountain refuge” theory of exotic Middle Eastern religions such as Yezidism.⁶ It’s true that such sects are almost always found in relatively isolated geographical spaces, and she points out that at various times, Jews, Christians, and Manichaeans are known to have sought refuge in the hills around Mosul.

On the question of Assyria, Spät says, “I was told in all seriousness that there were ancient Assyrian pictograms on the wall of the Lalish sanctuary . . . covered in white plaster” to hide them from Muslims.⁷ Carvings at Dubok, nearby, are Assyrian and seem to the Yezidis to represent their Angels (although they are depicted in sets of eight, not seven). Mir Mih, a prince who seeks immortality, must be Gilgamesh. Spät also notes “an old Persian sect whom Strabo and others mention, and who were said to worship the principle of the evil.”⁸ These were the Mardi, whom in 1827 von Hammer-Purgstall named as ancestors of the Yezidis in his *History of the Ottoman Empire*.^{*26}

Zoroastrianism makes sense as an “origin,” source, or influence, not only because Zarathustra is often mentioned as a “founder” of Yezidism, but because the logic of the assertion is inescapable. Before Islam, Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion of the region, at least that part of it dominated by Iranians, including western Iranian culture and language.

Why should remnants *not* have survived in remote corners? Some early scholars, including the eccentric R. H. W. Empson in *Cult of the Peacock Angel*, already saw this logic,⁹ and nowadays the magisterial Kreyenbroek supports it to a strong degree. He points out that the Seven Amesh Spentas of Zoroastrianism map closely onto the Seven Angels of Yezidism.¹⁰ The Amesh Spentas rule over:

Sky (stone or crystal), visualized as a cosmic egg

Water (fills half the egg)

Earth (a flat disc floating on the water)

Tree (plant; haoma)

Bull

First Man

Fire

Many of these categories and symbols recur in Yezidism, as do the Zoroastrian festivals such as the spring New Year (and commemoration of the dead) and the autumn feast. The shirt and girdle or sash are sacred in both traditions; both have hereditary priesthoods. Zurvanite Zoroastrianism develops a cyclical hierohistory which influences Ismailism, Ahl-i Haqq, and probably Yezidism as well. Like Zoroastrianism, Yezidism is an orthopraxy of taboos. The Four Elements are holy—indeed, “alive.” One does not spit in fire (or blow out candles). Yezidis also won’t spit on earth or in water, won’t whistle (i.e., spit in air), and won’t cut certain plants and trees (or anything growing in Lalish). Menstruation is impure in both religions.¹¹

Kreyenbroek also influences my suspicion that a pre-Zoroastrian Indo-Iranian religion underlies the overtly Zoroastrian and Mithraic motifs in Yezidism. He posits that Mit(h)ra was the supreme deity of the Ur-tradition, god of fire, sacrificer of the Bull. As light or energy he liberates the plant (haoma?) from confinement in a prisonlike cave (just as Indra releases the waters, the cows, and soma). This cult, Kreyenbroek surmises, outlasted Zoroaster’s reforms (circa 1500 BC in eastern Iran) as Magianism in Media or western Iran. Later it influenced the syncretistic cult we know as

Mithraism, which spread throughout the Roman Empire from India to Scotland. Yezidism preserves the bull sacrifice, the initiated grades, the caves and underground temples, the angels, and other Mithraic fragments.¹²

The two most obvious “influences” on Yezidi syncretism would appear to be Christianity and heterodox Islam. “Originally,” the shrine at Lalish was a Syriac monastery. The Yezidi hymns speak often of Jesus, and especially “the Cup of Jesus,” full of sacramental wine, which is also the wine of Sufism—both metaphorical, as in so much Sufi poetry, and actual, as in Bektashi ritual.^{*27} Wine is divine ecstasy, and may also serve as a mask for other entheogens, as we shall see. Melek Ta’us prophesizes about Jesus; he rescues Jesus, either from a prison, or from the Cross. Perhaps he “is” Jesus.¹³

Before Sheikh Adi was the servant of Melek Ta’us, he seems to have been an orthodox Sufi like his companion Abd al-Qadir Jilani (with whom he made the Hajj).^{*28} Sheikh Adi’s “early” Arabic writings are perfectly Islamic. What seem to be his later works are more eccentric. What happened? How and when was Sheikh Adi—or his legendary persona—turned into a schismatic “devil worshipper”? Today most Yezidis reject the notion that their sect was *ever* “Islamic.” Is this simply a matter of hindsight and revisionism?

Possibly Sheikh Adi was influenced in his “fall” from orthodoxy by the ninth century heresiarch Babak, an Azerbaijani rebel, “false prophet” and proto-communist about whom, sadly, little is known. He called himself a Magian and preached reincarnation. According to Kreyenbroek, Sheikh Adi said Babak was “divine.” A shrine to a “Sheikh Babik,” reportedly a son of Sheikh Shamsoddin, is located near Lalish. And like the Yezidi dervishes, Babak’s followers wore black.¹⁴

We’ll have to consider the Sufi “influence” on Yezidism at greater length. Here we might leave it for the nonce with an evocation of the figure of Khizr, the Green Immortal, mentioned in the Qur’an as a companion to Moses, in various poetic and folkloric sources as a companion to Alexander, and in Sufi texts as an important source of initiation (e.g., of Muhiyuddin ibn al-Arabi), especially of those Sufis with no “human master,” initiated in dreams and visions, as in the Uwaysi tradition,^{†29} or by magical figures or even animals. Khizr “is” the Immortal Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh epic,

and again in a sense Noah. He is “identified” with the Prophet Elias and also with Saint George, Saint Sergius, and the Nestorian martyr Mar Behnam,¹⁵ thus constituting an “Abrahamic” but *fully esoteric* link among Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. The Yezidis, naturally, venerate Khizr/Elias and devote a major festival to him.

My own best guess about the Adiwiyya and their slide from orthodoxy to whatever Yezidism “is”(!)—is that it probably took some time, and was probably mediated by heterodox Sufism, especially that of Mansur Hallaj (who has given his name to one of the seven *sanjaks* or “idols” of Melek Ta’us), but also other Baghdadi figures like Ahmad al-Ghazali and Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani, antinomian Persians like Shams-i Tabrizi, and outright heretics like Hajji Bektash. The Ishraqi tradition of Suhrawardi al-Maqtul (the Murdered) may have played a role, as well as the alchemical tradition of Khalid, son of the “wicked” Caliph Yazid. As for the Yezidi *mirids* (commonfolk), they may never have been Muslims, but simply venerated Sheikh Adi and his family for their charisma, miracles, and conspicuous holiness. Eventually the people converted the “elite” to their brand of “popular religion,” and only a few fragments of Sufi belief and Islamic praxis remained, like stones from ancient ruined temples reused in the walls of village shrines and houses.

If we seek a parallel for this “lost history” we could look more closely at the Ahl-i Haqq. Their textual tradition is perhaps more accessible to analysis, and their links to Sufi “origins” more clearly preserved—although structurally they are “angelicans” like the Yezidis. Kreyenbroek is inclined to suspect actual historical links. He points out, for instance, that the Ahl-i Haqq venerate the nutmeg (*jouz*), the symbol of the head of the initiate, and the Yezidis consider the walnut (*gûz*) to be sacred. The words are really identical.¹⁶



4

SHEIKH ADI AND THE SUFIS

Sheikh Adi's early texts in Arabic, probably written in Baghdad, appear impeccably orthodox, and even include a cursing of Satan and praise of the Prophet and his Sunna. Even in Lalish he persisted in his lawful ways, but seemingly began to "exaggerate" the role and function of the spiritual guide. For instance, it is said that Adi asked a disciple what he would tell the inquisitional angels after death when they demanded of him "Who is thy God?" He replied, "I would tell them Sheikh Adi will tell them that." Adi approved.

However, in his poetry Adi seems to have allowed himself even more latitude (or else the poetry is later than the prose). The Sufi language of love and drunkenness appears:

I see that drinking the luminous [wine] is a duty.
Live ever-eager, a happy drunkard, passed out.

And:

O my companion, my disgrace and the cause of
my madness,
is the eyes of the Turks [i.e., the beautiful] when
they looked at me.¹

Adi's verses also include the following:

The knowing ones know that
knowledge itself contains some of the sea
of my knowing

The Lotus Tree
in the seventh heaven is the place of my
confessions

For I am the All-Hearing, the All-
Knowing

glorified is my sanctity, and elevated
is my name

Paradise is my wine, and hell is the
heat of my scorching wind

Constellations prostrated to me until I
was elevated . . .

And all those in the universe said to
me,

O God lead us into the straight path.

And:

Praise be to me . . .

I am alone and no God other than me .

. .

I have created . . . the seven earths and
seven heavens

My Suns shine on them . . .
I am the being of beings . . .
God of gods . . .²

According to Sami Said Ahmed's informant and "friend," Sheikh Adi was born in the year 749 of the Roman calendar and when he was forty met Jesus in Jerusalem, was baptized by John, and told Jesus to undergo baptism as well. The Yezidis practice baptism because of this heritage.³ There are hints that Adi actually "was" Jesus—for example, he was born on December 25, performed miracles, converted the monks of Lalish, and so on, all in the exaggerated style of medieval hagiography. The Essenes wanted him as their messiah, but he continued to push for Jesus.⁴ The Jews mistook Adi for Jesus and tried to kill him.⁵ Adi spoke Kurdish without being taught—in fact, he was born already speaking. And so on for many pages.

Adi famously promised the Yezidis that he would carry them all to Paradise on a tray, and freed them from the obligation to pray. If he meant it metaphorically, his followers took him literally.^{*30}

At some point Adi came out of the closet and declared himself unequivocally to be God Himself. For such "poetic license" (if that's what it was), al-Hallaj was executed—with the approval of most of the other Sufis of his era, not to mention the religious authorities. Adi, isolated in his remote mountain retreat, got away with it:

How dare ye deny me when I am truly your God and I wipe out and
I write down (destiny). . . .

How dare you deny me when this is only part of my rank, when
I, the Ancient of Time, created the world? And ye ask me about my
lower abode, I tell you of the dominion which was established on
the rock. . . .

They named me (?) 'Adī, but I am the 'Adī of all I am the 'Adī
of yesterday, of the day before yesterday, of today, of the past, and
of what is to come. . . .

I am a unique Sheykh; and it is I, myself, who created things.

It is I who received a book, a book of good tidings. It came from my God piercing the mountains.

It is to me that all men come. They come in submission and kiss my feet. . . .

I am the Syrian ‘Adī, the son of Musāfir. The compassionate God has favoured me by names.

The Throne, the Chair, and the Earth (?) are within the secret of my knowledge. There is no God but me.⁶

This is from a prose tract called the *Kitab al-Habashi* (The Book of the Ethiopians). In his poetry Adi outdid even these claims:

The Poem in Praise of Sheykh Adi

Praise Be unto Him

My understanding surrounds the truth of things,
And my truth is mixed up in me,
And the truth of my descent is set forth by itself,
And when it was known it was altogether me.
And all that are in the universe are under me,
And all the habitable parts and deserts,
And everything created is under me,
And I am the ruling power preceding all that exists,
And I am he that spoke a true saying,
And I am the just judge and the ruler of the earth.
And I am he that men worship in my glory,
Coming to me and kissing my feet.
And I am he that spread over the heavens their height.
And I am he that cried in the beginning,
And I am he that of myself revealeth all things,
And I am he to whom came the book of good tidings

From my Lord, who burneth the mountains.
And I am he to whom all created men come
In obedience to kiss my feet. . . .
And I am he to whom the destroying lion came
Raging, and I shouted against him, and he became
stone.
And I am he to whom the serpent came,
And by my will I made him dust.
And I am he that struck the rock and made it tremble,
And made to burst from its sides the sweetest of waters.
And I am he that sent down the certain truth. . . .
Verily the All-Merciful has assigned unto me names,
The heavenly throne, and the seat, and the (seven)
heavens, and the earth.
In the secret of my knowledge there is no God but me.
These things are subservient to my power.
O mine enemies, why do you deny me?
O men, deny me not, why do you deny me?
O men, deny me not, but submit.
In the day of judgment you will be happy in meeting
me.
Who dies in my love, I will cast him
In the midst of Paradise, by my will and pleasure;
But he that dies unmindful of me
Will be thrown into torture in misery and affliction.
I say I am the only and the exalted;
I create and make rich those whom I will.
Praise to myself, for all things are by my will,
And the universe is lighted by some of my gifts.
I am the king that magnifies himself,

And all the riches of creation are at my bidding.
I have made known unto you, O people, some of my
ways.
Who desireth me must forsake the world.
And I can also speak the true saying,
And the garden on high is for those who do my
pleasure.
I sought the truth and became a confirming truth;
And by the like truth shall they, like myself, possess the
highest place.⁷

Of course it can be argued (and Kreyenbroek for one does argue) that such works were not actually written by Adi, but by later descendants or disciples, in his name—a type of pseudepigraphy common enough in all traditions. Even so, this need not deter us from taking the texts seriously. After all, *who is Sheikh Adi?* Is he merely a historiographical problem? Or is he the divine and miraculous savior of the Yezidis? From an esoteric perspective, hagiography (and even “forgery”) can outweigh authentic historiography—because it is more open to *ta’wil*. History is (to a certain degree, anyway) what we make it. Without consciousness facts are empty, and as Nietzsche noted, there exists no *real* connection between cause and effect, past and present, other than our *expression* of it. In this vein, let us investigate the biography of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir.

Adi ibn Musafir al-Hakkari was born at Bayt Far near Baalbek (Lebanon) into a noble Umayyad family of the Quraysh. He was a direct descendant of Caliph Marwan II (first of the Marwanid dynastic line). In Baghdad he met many Sufis, notably Abd al-Qadir Jilani, and was sufficiently orthodox to earn the praise of Ibn Taymiyya (who, however, mentions certain ecstasies and “extravagances”).⁸ He died circa 1162, aged about ninety.^{*31} Some say he took over his retreat in Lalish from Christian monks, and he has even been identified as the Christian Addai.^{*32} According to *Encyclopaedia of Islam*’s article on “‘Adī b. Musāfir,” his followers prayed toward his grave rather than Mecca, and believed Adi was in heaven eating bread and onions with God. (Onions are sacred to the Yezidis, perhaps because they have many layers and are thus “esoteric.”)

Yezidi traditions describe [Adi's] miraculous birth to an elderly couple and his departure from home to seek his destiny at the age of fifteen. Five years later, while he was riding by moonlight across a plain, the summons came to him. In front of an old tomb an apparition rose out of the ground—two camels with legs eight feet long, heads like water buffaloes, long bristly hair, big round ox-like eyes glowing green and a jet black skin, yet otherwise resembling a man.^{†33} Meanwhile the tomb grew larger until it touched the clouds, taking the shape of a minaret which then began to shake. In his terror Adi knocked over a jug of water that stood nearby.^{†34} The apparition now turned into a handsome boy with a peacock's tail, who said to him:

“Fear not; the minaret may well fall and destroy the world, but you and those that harken to you will be unharmed and will rule over the ruins. I am Malek Ta'us and have chosen you to proclaim the religion of truth to the world.”

Thereupon he took Adi's soul to heaven for seven years [i.e., to seven heavens] and God revealed the truth of everything while Adi's body slumbered by the tomb. When his soul came down from heaven to rejoin the body, the water from the overturned jug had not yet run out.⁹

The last motif, the overturned jug, is in part borrowed from the story of Muhammad's *Mi'raj* or Night Ascent to Heaven; as he is taken up from Mecca he accidentally kicks and overturns a jug—which is still not yet run out upon his return. This does not mean “it was all a dream.” The vision is real—but *time is compressed* by a miracle.

Melek Ta'us at first presents a terrifying double form: Death, re-mirrored in the tomb that expands to infinity—because we falsely see Azazel as evil—but then he “unifies” and becomes a “handsome boy” (a double of Shiva's son Murugan), complete with peacock's tail, to demonstrate his *redemption*. The website YezidiTruth.org is not the sole source for the suggestion that Sheikh Adi “is” Melek Ta'us; what else could he have meant by claiming to be God?^{*35} The fact that both these figures might also be identified as Jesus, or other holy avatars, is not solely the result of “folklore variants” but more deeply of visionary experience.

“There is no repetition in theophany,” as the Sufis say—and certainly no picayune rationalism. “Thou art That” is not an insight answerable to daylight logic, but only to the moonshine of Adi’s psychedelic experience.

“They are one Light, one [secret] all from the light of God,” says a Yezidi holy man.^{[10](#)}

The principle of mystical identity can even extend so far as to embrace—on the secret esoteric level—figures who outwardly are seen as enemies. For example, because the caliph Yazid is understood to be responsible for the death of Imam Husayn, Yezidism itself is generally considered a kind of polar opposite to Shiism. However, in some accounts of Husayn’s death, Yazid sheds tears for him, as we shall see. Esoterically there may be a link with Shiism—and in fact, Asatrian and Arakelova have noted several.^{[*36](#)} Sheikh Adi, for example, rides the horse Dundul (or Duldul), the steed of Ali ibn Abi Talib, Husayn’s father. Or perhaps the rider is Melek Ta’us himself:

Sharfadin [i.e., Malak-Tawus], [you are]^{[†37](#)}—the green
of a flower,

The manifestation of a bouquet of flowers,

Sharfadin is the horseman upon Dundul,

Sharfadin is my religion,

Sharfadin is my religion.^{[11](#)}

Ali’s wife, the Holy Mother of Shiism, Fatima, daughter of the Prophet, is known in Yezidism as Pira Fat. Ali appears in his guise of God’s Lion, and is mentioned as such in a Yezidi hymn along with the Holy Family. Ali’s two-pronged sword Zulfikar was once seen on Yezidi banners. We should recall the resonances of Yezidism with the Ahl-i Haqq, who are “Shiite extremists” (*Ghulat*) as well as “angelicans.” Other heretical Shiite sects such as the Druze, Alevis, Ali-Ilahis, Qizilbashs, Asheks, and so forth, surround the Yezidis geographically. As has been pointed out, “most of the syncretic teachings of the region have been shaped out of the same ‘heretical field’ and are often marked with common motifs.”^{[12](#)} The spirit of

Ali might “equal” the spirit of Adi or Melek Ta’us, or that of Soltan Sahak of the Ahl-i Haqq, or Hajji Bektash, or . . . “All is One,” as they say in India.

Many Yezidis used to believe—and some perhaps still believe—that Sheikh Adi lived *before* Muhammad (even in the time of Jesus) and was thus never a Muslim.^{[13](#)} Perhaps he was a Magian.



Figure 6. The Dundul or “Hand of Ali” amulet, woodblock print on rice paper (Persian, twentieth century).

Collection of the author

The legendary account of Adi's arrival in Lalish abounds in motifs found in Sufi tales and miracle tales of other religions such as Hinduism. Like folktales, or portions of folktales, these motifs migrate. This doesn't make them less "true" or important—indeed, quite the opposite. A common trope of the "arriving holy man" recounts miraculous encounters and contests with other saints; he "beats" them and converts them. Thus Adi comes into contact with four saints or angels, sons of Ezdina Mir (whose name means "Prince Yazid" and derives from Yazid ibn Mu'awiya, as does Sheikh Ezi's): Sheikh Shems (Shams al-Din, identified with Shams-i Tabrizi, d. 1248, who was Rumi's companion), Sheikh Fekhr (aka Fakhr al-Din, Fekhredden), Sheikh Sejadin (Sajad al-Din), and Sheikh Nasir al-Din, joined later by Sheikh Hesin (or Sheikh Sin, identified with Hasan al-Basri, d. 748, but also a mask for Hasan ibn Adi, d. 1254) and other figures.¹⁴

Some saints arrive to challenge Adi riding lions and using snakes as whips—Adi one-ups them by animating a rock and riding it (or a wall), or making one of his disciples ride it. Adi widens the cave under Lalish. He creates the holy wells there with his walking stick. He creates cows who eat the lions and chickens who eat the snakes! Some of these miracles are recounted in "The Hymn of Sheykh Adi and the Holy Men," in which the rivals concede (hoping to "hold on to their beards and mustaches") and all bow to Sheikh Adi.¹⁵

Adi's psychic powers were enhanced by his ascetic practices and fasting. He was telepathic, and could repeat the Egyptian miracles of Moses; "by placing his hand on the chest of his servant, he enabled him to recite the Koran"; he could make distant events appear in a mirror, like King Jamshid in the *Shahnameh*; he had the powers of invisibility and bilocation; he communicated with the dead, opened locked doors with a "magic word," and reversed the flow of rivers.¹⁶ All of these ESP- like powers can be seen as allegories of spiritual and yogic attainments. Miracle tales are told at Sufi shrines from Morocco to India—I've heard many such stories myself—but in Adi's realm everything takes on an "exaggerated" air, unchecked by Islamic law or decorum. Thus one imagines a Greek "hero" becoming a pagan god—a process of apotheosis going on even now, for example, in certain Taoist backwaters of Taiwan.^{*38}

Sheikh Adi left behind certain relics that are still venerated by his followers. For example, the Baba Sheikh, the Yezidi "pope" or high priest,

guards Adi's carpet (prayer carpet?) and displays it during the autumn feast. If any *kocheq* should perform a miracle "publicly, such as flying in the air, walking on water, etc. . . . [the Baba Sheikh] is obliged" to hand over the carpet to him for a while; but "as it is difficult for anyone to perform such miracles, the rug remains constantly" with the sheikh.¹⁷ We should recall that when Ibn Arabi encountered Khizr in Tunis, the Green One was riding a flying carpet; such phenomena are not restricted to the *Thousand and One Nights*.

The bench of Sheikh Adi, called the *barshbaki*, is also ritually displayed; it consists of some ancient boards held together with chains. An "auction" is held for the honor of ritually washing this see; in former times some fanatics would hurl themselves onto it from trees, sometimes killing themselves. Further elaborate ceremonies are performed, forbidden to outsiders. Some claim that this chair once belonged to Ali ibn Abi Talib; thus it would be the famous "empty throne" of Ali, and the implication is that Sheikh Adi (like his Umayyad ancestors) is the rightful caliph. Ali's empty throne is perhaps based on Mani's empty throne, once ritually displayed by the Manichaeans. True spiritual authority, for true esotericists, is always "lost" or removed to the imaginal world.

The *khirqe* or dervish cloak of Sheikh Adi is also preserved and displayed along with his "crown" or dervish hat. Some Sufis adorn their *khirqes* with patches; some cloaks are handed down from master to disciple and confer initiation (thus Khizr initiated Ibn Arabi). The Yezidis literally worship the black *khirqe*, as we shall see, and Adi's is the prototype.¹⁸

Regarded from Lalish, Sheikh Adi appears as the (re)funder or (re)former of Yezidism—but from Baghdad he can be seen and understood in the light of classical Sufism. So, for example, the best-attested link between Adi and orthodox Sufism comprises his companionship with Abd al-Qadir Jilani (1077–1166), with whom Adi made the Hajj in 1116. The *tariqa* founded in Jilani's name, the Qadiriyya, today shares spiritual rule of Kurdistan with the Naqshbandis—but in fact the Kurdish Qadiris are not seen as so orthodox (*sunnati*) as the Naqshbandis. In Sanandaj, the chief city of Iranian Kurdistan, I visited several times with the local branch of Qadiris, who played wild and beautiful music and danced and enacted marvels, such as stabbing their cheeks with skewers, handling snakes and scorpions, eating glass and razor blades, plugging themselves into electrical

outlets, and so forth. In trances induced by their sheikh, they felt no pain, and no scars remained afterward.

The Yezidis believe Jilani was a Yezidi, and (although his “real tomb” is in Baghdad) there exist mausoleums (*maqams*) for him in Lalish and Sinjar.¹⁹ Yezidis say that Jilani’s mother was a daughter of Junayd (the great Baghdad Sufi, d. 910), who drank from a stream into which the blood of Mansur Hallaj had flowed after he was crushed by a collapsing stone wall, whereupon she became pregnant with Abd al-Qadir.^{*39 20}

A Yezidi told Lady Drower that Adi could converse telepathically from Lalish with Jilani in Baghdad if they stood in “magic circles.”²¹ The theme of uncanny circles reappears frequently in Yezidi lore. Gurdjieff claimed that if a circle were drawn in the dust around a Yezidi boy he could not step out of it, and this seems to reflect or echo an actual rite in which a Yezidi is enjoined to speak truth while standing in such a circle. I suspect these stories conceal remnants of genuine “ceremonial magick” in the style of Dr. Dee or the Golden Dawn, also known to magicians in the Eastern worlds, and often involving the magic circle, called *mandal* in Persian, or *mandala* in Sanskrit. (Cornelius Agrippa is a rich source for these.)

Jilani’s Yezidi *mazar* (shrine) is decorated with the carving of a sun with thirteen rays or petals—perhaps the “origin” of the magic circle.²²

Adi is also linked with the great eighth-century saint of Basra, Rabia al-Adawiyya (whose tribal surname name is identical to the name of Sheikh Adi’s order, the Adawiyya). A *qewl* is dedicated to her in which she “seeks for the mystery of God everywhere, finally finding it when the pregnant mother of Ezi (Yazid ibn Mu’awiya), bearing the divine *sirr* [secret] of Ezi, arrives at Basra one dawn, when the divine cockerel [an avatar of Melek Ta’us] crows to announce a new dawn: ‘Rabia is a beautiful young woman / She is yearning very much for that mystery / She had wandered from alley to alley (looking for it) / Until the cockerel of the Throne crowed.’”²³ Melikoff reported that “one of her old informants from Siirt claimed that Tausi Malek was called a ‘cock’ in Anatolia.”²⁴ Although virtually all Yezidi clergy are men, there does exist an order of women *feqirs* or dervishes, who live at Lalish and tend the shrine, directed by a leader, the Kabana, who lives in seclusion and (some say) makes the very holy balls (*berat*) of clay from Adi’s tomb mixed with water from the sacred wells,

which are sold to pilgrims.²⁵ Perhaps Rabia could be seen as the prototype of these holy women.

Another violator of “real” chronology, Bayazid Bastami (ninth century) is said to be the son of Shamsoddin, companion of Adi (twelfth century)—but this can be explained because Bayazid was a “sun worshipper,” and Shams is the sun. Spiritual links are seen as far more real than historical or legendary filiation. In a sense, the living symbol of this initiatic truth would be Khizr-Elias, who is immortal and can appear at any time and place to link one Sufi (or mystic of any faith, or of none) to another.²⁶ One can identify him by his green turban and robe and red shoes; and wherever he walks, flowers at once spring up and bloom.

We have digressed from the “school of Baghdad.” In that context, the most important question concerns Adi’s links with the heterodox Sufis who said Satan was redeemed by his undying love for God. Now, some scholars (e.g., Spät in *Late Antique Motifs* ²⁷), and even Yezidis deny any connection between Adi and Sufi apologetics for Lucifer.^{*40} But I cannot take such denials very seriously in light of the obvious and immense influence on Yezidism of the figure and ideas of Mansur al-Hallaj. It may be that Adi himself never belonged to his school, but Yezidism has absorbed it.



5

THE REDEMPTION OF SATAN

S*hayatin* (the plural of *shaytan*) can be understood as a generic term for a class of djinn or supernatural creatures created by God from fire (unlike angels, made of light, and humans, made of dust and clay). *Shayatin* can be useful; some of them worked for King Solomon.¹ The writer al-Jahiz (here quoted in the fascinating *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article “Shaytan,” by Toufic Fahd) says they are

by comparison with us, more subtle, less harmful, more intelligent, less curious, of lighter body, of more extensive knowledge and of more profound wisdom. For proof of this, all that is needed is general agreement that there is nothing on the earth of marvelous innovation, subtle, majestic, nor any secret or manifest transgression, emanating from passion and desire, which is not the consequence of a solicitation by the *shaytan* and a seduction exerted by him.²

In fact, in the folklore of pre-Islamic Arabia, every work “of genius” is attributed to the *shaytan* (e.g., the construction of Iram Dhat al-‘Imad).

One of the [*shaytan*’s] well-known roles. . . is to act as inspirer to soothsayers and prophets (see Fahd, *La divination arabe*, 91ff). The Angel Gabriel, inspirer of the Prophet, is called *shaytan* by a woman of Quraysh (“his *shaytan* has been late in coming.”) It was after this delay on the part of the Angel that sura 93 was revealed.³

Still better known is the *shaytan* of the poet. Al-Jahiz relates that the Arabs “claimed that every great poet (*fahl*) had a *shaytan* of whom he was merely the mouthpiece.”⁴ This *shaytan* could have his own name: that of al-Farazdaq was called ‘Amr (. . .Tor Andrae compares this *shaytan* to the “muse” of the poet).⁵ It was reckoned to be either male or female: Abu ’l-Najm boasted that the *shaytan* of all the other poets were female, whereas his was male; another claimed that, despite his youthful age, “his *shaytan* was the greatest among the *djinn*.”⁶ The poet was in a relationship of absolute dependence with regard to his *shaytan*.⁷ This dependence and the loyalty which it supposedly entailed earned poets the nickname of *kilab al-djinn* “the dogs of the *djinn*.”⁸

Fahd goes on to say that the early Islamic distrust of poets (Muhammad cursed them) relates directly to their possession of (or by) *shaytans*. In this respect we can see the Yezidis in (perhaps unconscious) alignment with pagan Arab values in their rehabilitation of *the* Shaytan, whose proper name in Islam is Iblis, but who is known to the Yezidis under other names, including Azazel and Melek Ta’us.

Middle Eastern folklore about the character of “Satan” is informed by the Qur’an, which is informed by Christian and Judaic sources (perhaps oral rather than written), all of which stem from some unknown earlier, perhaps Sumerian or even prehistorical (e.g., Neolithic) myth.^{*41} The Yezidi version seems to be influenced by the Qur’an, but who knows? Eurasia is a big continent, but it’s all connected. It’s easy to trace links between, say, India and Ireland^{*42} or even across the entire landmass, as, for example, in the intriguingly universal Sulphur/Mercury theory in alchemy, shared from the

Middle East to Europe and China (as early as the medieval period, or perhaps even late antiquity). A certain playful neo-euhemerism might suggest that some of these stories are literally “true” records preserved in human memory—which works very well before it’s spoiled by technology such as writing or smart phones. The “universal” Flood, for example, seems to be recalled even in pre-Columbian Western Hemisphere mythology, and Sir Leonard Woolley found archaeological evidence for a Flood big enough to have obliterated the first dynasty of Ur and much of Sumeria. Even “Eden” may have been a real piece of geography somewhere—Dilmun (Bahrain), perhaps, or somewhere between the Tigris and Euphrates near Göbekli Tepe (not far from what was to be Kurdistan). After all, many versions of the Paradise myth admit that there existed “pre-Adamite kingdoms” (Yezidis know of pre-Adamite *creation*, but consider the subject secret and taboo), and the Sumerian King List (one of the world’s earliest extant texts) says that “kingship” was wiped out by the Flood, and had to be “sent down from Heaven a second time.”

The notorious cruelty of monotheist morality and eschatology has offended countless sensitive souls since its inception in the henotheism of the Mesopotamians. The present-day Unitarian Universalists, who deny the finality of damnation, are only one of the latest sects to reject the angry violent God of the Bible and Qur’an, who creates creatures He knows He will damn “forever.” No wonder the Gnostic dualists such as Marcion made fun of “Jehovah” as an idiot tyrant demiurge to be avoided or (if possible) overthrown. The subtlest mystic theology of the monotheists has been exercised on finding an excuse for God’s sheer bloody-mindedness, or on *denying it on the esoteric level*. As mentioned, certain Islamic hadith speak of the “secret” that Hell is not eternal, and from a certain point of view Christianity as a whole can be seen as an esoteric correction of Judaic eschatology from without (and Kabbalah can be interpreted as serving the same role from within), even though this “good news” was suppressed in later Christian teaching—even to the extreme point of Calvinism and its doctrine of predestination, which created an entire civilization (the “modern West”) plagued by the psychosis of damnation—surely one source of our present state of *technopathocracy* and ecocidal world hatred disguised as brutal materialism.

The Yezidi sages perceived quite clearly that the crux of this crisis lay in the myth of Satan's fall—since obviously humanity must fall with him—and that human existence itself could be redeemed only if Satan were pardoned and restored to God's favor. In fact, only thus could "God" himself be justified and religion "saved" from a Manichaeansque condemnation of Creation and material reality itself. The stake of the wager was the "goodness of the world," as the Hermetic text of *Aesculapius* expresses it.^{*43} By refusing to admit the redemption of Satan, the monotheisms create the "problem of evil": How can we call God's creation *good* if it ends in eternal hellfire for even one sinner—the Devil himself? Either Jesus redeemed our sins and harrowed Hell now and for all time (past, present, future), or else what exactly was the deal? Christianity can be seen as a *pure esotericism* meant as an anti-nomian liberation movement; the Sufis believed this, and even Saint Paul hints at such a notion, only then to draw back from it in fear. Like Sabbatai Sevi and Jacob Frank, Jesus was a "failed messiah," who meant not only to free the Jews from the Law, but to abolish Law altogether in the name of Love. The proof that Yezidism must be seen as an esoteric antinomianism is that Azazel is redeemed *already*—not at the "End of Time." Redemption at the end of time is merely an attempt to save the moralistic phenomena of monotheism, which Yezidism has jettisoned with its emphasis on the *really good* news: Satan is saved—and so too must be the *Shay-i Tan*, the "thing of the body," the separative ego or *nafs*—not extinguished, but transmuted, like base matter into gold.

Sami Said Ahmed once asked "a Christian from Bashika [a holy Yezidi village near Lalish] if he had heard while he was a child from Yezidi boys of his age about their opposition to cursing Satan. He reported that they said God's anger at Satan was temporary because it is the anger of a father for his son." After all, what father would damn his own son to eternal hellfire? Satan is prince or "god of this world,"⁹ but this world is (finally) good. "Evil" exists only as the faulty perception of this deep *real* world, and the consequent tragic misunderstanding of our true nature and being. If reality be One then evil consists of a lack, an absence, an aporia—not a substance, not an essence or reality in itself. So how can Satan be evil? *Absurdum est*.

According to Islamic tradition (again, perhaps based on earlier lore), Satan tricked the Peacock of Eden into introducing him to the Snake

(“master of all the beasts of paradise”) who then introduces Satan to Adam and Eve—or perhaps Satan takes the shape of the snake to trick them—so the Peacock and Snake are later punished by God.¹⁰ A “Yezidi princess” once revealed that “we worship Satan as snake and peacock.”^{*44}

I suspect that the secret of the Black Snake depicted on the gatepost at Lalish and on other Yezidi shrines, which Yezidis never tell outsiders, concerns the occult identity of Melek Ta’us as Snake as well as Peacock.^{†45} The role of the Snake in the Yezidi Flood, rescuing the Ark by acting as plug for a leak, also offers a clue to his savior persona. If the Yezidis call Satan (Melek Ta’us) “chief of the Black Powers,”¹¹ they do not mean that Satan is evil, since black for them is the alchemical color—“black light,” not the color of sin. (See chapter 9, “Color and Alchemy.”) Several sources, probably Islamic, claim that Satan took the form of Sheikh Adi when he was absent in Mecca on the Hajj, and “lifted all religious obligations,” released his followers from Shariate taboos, and substituted Lalish for Mecca as the *qibla* (direction of prayer). The real Sheikh Adi is said by these sources to have been “sad and in distress” when he discovered this, but unable to reverse the damage.¹² Yezidis simply say that Adi “is” Melek Ta’us, who “is” Azazel, whom the Muslims call Satan. This antinomianism stems from no delusion, but from the Truth itself. That the great angels called *Khas* take on human bodies throughout the cycles of time—this belief forms the very basis of “angelicism”; of course the greatest angel must “be” the greatest of humans, Sheikh Adi. If he is also “the angel whose heart is sad,” this emotion cannot be seen as regret but as the creative melancholy of the Hermeticists (such as Marsilio Ficino, or Albrecht Dürer):

Oh my house! I call upon the angel whose heart is sad
A bank of black clouds rose from the earth and brought
circulation (of air) in the sky
Tell me for the sake of Sheikh Adi’s name:
Who was that man who opened the tent with the golden
sides, on the deep oceans?

XIZÊMOK

(THE SONG OF THE BELOVED’S NOSE-RING)¹³

Scholars who deny that the Yezidis are “devil worshippers” must avoid the overwhelming textual evidence—from early pseudepigrapha such as the Apocalypse of Abraham, to Sufi poetry by Attar¹⁴—for the traditional identification of Azazel with Satan or Iblis, and also the Yezidi texts that stress the identity of Azazel and Melek Ta’us^{*46}—and who is that central figure other than Melek Ta’us? As a chief angel among the “Watchers” in the Enochian textual tradition,¹⁵ Azazel is seen as a benefactor of humanity, and only later (in the moralizing Rabbinic version) transmogrifies into a devil figure. Azazel teaches women the art of sexual pleasure, and gives instruction about jewels and minerals such as antimony, used both as a cosmetic and in alchemy. Collins believes Azazel may be identical with Shemyaza, the Watchers’ leader, who mates with a mortal woman, Ishtar (an avatar of the goddess Ishtar?), and reveals to her the secret name of God.¹⁶ Sami Said Ahmed points out somewhere (I’ve lost the exact reference) that the *ankar* bird mentioned in the Black Book (obviously the *anqa*, a type of *simurgh* or phoenix) must be Angra Mainyu, that is, Ahriman, the evil god of Zoroastrianism, that is, Satan—but obviously also Melek Ta’us and Lasiferos, the morning star and lightbringer. Like the Hallajian Sufis, the Yezidis accept the devil “as one of the necessary principles of creation, ‘unjustifiably’ condemned by dogmatic religion, without which it is impossible to comprehend the source of energy *per se*.”¹⁷ Or, as Blake says:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and
Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are
necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call
Good & Evil.

Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the
active springing from Energy.

....

The Voice of the Devil

....

2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
3. Energy is Eternal Delight.

THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL¹⁸

O my Lord [Melek Ta'us], from pre-eternity you have
always been the ancient one.

You are taste, happiness and insight.

THE HYMN OF TAWUSI MALEK^{*47 19}

The Persian historian Zayn al-Abidin Shirvani (1779–1837) records in his *Riyadh al-siyaha* a discussion he once held with an unnamed (but obviously well-informed) Yezidi about Melek Ta'us and Satan (translation emended):

I met a group of them and witnessed them magnifying Satan and worshipping him in servitude, calling him the Peacock of Angels, and I asked one of their leaders, “Who is Iblis? And what is the reasoning behind your worship and fear of him?” He answered that the learned are perplexed by incomprehension of his reality and scholars too ignorant to deduce a single atom from the valley of his realization—but men of knowledge have said in desiring him that if he had revealed his light to mankind all would have worshiped him as God. He is hidden but near to all, all-knowing in regard to humans and their deeds.

He then began to recite a poem, saying sometimes he comes to you from the wall and sometimes from the roof. Sometimes he resides in the depths of the heart and sometimes flows in the veins like blood. And it is related in a tradition that Satan is from the fire of glory, meaning that his glory was created from the fire of God's glory. And the saying in the Koran, “And you are of the watched to the fixed time” means that his power and kingship will not end till the day of resurrection.

. . . I asked the man, “Why then do they say he is of the infidels, and that ‘Upon you is my curse to the day of Judgement’?”

He answered that in this context “infidel” (*kafir*) means “the Keeper” (*satir*), because loftiness hides beauty . . . and the curse is the characteristic of sublimity and mercy the quality of beauty . . . and the affairs of mankind and the world are from his orderly blessing. The Kaaba and the Temple of the Magi are attended solely by his will. . . . Those who drink wine remember him whenever they fill their glasses, and drunkards hallucinate in his love. The infidel obeys his command. If one is a Moslem he works for him, if a Christian he peals his bells for him, if a Jew he takes him for his prayer-niche, if a Magi he’d thrust his leg in the fire, if a Hindu his face would grow jaundiced with distress, if an atheist he’d be led astray in belief solely by *him*. . . . This world is a ball, and he is playing a game with other boys. . . .

To conclude: most people worship him, directly or indirectly, and follow his will. . . . The Koranic verse, “Then by your power, I will put them all in the wrong except your servants amongst them, sincere and purified,” signifies that the sincere are few and live amongst other people in lowliness and oppression. . . . So for whomsoever strays far from Taus Melek and does not gaze at him with ever-loving eyes, the gate of vicissitudes would open for him . . . but by the favor of God the followers of Abu Murrah [a name of Satan] are all in glory, dignity, and eternal pleasure. Qabil [Cain] carried out his accomplishments because of Satan’s benevolence, and Pharaoh ruled the people for 400 years by virtue of Satan’s deeds;^{[*48](#)} Sheddad built a paradise on the basis of his principles and teachings. . . . The Ommayyads ruled for 1,000 months through his blessing, the Abbasids held sway for over 500 years by his care. You must have heard of al-Hazzaj, Ibn Ziyad, Gog and Magog, mentioned in the books, all his great champions; Genghiz Khan and Hulagu are of his officers.^{[20](#)}

From an orthodox Islamic perspective this doctrine propounded by the anonymous nineteenth-century Yezidi can be called explosive. People are being killed in Iraq and Syria *as I write* for their adherence to such ideas.

But these ideas precisely are also embedded in Islam, or rather in the heterodox school of Sufism we are about to investigate.

Was Sufism really crypto-Neoplatonism, or crypto-Christianity, or crypto-Zoroastrianism? Well, yes and no. “And between yes and no,” as Ibn Arabi once said, “stars fall from heaven and heads fly off their necks!” Ultimately Sufism must be called a mystery, and hence indefinable.

Was the Abbasid poet Bashshar ibn Burd hiding his secret Zoroastrian identity or revealing it when he wrote:

Satan is far preferred to your father Adam,
thus be aware (cautious), O evildoers, be aware.
Fire is his substance while Adam is of clay,
and clay will never attain the eminence of fire.
Sun was shining when earth was dark
and fire was worshipped ever since there was
fire.^{[21](#)}

The chief work of apologia for Iblis, the *Kitab al-Tawasin* of Mansur al-Hallaj, exists in the Arabic edition by Massignon and the Persian translation edited with commentary by Ruzbehan Baqli Shirazi in the twelfth to thirteenth century. (Ruzbehan sometimes expresses shock, but is generally trustworthy as to meanings.) An English translation was made by an American convert, Aisha Abd Ar-Rahman, but P. J. Awn avoided it, claiming it contains mistakes, and made his own translations, which I have used here.

Al-Hallaj begins by comparing Iblis and Mohammed as “the only ones whose preaching was sound.” They are opposites, but

Because things are known through their opposites, fine white silk is woven with a backing of coarse black wool. The angel can point out good deeds to someone and say to him as an abstract statement, “If you perform these deeds you will be rewarded.” But he who does not know evil in the concrete, cannot know good.^{[22](#)}

Iblis is not merely a foil for Muhammad, however. Commenting on the Quranic story of Satan's refusal to bow to Adam, al-Hallaj says:

There was no monotheist like Iblis among the inhabitants of the heavens. When the essence revealed itself to him in stunning glory, he renounced even a glance at it and worshipped God in ascetic isolation. . . . God said to him, "Bow!" He replied, "To no other!" He said to him, "Even if My curse be upon you?" He cried out, "To no other!"

My refusal is the cry, "Holy are You!"

My reason is madness, madness for You.

What is Adam, other than You?

and who is Iblis to set apart one from the other?²³

The quality al-Hallaj admires in Iblis is his *futuwwa*, which Awn translates (unfortunately) as "manliness" but which I would prefer to render as *chivalry*. Here al-Hallaj discusses the term not only with Iblis but also Pharaoh (the enemy of Moses), usually seen as an arch-villain:

I debated with Iblis and Pharaoh about *futuwwa*. And Iblis said, "If I bowed, I would have lost the title of manliness." And Pharaoh said, "If I had believed in His messenger [i.e., Adam—but by extension also Muhammad], I would have fallen from the rank of manliness." And I [al-Hallaj] said, "If I had gone back on my preaching and my sayings, I would have slipped from the carpet of manliness." . . .

My friend and my teacher are Iblis and Pharaoh. Iblis was threatened with the fire, but he did not go back on his preaching. And Pharaoh was drowned in the Red Sea, but he did not acknowledge any mediator at all. . . . And if I were killed, or crucified, or if my hands and feet were cut off, I would not go back on my preaching.²⁴

Of course, the leitmotif of al-Hallaj's preaching was *I am the Truth*—like Sheikh Adi's *I am God*. And of course al-Hallaj *was* crucified—so either the *Tawasin* is “inauthentic” or else al-Hallaj was psychic!

Iblis contends that God did not predestine him to obey the command to bow, or else (being perfectly obedient) he would have done so. “You have already chosen for me, O Creator.” In reality God *prevents* him from bowing. “I know of no one among the gnostics who knows you better than I!” Iblis refuses not as a mere puppet of predestination, but as a result of his love and “the long duration of his contemplation.” His act is heroic—chivalric.

He (Iblis) fell into the ocean of omnipotence and became blind. He cried, “My path leads to no one except You, for I am a humble lover.

. . .

I no longer experience a sense of distance after being
distanced from You,

since I have realized for certain that nearness and
distance are one.

As for me, even if I am abandoned, then abandonment
becomes my companion;

how right it is that abandonment and love are one!

May you be praised! in Your providence and Your pure
essence,

for the sake of a guiltless worshipper who bows to
no one but You.”^{[25](#)}

Iblis meets Moses and defends himself, again, as the perfect Sufi, asserting (as many Sufis have maintained) that the spiritual state of separation in some sense outranks that of union, since in separation the desire for the Beloved is never slaked by realization. “My service now is purer, my moments freer, and my *dhikr* [remembrance] clearer. For I used to serve Him for the sake of my own prosperity; now I serve Him for His.

Separation and union constitute a kind of dialectic for the School of Love. The point is not to resolve these opposites but to experience in their continual interplay the dynamic relation or tension of love. Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani quotes this verse:



Figure 7. Iblis, the Fallen Angel. Persian carpet, nineteenth century. One evening in the 1970s, Karl Schlamminger, the owner of this carpet, showed it to me (PLW) and the philosopher Henry Corbin. Corbin expressed his opinion that

the imagery had a connection with the Ahl-i Haqq “Satan worshippers,” and possibly with the Yezidis. Karl and I later included it in our book on Iranian picture carpets, *Weaver of Tales* (see bibliography).

Separation from You is more agreeable than union with others; to be repudiated by You is better than the acceptance of others.²⁶

Fakhroddin Iraqi says:

I desire union with Him; He desires separation from me; so I abandon what I desire for what He desires.²⁷

Al-Ghazali refers to the same tales of Iblis as al-Hallaj. For example, he recounts the debate with Moses, commenting, “Whoever does not learn monotheism from Iblis, he is a *zindiq* (heretic).” When Moses asks Iblis, “Do you remember Him still?” He replies, “I am the remembered one”—because God has honored him with His curse. Al-Ghazali says, “When Iblis was driven away, he did not diminish his service, nor his love, nor his *dhikr* in the least way.” Ibn al-Jawzi told this story about al-Ghazali, and added that he considered him “one of God’s marvels for lying”—for instance, for his boast that when he met Iblis, the devil bowed to *him*, “more than seventy times”!

The same story of Moses and Iblis is retold by Fariduddin Attar, who concludes

. . . according to this Tale of Moses, he (Iblis) is in the divine Presence.

Although the curse engulfed his heart with fire, because of that curse, his burning ardor increased.²⁸

Al-Ghazali’s disciple Ayn al-Quzat al-Hamadani was executed in 1131 (during the lifetime of Sheikh Adi) for heresy. In his exegesis of the Islamic

profession of faith, *La ilaha illa 'Llah*, “There is no god but God,” Hamadani tells us that the “guardian and chamberlain of the Divine Presence” who complements the negation of “no god” with “except God” is none other than Iblis, both because of his “intimacy with the Beloved” and his expertise in testing humans for sincerity. What value would admission to the Presence have if all and sundry could attain it?

The Beloved said to me, “Sit at My door,
do not allow inside anyone who is not in accord
with Me.

To him who desires Me, say ‘Be enraptured!’

This state is not suitable for any man unless I find
it suitable.”²⁹

Both al-Ghazali (in his *Sawanih*) and Hamadani refer to Iblis as the personification of the Black Light (*nur-i siyah* in Persian), which complements the White Light (or green ray) of Muhammad, as the moon complements the sun. “The sun at midnight” is a traditional trope for the mystical state, and Henry Corbin has devoted a brilliant chapter of *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* to the “photisms” of inner alchemy, which include black light as the ultimate or penultimate color-stage of transmutation. (The final stage can be seen as gold/red, or as Muhammadan green, which would also harmonize with Paracelsus and his herbal stone of spagyria.) Note also that black is the heraldic tint of Shiism, as well as of the Abbasid dynasts, in addition to being the most sacred color of Yezidism.

Ultimately, Hamadani proposes a classic *coincidentia oppositorum*, reminiscent of the strange union of Set and Horus that produces Thoth (Hermes), the god of wisdom. Ayn al-Quzat says:

But have you never realized that God has two names? One is “The Compassionate, the Merciful” and the other is “The Omnipotent, the Imperious.” From the attribute of overpowering might, He brought Iblis into being, and from the attribute of Mercy, Muhammad.³⁰

Muhammad is the merciful “light” aspect, Iblis the mighty “fire” of God’s power. (Hamadani claims that the ultimate source of this insight was Khizr.) Even Hasan al-Basri said, “If Iblis manifested his light to creatures, he would surely be worshiped as a god.” And according to the Yezidis (perhaps even to Sheikh Adi himself) this is precisely what the Devil has done.

In the next section of his chapter on the redemption of Iblis, Awn demonstrates the influence of the School of Baghdad on the Persian poets Sana’i and Attar. For the most part they reiterate the ideas of al-Ghazali, al-Hallaj, and Hamadani, although with a more “Muhammadan” view of the matter. Still, they dare to elaborate on Iblis’s lack of culpability—sometimes in Iblis’s voice, as here by Attar:

My heart was filled with His glory;
I was a confessor of His unity.
Nevertheless, without cause, in spite of all this
devotion,
He drove me from His threshold without
warning. . . .
So if He should, without cause, accept me back again,
it would not be strange, for it cannot be fathomed.
Since without cause I was driven away by Him,
I can also, without cause, be called back by Him.³¹

Awn then devotes several pages to the “greatest Shaykh” Muhiyuddin ibn Arabi and his circle (Azizoddin Nasafi, Abd al-Karim al-Jili) and their positive valuation of Iblis. Most importantly here the step is taken to identify Iblis with the faculty of imagination (*wahm*), which “refuses to bow” along with intellect (*‘aql*).^{*49} According to the Quranic commentary of Ibn Arabi and his school, “At the final apocalyptic consummation of the universe, i.e., the final resurrection, all, whether good or evil, will be subsumed into the one, pantheistic reality who is God: ‘. . . and he (Iblis) will not be accursed. . . . And both their respite to lead astray and the curse will come to an end at that time.’”³²

Those who have studied Ibn Arabi with Henry Corbin will recognize how vitally important is the conflation of Satan and the “creative imagination.” Heretical Akbarians of course ignore the caveat about the “end of time.” The end of time is as much *now* as any other time. The “pantheistic monism” that emerges from this unterrified view of Ibn Arabi is profoundly resonant with Yezidism. Ibn Arabi is buried in Damascus; according to some Yezidi lore Sheikh Adi came to Kurdistan from Damascus; and the caliph Yazid is also said to be entombed there.

The doctrine of Devil as imagination resembles Blake’s. He doesn’t say it exactly, but he does find the “enjoyments of Genius” amid the fires of Hell, and quotes “a mighty Devil” as saying:

How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy
way,
Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your
senses five?

And a “Proverb of Hell”:

The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.^{[33](#)}

Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* could almost serve as another holy book for Yezidism:

Messiah or Satan or Tempter was formerly thought
to be one of the Antediluvians who are our
Energies.

. . . .

[Opposition is true friendship.]

. . . .

One Law for the Lion & the Ox is oppression.

. . . .

For everything that lives is Holy.^{[34](#)}

P. J. Awn finally states that the Peacock Angel is “none other than Iblis/Ash-Shaytan who has been restored to his previous glory after his fall from grace.”³⁵ For Awn, the Yezidis are the “folk” equivalent of the sophisticated heterodox and heretical Sufis inspired by al-Hallaj—including Ahmad al-Ghazali, who was a teacher of Sheikh Adi.^{*50}

Mark Amaru Pinkham, founder of the new Most Ancient Order of the Peacock Angel,^{†51} in his privately circulated document, *The Peacock Angel Mysteries*, has made the valid suggestion that Melek Ta’us represents both the fall into separation and the redemption into “Christ Consciousness.”³⁶ He calls this scenario the “Lucifer Program,” and states that Lucifer is not the evil principle but rather “Satan and Christ *united*”—a concept not unknown in occult circles—and certainly not incompatible with the syncretism of Yezidi tradition, which has identified Melek Ta’us with both Azazel and Jesus. Pinkham suggests here the traditional mytheme of the divine twins, common to many esoteric paths from the Vedas to the Popul Vuh, and exemplified for the West by the asterism Gemini in all its variations. As the dark twin, who is nevertheless the light-bringer, Satan—like Shiva or Kali—destroys, but destroys ultimately only illusion, in order to realize *moksha*, “liberation.”³⁷ In my interpretation of these themes, Melek Ta’us/Azazel/ Lasiferos represents the principle of *esoteric antinomianism*—the spiritual certainty that “the chains of the Law have been broken”—as the Assassins of Alamut proclaimed at their *Qiyamat* or Resurrection ceremony in 1164—the eternally recurring moment of liberation from the Law that oppresses Blake’s Lion and Ox.



6

ANGELOLOGY

A certain vagueness and lack of definition surrounds the panoply of angelology in Yezidism. The mandala is blurred. Various texts and oral sources fail to agree on a definite list of names, attributes, days or epochs, functions or earthly incarnations for the Seven (Arch) Angels. No doubt this imprecision functions providentially to protect the tradition from fossilization or excessive dogmatism. An esoteric antinomianism by definition must remain *free*, within the symbolic ambience or *symbolique* of its proper “world,” to construct imaginal systems of “poetic facts,” not rigid prisons of immutable doctrine.

My guide on the subject of angels (for which see my *Angels: Messengers of the Gods*) has always been Henry Corbin, especially his masterpiece, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*. If I were to attempt a brief summary of what I took from reading and studying with Corbin in Tehran in the 1970s, I would emphasize two themes. The first concerns the image of the “spheres” of the heavens—usually the seven planetary heavens, with the additions of the “fixed stars,” and heaven itself, to make nine “circles” (as in the angelology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Aereopagite, or equally in the Siberian shamanism explored by Mircea Eliade). Avicenna posits an archangel for each of these spheres, and explains that the universe *moves*

because each angel *desires* the next higher angel; reality itself is activated solely by love. This image evokes or mirrors such concepts as the music of the spheres (e.g., in the *Somnium Scipionis* of Cicero), or the efficacy of the *mandal* or circle in ritual magic, etc.

The second theme, related to this, involves the fabric of the *symbolique* as a weave of *personae*—literally, *masks*, and hence *persons*. That is, not only is everything in the universe “alive” and linked in series of signatures or “correspondences” (as Swedenborg, Charles Fourier, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud would call them)—but also it must be said that everything is alive as a distinct being: “No ideas but in persons.” Thus everything “has its angel”—and not a raindrop falls (according to a hadith) without its tutelary spirit or elemental. Because of this animate and personal universe, two related actions become possible (as Coleridge, Novalis, and Nerval realized): magic and poetry. This system of thought arose, perhaps in Egypt, where it eventually became—under the sign of Thoth/Hermes—the Hermetic Tradition.

The key to unlocking the treasury of the angelican (angel- worshipping) religions of the Middle East is the understanding that the *Sirr* (Mysteries) or *Khas* (Archangels) of the heavenly hierarchy, who are like lamps lit from the one *Nur* (Light) of Khuda (God), incarnate in each successive “age” or epoch of hiero-history as human figures, saints, prophets, avatars of the religion. Yezidism also “believes” in reincarnation (and sometimes also paradoxically in eschatological ends such as heaven and hell). But angelical incarnationism is not the same thing as reincarnation. The system of rebirth as commonly understood in, say, popular Buddhism, seems to posit that “I” am repeated as another “I”; person A *becomes* person B. In Yezidism (as also with the Ahl-i Haqq and “Sevener” Ismailism, etc.) the angel serially incarnates in the “robe” (or role) of a human being, one person after another. This identity, moreover, sometimes seems more than simply a formula implying that $1 = 1 = 1$, and so on. Perhaps because variants are believed simultaneously, or perhaps because 1 can equal 2 or even more, it appears that an angel can “be” more than one human at a time, or vice versa. Sheikh Adi “is” Melek Ta’us, but perhaps also Jesus, and/or Sultan Ezi. The Ahl-i Haqq whom I met in Tehran and Kurdistan had no difficulty believing similar facts about their holy figures such as Sultan Ishak or Pir Benyamin, and the Yezidis seem equally at home with such multidimensional consciousness. Every village—as a rule—boasts at least

one “tomb” of such an avataric figure, who still acts (to cure some disease, for example, or to bestow an initiatic dream) as a living being—and one’s *mir* or sheikh or pir or spiritual guide might well “be” such-and- such an angel, secretly, or openly. One lives in sacred time. The “age of miracles” and saints is never over for these believers. The closing off of such existential spiritual possibilities in the name of some spurious “Enlightenment” or “rationality” has certainly not added to the plausibility or popularity of modern monotheism! ^{*52}

Among the archangelic identities, Melek Ta’us is frequently seen as Ezi, or Ezid, that is, the caliph Yazid ibn Mu’awiya; but Melek Ta’us himself is sometimes God—as is Sheikh Adi. Sheikh Adi is also seen as Khizr-Elias. Melek Ta’us was “created on Sunday,” which ought to make him the sun—but the sun is usually identified with Sheikh Shams, who is Israfil, created on Tuesday. Sometimes he is Jesus, or even “Lord of the Moon” (a title usually reserved for Fekhredin).

One recension of the *Meshef Resh* gives the following angelic identities:

Ezra’il	Melek Ta’us
Darda’il	Sheikh Hesén
Israfil	Sheikh Shams
Mikha’il	Sheikh Obekr
Jibra’il	Sejadin
Shemna’il	Nasiroddin
Tura’il	Fekhredin

Browne (followed by Guest) uses a version with the following “equivalences”:

Ezazil	Melek Ta’us
Jibra’il	Sheikh Obekr
Ezra’il	Sejadin

Nura'il

?

Other sources mention a being called Shifqa'il. Sometimes Khuda(wand)—that is, God—is counted as one of the seven.

Ezra'il is angel of death, but so is Sejadoddin. Sometimes Melek Ta'us is Ezra'il. The “Four Angels” or Elements or “Corners” are probably the four sons of Ezdina Mir (Yazid): Shams, Fekhredin, Sejadin, and Nasiroddin. Fekhredin as the moon is the brother of Shams as sun; sometimes Fekhredin is the angel Tura'il/Nura'il. And Kreyenbroek's “Survey of Prominent Yezidi Holy Beings” gives a long list of further identifications of Yezidi holy figures, compounding the confusion.¹

The various family connections among the human incarnations of angelic beings give order to the hierarchies of clans of Yezidi holy men (and some women), and determine which family will provide the individual with his or her obligatory sheikh and pir, and brother/sister of the Hereafter. These relations, and not any belief or ideology, define who is a Yezidi, their rank and caste. Açıkyıldız guesses, for example that the Shamsani sheikhs are descended from “Manichaeen sun worshippers,” whereas the Adani Sheikhs descend from Muslim followers of Sheikh Adi.² Adi died childless, appointing a nephew, Abu 'l-Barakat, to succeed him. His son Adi II ruled next, and *his* son was Hasan ibn Adi, who was martyred by the Zayid ruler of Mosul, Badr al-Din Lu'lu' in 1246 or 1254. Sheikh Hesen was perhaps the reformer who shifted the Adiwiyya from Islamic orthodoxy to “devil worship” and schism (although I believe it's quite possible that Adi himself had already accomplished this *in secret*). Hesen's son, Sharaf al-Din (Sherfedin), became another angelic incarnation, and a *typos* of the returning messiah (as is Hesen).³

Kreyenbroek has championed the idea of a *structural similarity* among the religions Collins calls “angelican”—namely, the Ahl-i Haqq and the Alevis (or Nusayris)—to which can be added the Sevener Ismailis and perhaps other Shiite groups such as the Qizilbashs (who influenced the early Safavid movement in Iran), the Ali-Ilahis or “divinizers of Ali” (and his family), and so on. Of all these parallels, the one with the Ahl-i Haqq strikes me as most convincing: after all, they share Kurdish language with the Yezidis as well as Zoroastrian heritage, seven incarnating angels, and

even the custom of never cutting one's mustache!^{*53} Add to these clues the existence of Ahl-i Haqq Satan worshippers and one must ask: How could there not exist an actual historical link between Yezidism and the People of Truth? Spät offers the hypothesis of a shared Manichaean influence on the doctrine of angelic incarnation, but then hedges by admitting that Mani might have shared in "old autochthonous Iranian beliefs"—which resonates with my own hypothesis of a deep prehistoric Indo-Iranian or even universal Eurasian Stone Age motif of Seven Divine Beings.⁴

According to Asatrian and Arakelova, the Peacock Angel is identified with Satan in Ahl-i Haqq teaching, and sometimes with the important figure of Pir Dawud, who is second in the Ahl-i Haqq's own heptad (*Haft-tan*) of angelic beings.⁵ In the Qalkhan region of the Dalahu mountains there exists a subsect of Ahl-i Haqq known as Malak-Tawusiha, devotees of the Peacock who converted to Ahl-i Haqqism when they met Sultan Sohaq, the fourth incarnation of the Divine Principle. Influenced by Shiite ideas, this subsect identifies Melek Ta'us with none other than Ali, who created Jibra'il from his right hand, Mikha'il from the left, Isra'il from his tongue and Melek-Amin (Melek Ta'us) as his incarnation.

One Yezidi source tells this quasi-origin story of Melek Ta'us.⁶ It begins with the Crucifixion, and the tale that Jesus was rescued from the cross by an angel, who placed a substitute in his stead. (This tale is alluded to in the Qur'an, 4:157.) The angel then appeared to the two Marys, and told them of Jesus's translation to Heaven. The women expressed disbelief, whereupon the angel slew a peacock that happened to be near, cut it in pieces, reassembled them, and entered the body and flew away.^{*54}

As Lady Drower put it, "one of the charms of the Yezidis is that they are never positive about theology."⁷ Are there seven angels, or one god and six angels? Which angel "is" Melek Ta'us? Azazel? Isra'il? Gabriel? (The last was named by one Feqir Ali, an old Yezidi living in Germany.⁸) Is he the chief angel and demiurge, or is he "forever God" as stated in the "Hymn of Melek Tawus," "alive without having been born"?⁹ But then, Sheikh Shams is addressed as "my creator" in the "Hymn of Sheykh Shems."¹⁰ Each angel is a *sirr*, or in Kurdish a *sur*: a "secret" or mystery, a *nur* or light from God, and also the secret inmost spiritual heart of the mystic.¹¹ Another hymn mentions "the Seven Mysteries of Sultan Ezid," as if the whole heptad were

under the command of Ezi/ Yazid in some way.¹² The *Khas* are, to be precise, the earthly incarnations of the angelic principles or principals, those whose bodily remains are buried in the tombs—the “good holy beings”—also called *babchak*, “good father.”¹³ The same concept informs all the “angelican” traditions.

Sultan Ezi himself “is” God, and also Melek Ta’us and Sheikh Adi (as in the “Hymn on the Laughter of the Snake”).¹⁴ To extend the series of *khas* identities even further, the “Hymn of Abu Bekir” claims that Ezi “is” also at the same time Mansur Hallaj, Shams-i Tabrizi and, in essence, Adi himself.¹⁵

It’s interesting that the angels’ names are all Semitic, and Jewish in origin, although they probably reached Yezidism through Christianity and Islam. The whole idea of angels supposedly infiltrated Judaism from Zoroastrianism after the Babylonian Exile, but the names themselves are not Persian. The Yezidi angels lack definition, their functions are unclear, and they resemble Neoplatonic hypostases or emanations rather than individual personalities. They are as candles lit from one candle, in a kind of inclusive monotheism, rather than pagan gods in a masked polytheism (although Yezidis have been known to identify proudly with “pagan” origins).

The symbolism of the angels includes also an *ouranic* aspect. As Pinkham notes, the Heptad is identified with the asterism of the seven Pleiades, which appear during the two major Yezidi festivals in spring and autumn.¹⁶ Sami Said Ahmed claims that each angel “equates with a constellation” but unfortunately does not specify further.^{*55 17}

In the song of Xizêmok, or “The Nose-Ring of the Beloved,” we hear:

Oh my house! There is a bird in the sky over it, its name
is Enqer

(It has) seventy-two feathers

On each feather stands a bull

Spreading its claws and wings

From it come light, luminosity, radiance and dew.

A gate opened in the heavens, a point [*nuqta*] issued from
it

A bird descended onto the throne of happiness. . . .

By the stars that came to me from the all-powerful star!¹⁸

Here the “point” (*nuqta*), the diacritical mark on the Arabic letter, stands for both the singleness of realization and the point of light which is a star—and thus an angel.^{*56} The angel stands for the imagination (Blake’s devil, Ibn Arabi’s devil) because it mediates (as the genius of the *mundus imaginalis*) between the divine and the human—that is, between the world of the ideas and the world of things—as the alchemical *materia* which must be both spirit and matter in one. And likewise anyone who has ever felt that another human being can be (even temporarily) an angel might see that the angelic is the field of the *symbolique* because it is both the representation and the *res ipsa*—the “signature” and the elixir. This is the power of imagination—the Peacock Angel, the beloved—and it is how the angels of the Heptad continually reveal themselves as living avatars. This is the essence of “angelicism.”

Another way of symbolizing this intervention of the angel is hinted at in the complex of motifs involving miraculous figures born without a mother, either from the void or from another male, and so forth. Thus Adam gives birth to Shahid ibn Jarr (a monstrous version of this offspring is indicated in a footnote to chapter 8), and according to another tale Sheikh Assin (Hesen) “was created by Shaykh Adi from a tooth (hence the name) extracted from the jaw of Farkhadin; the shaykhs of the Mand family are not descended from his sons naturally born but three male children created by him out of an apple, a snake, and a staff.”¹⁹ Metaphysically, these apparitions mirror Jesus and his virgin birth, via the intermediation of Gabriel acting, as it were, as God’s presence.

Asatrian and Arakelova have corrected the common error that the Yezidis recognize only God and his angels; they have discovered a pantheon of lesser deities, probably inherited from Indo-Iranian Urpaganism, such as Mama-Rashan, god of thunder and lightning, also called Sheikh Abrus, the cloud, or Black Wind, and so on, whom the authors

compare with Vayu and Vata, old Iranian wind gods.²⁰ “The color black is in Yezidi lore a definite symbol of the transcendental world, masculinity and chthonism,”²¹ and the color of deep mystical states and alchemical transformation. Other deities listed by Asatrian and Arakelova include several goddesses, the sun and moon, a phallus god, dual gods of cattle, the lord of Earth and burial, Khizr-Ilias, the king of the djinn, the god of the *khirqe* or dervish cloak, and so on.²² The chapter in Asatrian and Arakelova devoted to these spirits is unique in Yezidi scholarship, being based on sources in Armenia unknown to all other writers. For example, the existence of *Milyak’ate-qanj*, the “Holy Angel” of the phallus, is not mentioned elsewhere. Yezidi women sacrifice to him (or *it*, since the angel is visualized as simply a *lingam*) in the form of naturally shaped stones, to obtain a baby:

Impregnate me [lit. “Sit upon me”];
Let me have yoghurt, let me have good;
Let me have a son, let me have a daughter.²³

This angel was also celebrated at circumcision and the spring mating of sheep (under the constellation of the Ram, also a deity).

Dewresh E’rd, the Dervish Lord of the Earth, is praised during funerals in one of the most secret Yezidi rites, with a beautiful hymn appearing in several versions in Vardam Voskanian’s article on “Dewreš E’rd.”

Oh Dewreš E’rd,
This slave [of God], be a woman or a man,
[Let thee] spare [and] appease [him/her]
[Let thee] take care of his/her soul
[He/she] is the lamb of [Sult’an] Yezīd,
The cord-ring of the Peacock Angel is laid
[around] his neck.
[Oh,] offspring of Adam, [they] will come to thee,
Neke and Menkī,

[They] will ask: “Who is thy god?”
Say: “My God is [Sult’an] Yezīd,”
[The] God of vigilants and inebriates,
[The] God of desert and garden,
[The] God of all the Gods.
Slave [of God] and son [of Adam] can not
recognize [Him].
He is the creator of people and all things in it,
He is without essence, without sin,
He is without smell, without breath,
He is without passion, without soul.
Seven times for this soul [of the deceased]
I asked from Him (i.e. God) forgiveness
[May] the mercy of God be for thee equal to thy
deeds.²⁴

Seven toasts are drunk (in “wine” or arak) to the Yezidi faith, the Lord of the Earth, Sheikh Adi, Melek Ta’us, the Patron of Wayfarers (Sheikh Shamsan), Lord of the Graves (Pir Mandi-gora) and to the Daily Bread. This is because the Lord of Earth, like the Zoroastrian deity Spandemat, is also lord of grain; as Eliade says, agriculture always involves “the world of the dead,” which accounts for its uncanniness.

The spirit named Khudan-e maleh or God of the House, a kind of lares and penates, is a snake, as is also Pir Mandi-gora, Lord of Graves, an important deity (see below chapter 8):

I am the Son of Malak Farkhodin [the Creator]
I am a hawk with sparkling claws
I am sitting on the golden throne²⁵

And in another form his esoteric aspect is praised:

Staff in his hand, burning coals and fire . . .
 Your eyes are like the eyes of snakes,
 Your fingers are like spades,
 Your nails are like knives,
 This name is hardly fit for lord of goodness
 Your eyes resemble drinking cups,
 Your fingers are like lead,
 Your nails are like sickles,
 Is that the just lord of goodness?
 Your eyes are black as eyes of a *fakir*,
 Your hair black as silk,
 Let the devout servants perceive the face of god. [26](#)

Note the prevalence of images of intoxication and drinking cups; these are not borrowed from Sufism in some shallow mode, but are integral to Yezidism as esoteric antinomianism, as I hope to demonstrate.

Another way of viewing the Heptad or Septenary is as a double trinity under God: [*57](#)

Supreme Deity	Khuda/Yazdan
Celestial Level	Melek Ta'us Melek Salem (Gabriel) Sheikh Shems or Sheikh Hasan
Terrestrial Level (emanation of celestial Trinity)	Jesus Christ Sheikh Adi Yazid ibn Mu'awiya

Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya is mentioned here as the messiah who will return; and the sun is also Sheikh Shams.^{[27](#)}

A Kurdish scholar named Izady is critiqued by Ziba Mir-Hosseini in “Faith, Ritual and Culture among the Ahl-e Haqq” as an extremist “who, in his eagerness to distance the Ahl-i Haqq from Islam and to give it a purely Kurdish pedigree, asserts that the sect is a denomination of a religion of great antiquity which he calls ‘the Cult of Angels.’ This ‘Cult,’ he states, is ‘fundamentally a non-Semitic religion, with an Aryan superstructure overlaying a religious foundation indigenous to the Zagreus [mountains, i.e., western Iran]. To identify the Cult . . . as Islam is simply a mistake.’”^{[28](#)} Izady’s “most astonishing” assertion is that Ali Mohammed the Bab, the founder of the heretical Shiite schism of Babism, was one of the three avatars of the cult in modern times. This claim is indeed unique—but not so ridiculous, I feel. Babism, an offshoot of the Shaykhi theology so admired by Corbin, evolved on one hand into the Bahá’í religion—but on the other hand into the Azalis, headed by the Bab’s chosen successor Subh al-Azal. (See the Introduction for the revival of this sect by Wahid Azal.)

Angels are birds; or our idea of angels is based on the universal dream of flying like the birds we see every day performing such magic so nonchalantly. Yezidism can be called among other things an *ornitholatric* faith (as well as *ophiolatric*): the peacock, cockerel, and dove are all figurations of the Septenary, and somewhere in my sources the intriguing suggestion is made that we should remember the *iunges* of the Chaldaeans in imagining Melek Ta’us.^{[*58](#)} The *iunx* or *inyx* (singular) is the bird called wryneck. In ancient times it was crucified on a little wheel by sorcerers like Medea and used to perform love spells. Later the wheel alone sufficed, as in Theocritus’s Second Eclogue. Strung on a ribbon and spun like a top, it produced a humming sound that evoked the music of the spheres. In the *Chaldaean Oracles* (that mysterious text passed on to the Renaissance by Gemistho Plethon) its function is enlarged from love magic to the abstractly erotic invocation of deities such as Eros and Hekate. The later Platonists like Iamblichus and Proclus adopt it as an aid in theurgy, divine magic. The English word *jinx* is derived from *iunx*—an appropriate taste of the diabolic, if we are indeed to see this bird as a forerunner of the Peacock Angel.^{[*59](#)}

The Yezidis are exempt from prayer because Sheikh Adi prays *for* them—but the Yezidis do have prayers, notably the daily practice of kissing the first and last sunbeam to fall on earth. The sun is Sheikh Shams, Israfil (or Raphael), one of the four corners of the Cosmos. “The Morning Prayer” says:

Light (comes) from the light of dawn,

Praise to you, my Creator.

The angel is facing us. ²⁹ (Literally “face-to-face”;
my emphasis)

In Kabbalah the highest angel is sometimes said to be Phanuel, the Face of God, the Angel of the Presence (since God Himself cannot be seen). In truth, all angels are theophanies, divine countenances—as is all creation, seen in the light of realization, as “The Morning Prayer” continues:

Sheykh Shems is lord of the dawn

We shall kiss the hand of Sheykh Shems and the
hem of his clothes. . . .

Sheykh Shems is the lord of mystical knowledge
(*khudan-i maarifat*). . . .

The Great Ones are (actively) busy, they do not
allow you to sleep. ³⁰

Shams is also Shams-i Tabrizi (called “the Tartar,” and “the Turk”) who was the mysterious companion of Rumi, murdered by Rumi’s jealous disciples and thrown in a well. Until recently Westerners have seen Tabrizi through the lens of Aflaki’s apologetic biography of Rumi, but we can now read texts by Shams himself and discover him as an extreme proponent of the School of Love, of “sacred pederasty,” of drunkenness and antinomian eccentricity. ^{*60} In the Mevlevi Order his influence survives among a minority of heterodox wine- and hashish-loving Qalandar types, and among outright heretics such as the Ismailis of India (who are the custodians of a tomb they say is his) and the Yezidis. The pious and goody-goody New Age

image of Rumi prevalent in the West today needs to be broadened by an appreciation for the man he loved and lost.

Whatever influence Shams-i Tabrizi may have had, the evidence for a sect of Shamsani sun worshippers antedates the advent of Islam by far. Sami Said Ahmed's anonymous Yezidi informant attributes sun worship to Cyrus the Great, whom he calls "Korush Yazid Shamsani." Cyrus was born, it seems, in Yazd of Shamsani parents and worshipped Melek Ta'us—all of which is, Ahmed remarks, quite demonstrably false. But Rayhan al-Biruni (he says) mentions the Shamsiyya of Yazd. In the eleventh century a heretical Christian sect of sun worshippers is condemned by the Jacobite patriarch as "deceived by Persian Magi." In the twelfth century they were condemned as Paulicians (Gnostic dualists) "sitting in Satan's darkness." The Armenian patriarch Mekhitar Abaranetsi describes Armenian sun worshippers as Arevorti who "prostrate to the sun . . . and revere the poplar, lilies of the valley, and sunflowers. And they meet . . . men and women together (naked) . . . in a very dark cave." Later Armenian churchmen continued to revile them as Satanists.³¹ Russell also mentions the Arewordik/Shamsanis and links them with the Yezidis.^{†61} "Children of the Sun" he calls them. Russell also mentions a Sufi order called Shamsani (ca. 1600), but interprets the Arewordik as crypto-Zoroastrians, perhaps daeva worshippers.

The "Beyt of the Morning" (also called the "Beyt of Sheikh Shams") begins:

Hey hey, the sun is rising there
The Sheikh of Light is (like a flower) in bud
Both prayers and hell are in Sheikh Shems's hand

Since the sun has risen there
It has eclipsed the moon
Sheikh Shems has adorned the land.³²

In other words, sun-worship has banished Islam, symbolized by the moon. The sun is associated with "white light," with musk, with the

disclosure of mystic “lovers” (*asheq*), and with “medicine for the heart” (entheogens?). The appendix to the Black Book says “Some believe that Christ is Sheikh Shams. . . . After making a sign in the Sun, Christ came down to earth.”³³ In alchemy the sun both symbolizes and is in fact fire, the source of all transformative energy, as we learn already in the eighth-century *Testament of Alchemy*.³⁴ This text, which contains the teaching of Khalid ibn Yazid, the alchemist son of Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya, was translated from Arabic into Latin during the lifetime of Sheikh Adi, and I believe it contains secrets relevant to our *ta’wil* (or esoteric hermeneutical phenomenology) of Yezidism. Lady Drower opines (and Ahmed entertains the hypothesis also) that Sheikh Shams al-Din (meaning, “Sun of the Faith”) is in fact to be seen as Shamash, the Mesopotamian sun god, whom the Mandaeanes still worship; and she notes the prevalence of lion imagery in Yezidi art and lore, the lion being “a sun-beast.”³⁵ (Lion and sun appear as one in the old flag of Persia.) Shams has a tomb and tower in Lalish; where the “Hymn of Sheykh Shems of Tabriz” says

I am intoxicated from the cup
Oh Lalish of the spires
Let us give praise to Sheikh Shems. . . .
From pillar to pillar
There are forty keys to the inside of the treasury,
O Sheykh Shems, you have given
mystical knowledge and discernment
into (our) hand.³⁶

Asatrian and Arakelova identify the original Sheikh Shams and Sheikh Fekhr as sons of Adi II (and Kreyenbroek confirms that they were Hasan ibn Adi’s brothers), who were later converted into solar and lunar deities.³⁷ Shams is “the light of the eyes,” a form of God; and is sometimes identified as Jesus. He is “the essence of the religion,” “master of the seal and of spiritual knowledge” and God’s own eye. He owns the bridge to Hell, and has abolished it. His twelve children are the months or zodiacal signs. He is even “the creator.” The hem of his robe takes the place of the Kaaba and the

Hajj. Shams is “our cross” (*kache maya*), the sun-cross or swastika, a universal symbol from the Basques to the Vedic Aryans. (The connections between Shams and the bull sacrifice at Lalish, which is vitally important for our thesis, must await the chapter on ritual.) As for Sheikh Fekhr, he seems to have been made the moon-god by default.^{[38](#)}

Rather than earth/air/fire/water, the four elements (a quaternity of archangels) in Yezidism are designated thus (in the “Hymn of the Creation of the World”):^{[*62](#)}

One is Water, one is Light
One is Earth, one is Fire
Our Lord in (his) mercy
Made visible the *def* and *shibab*.^{[39](#)}

Here we are told that music (*def* is a frame drum and *shibab* is the flute, the sacred instruments of the Qawwals) is created along with the very elements as the angelic means of return to the angelic state of consciousness.



Figure 8. Lasso, a blind Yezidi musician, sketched by C. J. Rich in 1820.

This explains why Adam's soul would not enter his body without hearing the *def* and *shibab*: music *is* the order of the Cosmos. Life without music would not be merely a mistake, as Nietzsche said—it simply would not be.

Another way to participate in angelic existence is of course through ritual, “that which the angels perform in heaven” (see next chapter). But here we can note that for Yezidis all of life takes on ritual or angelic forms. Dress is angeliform, for instance, and angelifies the wearer. In “The Song of the Commoner,” we learn that the ornithoform headdress is worn by the Heptad themselves: Sheikh Adi, Sultan Ezid, Hesên, Obekr, Shamsoddin, Fekhrêdin, and Khizr-Elias.

Your headdress is precious,
It flew, it went away, it was in Heaven,
It circled around the Throne.^{[40](#)}

The same symbolism accrues to all the other obligatory items of dress and accoutrements (“Prayer of Belief”):

Faith is truth
The Bull and the Fish were created
The *zerguz* tree and the sheep
They produced leaven from the White Spring. . . .

The angels pondered
They gathered in a group
Through that faith they moved over the Ocean of
Knowledge
They produced the earth and brought
into being the sky overhead. . . .

They created black sheep, whose place is among
the dewy meadows. . . .

The angels made the great ritual procession in the
heavens
Through that faith the believers reached the
assembly of the All-powerful One. . . .
Those were the angels of the epochs
From them radiated light, the
north wind and luminosity.^{[41](#)}

The black dress of the Yezidi *feqir* is produced from a dye made from the *zerguz* (poplar) tree and wool from black sheep who are associated with that most alchemical exudation, the “dew of a thousand mornings.” The “ritual procession” is the Sema Qanuri, the highly secret and “most solemn ritual,” with music and formal dance, performed by the dervishes at Lalish—and by the angels in heaven. The north wind emanates, as it were, from the polestar, the *qutb* or “unwobbling pivot,” to borrow a Chinese phrase from Ezra Pound.^{*63} The properly dressed Yezidi becomes this center point—the angel (“Sacred dandyism”).

The Yezidi dervish Feqir Haji informed Eszter Spät (the author of *Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition*) that Adam in Paradise was an angel. His inert body (four elements) was brought to life by Sheikh Sin (Hesen). Hesen only agrees to the demotion of entering a body if he can wear the *khirqe*. He invests Adam with his divine light, placing the pearl of his *sur* (“secret”) in Adam’s *forehead*. Also, in *The Cult of the Peacock Angel* (1928) by R. H. W. Empson,^{*64} we learn from a Yezidi elder who talked to Empson that the “seed” of Adam that was placed in a jar and heated in camel dung (a wellknown alchemical technique) for nine months was actually blood from his forehead;⁴² from this blood was born the ancestor of the Yezidis. Sheikh Sin (says Feqir Haji) “was modeled after the Pearl [that hid God before Creation].” He gave his power to Adam, the first Prophet. Later, when Adam ate the wheat and was expelled from Paradise, he could no longer wear the angelic *khirqe*, and the *sur* was removed from his forehead. But according to another variant cited by Spät (from the unpublished Ph.D. thesis of Jasim Elias Murad), the Angel was Derda’il who is also Hesen; the costume included a headdress and crown, and a red belt. All were stripped from Adam—but the pearl remained in his forehead. So man was deprived of Paradise but not of his connection to angelic consciousness. Haji Feqir said “he became like the empty shell of a snail. He became a human”⁴³—but the human is always potentially connected to his angelic “blood” or heritage. For Yezidis, this blood is literally the sign of genealogical descent: *only* Yezidis are “pure.”

Here are some poems by the “historical” Hasan ibn Adi, or attributed to him anyway, collected and translated by Sami Said Ahmed. In some ways, they resemble the poems attributed to Caliph Yazid in chapter 12. Was

“Hesen” influenced by Yazid, or merely working in the same tradition of love and wine poetry?

1

Laila was revealed while we were in the mountain path
and the first heart that was infatuated with her love was
mine.

I glanced at her countenance and the beauty of her
features and she understood what was in me, and my
companions never knew.

If her love is a sin, O rebukers,
(then) take my goods away and leave my sins for me
At the valley side and the curbing passageway
[roam] eye kohl-applied deer whose abode is my heart
I am as eager to the one I love
as Jacob was eager to the dweller of the well.

2

How many times I said when I drank the wine with a
companion: “For whom is the blame, [when] the
excess of drunkenness tosses me?”
and was left alone with no second on whom I can lean
and the universe and the world became proud of me
(all her meaning is my meaning and her image is like
mine
and she is called my daughter and my father)
Was not the origin of she with the mole from me
and our meeting the most sublime of lineage?
If I appear, the one with the mole is apparent
and if I was hidden, (then) I was not unseen
Look at me if you want to see her

and if you are near her, O man, you must watch!

As Sami Said Ahmed says, “The poem no doubt contains some of his radical conceptions about the attainment of Absolute reality.” The mole usually symbolizes Divine Unity (*Tawhid*).

3

Do not mix wine with cold water, for
 mixing the grape with water is forbidden
For it was born originally from him, and the
 marriage of daughters to father is not allowed
And listen, you may be guided by my words, I am a man
 who knows that drinking wine is for preëminent
 people.
From it I was created and from me it began
 and its miracles mixed with mine.

4

What a night that was and the house gathers together
 (where) we were in an ecstasy that departed and never
 lasted
And the wine you drink from the palm of a beautiful maid
 when it appears you think a full moon appears in
 darkness
She reveals to us a wine just like her cheeks
 whose drinking was permitted (even) in the sacred
 months
I vowed, when a critic criticized her figure,
 that I will not change, and that I am ill
And I said when she possessed my slavery without being
 merciful to my abasement, though she knew the pains I
 had

“The order is yours after God. You be the judge
If you fast we will fast and if you break your fasting
we will not fast.”

5

The beginning of my intoxication is from the wine of your
mouth and how in love was I to be blamed?
when [once] your heart was mine alone
and now I have in your love a partner
O King of beauty we came to you complaining
of the look of your eyes to your watchers
You possessed our hearts which became (your) subjects
and never will accept other than you as a king for
them.⁴⁴

These poems may seem superficially to resemble the usual boasts about wine drinking and dalliance with beautiful maidens or youths, but in this case we should remember rather the Proclamation of Qiyamat during the month of Ramadan on the “Day of Resurrection” at Alamut in 1164, by another Hasan, the leader of the Ismaili Assassins, Hassan-i Sabbah.^{*65} He mounted the pulpit and preached that “the chains of the law (Shari‘a) have been broken.” He himself was thus revealed as the *Qa’im*, the Lord of the Resurrection, in effect the esoteric antinomian messiah. The Alamutis rejoiced and broke the Ramadan fast with wine in daylight—a double violation. The Assassins from this point forward lived in *sacred time*, the time of spiritual rebirth as a community (see Corbin, *Creative Imagination*)—as do Yezidis even now, at least potentially.

As much as or more than we’ve learned about Sheikh Hesên could be written about each of the major archangels; the point here is not comprehensiveness but specificity: the theme of esoteric antinomianism. So I’ll add only a few more relating to that theme. For example, Pir Sherefeddin is identified, among others, with Khizr-Elias, who is in many ways the epitome of pure esotericism:

Sheref speaks of fundamentals,
My understanding is very great.

Are you Khidr or Ilyas?

Khidr, oh my Khidr!

You are full of effective (mystical)
power;

You are ready to give all answers.

Khidr has answered.

The Mulla proclaims clever utterances.

Thus he makes the disaster greater.⁴⁵

If Khizr is seen on the folk level so to speak as “a kind of Santa Claus” or “the God of love who fulfills love-related views,”⁴⁶ all the colorful customs surrounding his feast day are based on the premise that he is immortal, able to confer initiation on the “lost wayfarer.” He is a water-and-vegetation spirit and thus evergreen, the very embodiment of an eternal spring despite his wintry white beard; a trickster whose tricks lead to enlightenment, and a prophet for followers of *all* religions—or even of none—who teaches by breaking outward law in order to fulfill inner truths. Scholars say the Yezidis “borrowed” Khizr from Islam—but in esoteric terms this can scarcely be the case given that he predates all monotheism, having been alive since the Flood and spoken to Gilgamesh, to Moses, and doubtless to Christ.

Given the overwhelmingly male aspect of Yezidi angelology, a few words should be said of the chief “goddess” or female angel, Pira Fat, the “foremother of the Yezidis.”⁴⁷ Before the vaguely Gnostic creation myth of Shahid ibn Jarr became predominant, Pira Fat was probably known as the origin of the “seed” of the Yezidis. As Asatrian and Arakelova insist, such a mythos would resonate much more clearly with ancient Iranian themes. Pira Fat would be a *typos* of Anahita, and even of the Virgin Mary as spiritual

progenitor or “mother of the Faithful.” Hints of a pre-Adamite creation are kept very secret in Yezidism:

I cannot speak:

If I say that [the people of the] *sunna* [here, the Yezidis]
had existed before Adam,

I will be accursed.⁴⁸

This unexpected feminine spirituality is properly “hidden” in Yezidism, not as a form of oppression but of esotericism. The essentially chivalric nature of Yezidi mysticism demands this outer/inner dichotomy be reflected on the level of yang and yin, so to speak, male and female, as in our Western Arthurian mythos.^{*66} Moreover, as Pira Fat refers obviously to Fatima, the holy mother of Shiism, her presence within Yezidism stands for another secret interiority, already mentioned: the presence of Shiite *‘erfan* or esoteric knowledge within the supposedly hyper-Sunni origins of Yezidism—which can be viewed as a *ghulat* or “extremist” Sunnism, just as the Alevis or Nusayris are viewed as *ghulat* of the Shiah. Now, the fact that Yazid is ritually cursed by Shiites (as the “murderer of Husayn”) does not make Yezidism any more “Sunni”; for proof, simply observe the continually attempted extermination of the Yezidis by Sunnis! Nor are the Yezidis crypto-Shiites. They are not Muslims at all. However, they attract esotericism like a magnet attracts bits of iron—and Ghulati Shiism has a great deal to offer such a feast of eclectic esotericism, as Corbin was always pointing out. Sunnism had Sufism, of course. But Shiism is imbued with the esoteric. It characterizes the “heretical field” in which Yezidism is located. This “field” could also be symbolized as a cave—a common Yezidi motif—such as the Cave of Salman Pak.

Salman the “Pure,” the Persian, is reckoned as one of the first Shiites, and a member of the inner circle of Caliph Ali who was adopted into Ali’s family, but was also related to the Sassanian royal dynasty. Thus he links Shiite *‘erfan* with Zoroastrian mysticism, so precious to the Sufis. Here he appears, like Khizr, to be immortal. As such, he might be said to epitomize a secret within Yezidism, hidden in a Cave that is also a space outside profane time: “The Jawana Yezidis believe that he (Salman) lives in a cave

in Qarjagh Mountain near Balad Sinjar. The Jawans visit this cave requesting blessings.”⁴⁹ Here all spiritual truths are valid, and all religious orthodoxies overcome. Here the human becomes the angel.



7

RITUAL

At the beginning of Creation, Lalish existed in heaven and was inhabited by God and his angels. After Earth was created, the land remained turbulent, fruitless, and barren. So God sent his Throne—Lalish—down to earth, whereupon the world solidified and was adorned with greenery. Since then there has remained an archetypal Lalish above and a material one below—but, as the alchemical Emerald Tablet proclaims, “That which is above is as that which is below, for the accomplishment of the Work (of transmutation).” These two Lalishes symbolize the *batin* (inner/esoteric) and *zahir* (outer/exoteric) aspects of existence. “During the week of the Autumn Assembly the Seven Angels gather in heavenly Lalish above, under the leadership of the Peacock Angel, just as the terrestrial leaders of the Yezidis do in earthly Lalish.”¹ This symbolism of the temple appears to be nearly universal: ritual is always that which the angels do in heaven, and the holy place is invariably a more-or-less exact reflection of heaven (see Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*). The art of geomancy or sacred geography comprises knowledge of the signs and shapes that reproduce heaven on earth. Lalish by all accounts fulfills all the rules of *feng-shui*, so to speak, and creates around itself an atmosphere of magical holiness, well-watered and green like all imaginings of Paradise, at the head of a valley, in

a configuration that a Taoist geomancer would see as a hidden dragon. Thus the Holy Beings or incarnated Angels who accompanied Sheikh Adi at once recognized Lalish as “the site of Truth,”² descended direct from on high. Here time itself behaves differently, unlike ordinary secular time, but in a mysterious sacred fashion, such that paradoxes and myths can be seen as normal—such that one and the same person can simultaneously “be” both an angel and several different humans who lived in different centuries. Thus the external *zahiri* world is merely the reflection of an inner *batini* or essential reality, which is experienced (especially in holy or “thin” places) as more real than outward reality.³

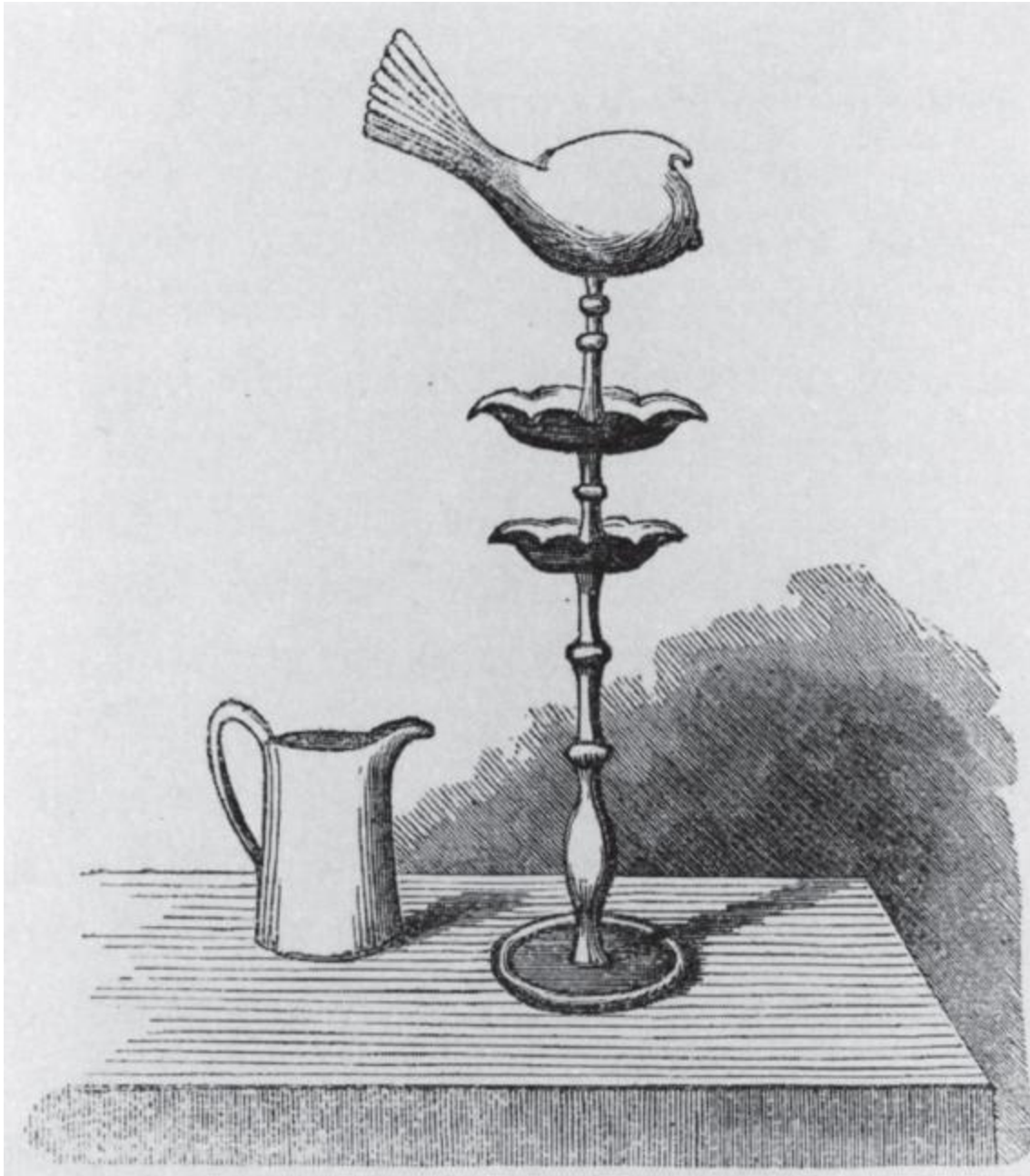


Figure 9. The *sanjak* of Sheikhan, sketched by Mrs. Badger in Bashika, Iraq, in 1850.

Anyone who has spent time with dervishes or other adherents of mystical sects will have become accustomed to this way of describing time's flow of events—as *signs*, intimations of “eternity” that penetrate quotidian consciousness with the quality of waking dreams, somehow both vague and vivid. “Facts,” as a woman of the Ahl-i Haqq once upbraided

me, are meaningless—what counts, she insisted, is “love.”⁶⁷ And as a Yezidi *qewl* (“The Laughter of Snakes”) puts it, “Wherever they recite the *qewls* and *qesides* of Sheikh Adi / There paradise is present.”⁴

No pain remained in my heart
A form of Lalish was created on high
Its gate was called the “*Qibla* of the Full Moons.”

Lalish lies at the center
Its hallmark is the White Spring
The sign of earth and heaven.

HYMN OF THE WEAK BROKEN ONE⁵

Oh Lord, you made the world, the world (is) good
In it men live replete. . . .
He brought Lalish down from above
Lalish became pleasant everywhere
On earth, plants began to grow
With them he adorned the existing things.

HYMN OF CREATION OF THE WORLD⁶

According to Khalil Jindy Rashow, the relationship between earthly and heavenly Lalish should be compared to that between God and the human soul. He mentions the mysterious tree of Ghewar, referred to in “The Prayer of Belief”⁷ as a tree that had its head below, its roots above.⁸ As the poet Gerrit Lansing put it, “The heavenly tree grows downward.”

Eszter Spät says that at the great autumn assembly at Lalish, “The Evening Dance [Sema Evari] is performed by religious dignitaries every evening after sunset in the court of the Sanctuary. Twice seven men (*seven being the number of Great Angels*) dressed all in white, the colour of religious purity, walk around a sacred torch representing both the sun and God, with slow majestically measured steps to the plaintive music of the

gewels. They are led by the head of the *feqirs* dressed in a black fur cape and conical hat, allegedly once worn by Sheikh Adi himself⁹ (parenthesis in the original, italics mine). In this ceremony, Jesus is invoked.¹⁰

The angelological interpretation and performance of ritual proposes to transport the ritualist from earth to heaven (since all effective ritual as “theater” is designed to induce “mystical transports” through an art of sensory/aesthetic “yoga,” so to speak), but also to redeem Earth as Paradise, to sanctify and “heavenify” it, just as Melek Ta’us is redeemed and “taken up” again (and “sent down”) by a loving God. The earth is good, *because* it “always already” comprises the scene of this reunion. To the awakened consciousness, earthly Lalish “is” the heavenly Lalish—at least temporarily, during ritual festival reenactments of the establishment of the temple. Its very existence sanctifies matter and materializes the sanctified. The Yezidi towers serve as alchemical athanors or alembics for *transmutation*.^{*68}

It has been said—notably by Kreyenbroek¹¹—that, more than an orthodoxy, Yezidism is an *orthopraxy*. That is, Yezidism is a matter of what the believer *does* rather than what the believer believes.

Now on one level this formulation obviously holds true. As an oral tradition, Yezidism remains necessarily vague about doctrine. Other than a few basics, one finds variations, “variants” concerning central beliefs, and even more so in secondary doctrines and practices. Moreover, the belief in multiple and even overlapping identities of holy beings adds to the uncertainty. All quite true, and as I’ve noted, also perhaps quite providential, since this flexibility saves Yezidism from the sclerosis of dogma.

But on second thought, not quite absolutely true. The techniques of studying Yezidism I’ve chosen (admittedly *faut de mieux*, since I cannot visit Kurdistan or speak Kurdish)—the perusal of scholarly sources, and this attempt (*essai*) at *ta’wil*—has suggested to me more and more forcibly that *what is done* constitutes a *zahir* or exoteric shell, “hiding” (and thus revealing) a *batin* or esoteric metaphysical kernel or content. This kernel is not a reductive theology or systematic structure of belief, but a *theophany*—in Sufi terminology, a *tajalli* or “shining forth” of inner “states and stations” and of the face of the Angel.

The potential importance of this insight has been set in sharp relief for me by reading Kreyenbroek's more recent book on *Yezidism in Europe: Different Generations Speak about their Religion*, consisting of interviews with Yezidis living in Germany (and some in the former USSR). The voices are many and varied, but the general tone is one of pessimism about the future of the religion. Yezidism is so geomantically located in Kurdistan that its transplantation to anywhere else must amount to exile even more than, say, the displacement of Jews and Christians, who may find spiritual "homes" elsewhere in the world.

The first generation of Yezidi refugees, like most people in their situation, are slow to adapt to the new conditions, language, and customs, which seem *irreligious* to them. The second generation tends to lose their parents' language, to feel drawn toward assimilation, and to forget the faith. And because Yezidism is an oral tradition, it proves exceedingly difficult for the elders (who themselves are unused to thinking about belief in isolation from praxis) to pass down a tradition that is bereft of its *places* and *events* (such as festivals, which are usually linked to places as well as times) and reduced almost exclusively to *memories*.

So what needs to be recovered, it would seem, is neither an orthopraxy nor an orthodoxy, but an esoteric sense of metaphysical inwardness—we might call it a *heterodoxy*—or an esoteric antinomianism—which constitutes the origin, the very source (*fons et origo*) of the path.

Luckily this inwardness has not vanished from among the Yezidis in exile. I was deeply moved by this interview with a lady of the Sheikh caste (seventy-three years old) from Armenia:

If there was a religious problem, whom did you ask for help?

I invoked the Sun [Sheikh Shems], I invoked God. To invoke God you get up in the morning and say, "God please quench this fire with water, let it be smothered. Sheikh Shems, who sprang from your mother's bosom, you who are under the Seven Stones! Early in the morning Sheikh Shems knocks against the rock three times as on a door; then he hits it and comes out. This Sheikh Shems is the refuge of the Yezidi nation, and we are protected by Sheikh Shems." It is true that God exists, but we are the protected of Sheikh Shems.

What about Meleke Tawus?

[Whispering:] Meleke Tawus, I cannot talk about him. . . . But [hesitates] . . . there are seven brothers in a certain place; their Lady is a Pir. Her name is Jele. Jele prepares their dough. Those seven men, she makes the bread they eat. The elder brother comes and says, “Jele, take this gold and hide it.” . . . Jele takes that gold in her mouth. The gold melts in her mouth, and makes Jele heavy, she falls pregnant. Jele forgets about this, for the gold is no longer there. After some months, Jele’s stomach swells up. The male who gave her the gold, who is himself one of the Seven, says to the other six, “Come here, I have to discuss a matter with you. We are seven brothers, and one of us must be guilty of fornication. Tell me truly, which of you has committed this act?” All six say, “By God, such things are impossible for us. She is our Lady, our mother, our patroness. Still, Jele’s stomach is heavy. We must find out how Jele became pregnant.” When it was time for Jele to give birth, the baby was born through her mouth. The child came out the way the gold had gone in: the child was born through her mouth. . . . God made this child in that way, he made him the leader of all those Seven.

The same informant had a visionary experience:

What is the other world like?

When I was a girl, a bird came, it came to my bedside. I was fourteen or fifteen at the time, I was still unmarried. It put me on its back and took me away. That bird took me away. I woke up when I was still on its back, I thought I had died.

Was it a dream?

Yes. It was a dream, and I was taken away. Then I asked questions and it told me, “Paradise exists. At the doorway of Paradise there is the Water of Life.” It took me to the Water, it was a blue lake. It was green, it was as though my eyes were cleansed by it. I asked, “What is this water?” It said, “This water is the Water of

Life.” I washed my head and eyes in it. It said, “This water is the Water of Life.” That is what I have seen.^{[12](#)}

As long as the archetypes of the religion can spontaneously produce such genuine and profound visionary experience, hope remains alive. The problem is how to educate in the diaspora to achieve this end. I am unqualified to prescribe, and leave the question open. But I want to reiterate that the orthopraxy/orthodoxy “problem” can perhaps be overcome (in Nietzschean terminology) by recourse to vision itself.

As to the subject of actual praxis, inasmuch as it appertains to *ta’wil* or uncovering of esoteric elements, we can say that Yezidi ritual revolves around *ziyarat* or pilgrimage to tombs and shrines, and the festivals that are held there. Especially important are the spring and autumn festivals, involving visits to Lalish (when possible—nowadays very fraught). A pilgrim to Lalish is called a Hajji, like a Muslim who’s made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

In Sufism it’s often said that a visit to the tomb of the founder of the order is ritually equivalent to some fraction of a Meccan pilgrimage. Moinoddin Chishti’s shrine at Ajmer in Rajasthan, for example, counts for one-seventh of a Hajj. In Yezidism this esoteric economy has completely wiped out the account—so to speak—of Mecca. Lalish acts as the one and only cynosure of Yezidism; its outer form simply “is” its inner reality: Paradise on earth. To perform the requisite ritual *there* is *to be* a Yezidi.

The spring festival (Sere Sal) is related to the ancient Iranian celebration now known as Nowruz (New Year’s Day in the Zoroastrian calendar) and is held by the Yezidis according to the old Seleucid calendar on the first Wednesday in April. Some sources maintain that Wednesday is the Yezidi sabbath, presumably because the Muslims have Friday, the Jews Saturday, and the Christians Sunday. (Or does it honor Mercury/Hermes, the god of Wednesday who thus might be identified with Melek Ta’us?^{[*69](#)}) This holiday especially honors Melek Ta’us but does not involve a major pilgrimage to Lalish. Eggs are dyed, perhaps in memory of the Pearl (which is of course also the Egg of Chaos or potentiality) and red flowers (anemones? poppies?) are gathered for “Red Wednesday.” At Lalish lamps are lit, and the five pieces of the banner of Melek Ta’us are ritually washed

—baptized—by leading holy men, then assembled, raised, and saluted.¹³ The red flowers might remind us of the god Tammuz and the ancient “oriental” mourning for him. Tammuz has been etymologically linked or identified with Melek Ta’us, and in fact the spring festival (like Nowruz) is somehow involved with the realm of the dead (and resurrected, or reborn, thus similar to Easter). Holy shrines or tombs are visited. Sacrificial animals are offered to the souls of the dead. Songs are sung in graveyards. On the midnight before the feast day God sends Melek Ta’us and all angels to earth to fulfill His desire.¹⁴

Several other minor feasts also involve the dead, for example, the “Day of the Crazy Old Man.” This falls on January 7, twelve days after Sheikh Adi’s and Caliph Yazid’s birthday (which is also Christmas) and is thus equivalent to Epiphany. Yazid’s feast (perhaps his birthday) is held on the first Friday of December, and is also associated with the dead. We should recall in this context the highly secret hymn to Dervish Erd (Lord of Earth) recited at funerals, which thus become esoteric/occult events. The same esoteric subtext belongs to the Celtic Samhain, or Halloween, the “hinge of the year,” New Year’s Day, Day of the Dead—or rather of a momentary “thinness” between our world and the Otherworld, which constitutes both the realm of death and also faeryland, and so the source of magical knowledge. Such Indo-European motifs are certainly not foreign to Kurdish tradition, so it’s interesting to note that the most important Yezidi holy days take place in autumn. These come near the fall equinox, also the first days of Libra. The first is called simply al-Jammayyah, the gathering; *jam* is also the word for the regular Ahl-i Haqq ritual meeting with blessed food and music (which I experienced in Tehran). The word is also used in Alevi practice. Yezidis are obliged to attend, if at all possible. It’s like a New Year anniversary in that “the destiny of the entire New Year is determined.”¹⁵

Toward the end of the autumn assembly comes the bull sacrifice. The killing, butchering, and cooking of the animal provides a feast for the faithful, and a conceptual banquet for the amateur scholar of comparative religion. In the first place we could believe, with Pinkham, in some link with the ancient cult of Mithras.¹⁶ Mithraism as a religion of Late Antiquity retained connections with the regions now inhabited by Yezidis. It bestowed seven ranks of initiation presided over by different deities, led by a Mithras who slays a bull, who is a constellation, whose rituals are celebrated in

caves or underground temples, and so on.^{*70} The links with Indo-Iranian tradition are vaguely obvious: Mithras is Mehr, a sun-god *typos*. The Yezidi bull is dedicated to Sheikh Shams (the sun) and killed at his shrine in Lalish. Archaic motifs include the pretense that the bull is “stolen”^{*71} and then returned; and that pieces of meat are “thrown to the crowd” and the religious leaders.¹⁷ People throw gobbets at each other in holy glee.

The animals are variously described: “white oxen,”¹⁸ a white bull, or black bull, or bull of any color,¹⁹ a white bull, not black.²⁰ The blood of the animal is considered auspicious, like its neck-garland of red flowers; an old Yezidi described to Seabrook the circle of blood around Shams’s tower, spurted from a cut in the neck vein, as “very beautiful”; and the man who makes the cut dyes his cloak in the gore,²¹ just as the Mithraic initiate was bathed in the blood of the ritual tauroctony.

In Empson’s weird little book, a commentary is appended by a “Sir Richard Carnac Temple, Bart.” Sir Richard mentions that the sacrificial beast is a white ox, and remarks, “Here we seem to see a harking back to a very ancient Zoroastrian custom . . . in which the fat of a white ox had much to do with the great ceremony of concoction of haoma as the Elixir of Life.”²²

From the Indo-Iranian perspective (as explained by Mauss and Hubert in *Sacrifice* and Roberto Calasso in *Ardor*), there can exist no religion without sacrifice. Perhaps this perception is universal. That one must kill in order to eat must seem obvious to the original human sense that *everything is alive*, which in both the Rig Veda and esotericism such as alchemy remains the basic (meta)physical premise. Perhaps the idea of an herb of immortality or Elixir of Life is also universal, at least in written sources from Gilgamesh to the psychedelic revolution. In any case the *loci classici* for our tradition are to be found in the Rig Veda and its great commentaries the Brahmanas, and in the Zoroastrian Yashts. Soma (or, in the Avesta, haoma) constitutes both the sacrifice, the food, and the means to attain apotheosis or immortality (however temporary). Zoroaster—whoever, whenever, and wherever he was—seems to have reformed the earlier Iranian version of the cult by eliminating the animal sacrifice (bull or cow, usually) that mirrors the plant sacrifice, and by eliminating the actual psychotropic plant itself. My hypothesis, explained more fully elsewhere,^{*72} would suggest that haoma was originally “activated” by ephedra, but

Zoroastrians today use *only* ephedra; a mild stimulant, as haoma. The actual identity of soma/haoma is now lost because such secrets must always already be *secrets*. Popular candidates include the *harma/isfand* of the Khaksari dervishes (see David Flattery and Martin Schwartz's *Haoma and Harmaline*), *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms (see R. Gordon Wasson's *Soma* and Wasson et al., *Road to Eleusis*), psilocybin (see Terrence McKenna, *Food of the Gods*), and cannabis (see Wendy Doniger's essay in Wasson's *Soma*). The literature on the subject has grown to unmanageable vastness, and I do not want to be distracted. However, I must make a few points relevant to this study of Yezidism.

First: *what* haoma “was” is not so important as *that* it was. The “soma principle” can adhere to any psychotropic or entheogenic substance.

Second: Sheikh Adi hailed from Baalbek, which in his day was probably already a major hashish-producing region. I personally witnessed a huge industry there in 1968. In the late nineteenth century a traveler reported that Nusayris (Shiite heretics very near the Yezidis, in Syria, and sharing with them certain customs and beliefs) used hashish ceremonially and called it *homa*.^{†73} In the Yezidi “Hymn of Sheykh Erebeg Entush (The Origin),” a text packed with antinomian imagery, we read:

The hashish-smoker has a yellow look.
Even if you are angry with him seven times a day,
He does not harbor rancor or disgust in his heart.²³

Third: In connection with the cult of the Angel of the Phallus (Milyak'ate-Qanj) discussed by Astatrian and Arakelova, all this speculation falls suddenly in place:

Gulizan Mamoyan, a Yezidi woman of around ninety years from Aragats region of Armenia, added a new detail of utmost interest to the story of the Yezidi phallic cult. She remembered that when she was young, the barren and newly married women, in summer quarters (*warga*)^{*74} used to pick up small red mushrooms—*karied sor*—on the mountain slopes. They strung the mushroom on threads and hung them on [their] necks.^{†75} They believed, she said, that

mushrooms could cure sterility and induce the productivity of women's wombs. The women also performed a round dance (*govand*) around big mushrooms that appeared after rain, in a secluded place, far from men's eyes.^{†76} The old lady remembered a short part of the incantation accompanying the rite:

Mushroom, mushroom,

Help me soon!

Make my womb a box [here a wooden box for keeping cereals]

[Make] my wooden box a flour's jar

[Make] my jar a wooden box . . . ^{§77} ²⁴

Russian scholars (obviously mycophiles!) point out that mushrooms are aphrodisiac, and that red swelling mushrooms are phallic. *Amanita muscaria* would make a perfect fit with all these themes. Have we discovered an authentic survival of a Yezidi haoma cult among the Yezidis of Armenia? Some scholars believe that entheogens are one of the secrets of alchemy and help to explain the exalted states and hallucinogenic imagery of alchemical texts. Mithras, who “was” Perseus, was thus also the founder of the city of Mycenae—literally “Mushroom City”^{*78}—suggesting that the alchemists were the heirs of a much older tradition.

Pilgrimage in the ancient world was often for the purpose of *incubatio*, a practice in which postulants or patients would sleep in the shrine seeking an initiatic or healing dream or vision, with perhaps an interpretation and/or prescription from the resident priests. Most famously the healing god Aesculapius (and his snake) supplied the service wherever Greek influence penetrated (including Egypt, Italy, Asia Minor, and the East as far as Bactria)—but even earlier such temples existed (e.g., in Margiana, ancient Turkmenistan, where Russian archaeologists have discovered the incubatory use of a drink prepared with cannabis, ephedra, and opium in temples equipped with small cells for sleepers). These are dated as early as 1500 BC; they could be (in my opinion) haoma temples. The Yezidis practice incubation for medical purposes²⁵—perhaps also for “initiatic” dreams? I would suspect so.

Layard was perhaps the first traveler to mention, in connection with the Yezidis, the ancient accusation known to scholars as “the Extinguishing of the Lamps,” in which celebrants at shrines practiced indiscriminate sexual intercourse (including incest) in total darkness.²⁶ Similarly, the Christians were accused of lamp-extinguishing by the pagans (as well as cannibalism) in the first couple centuries AD. Now, given that in the course of human history sooner or later everything possible must occur, it stands to reason that some group of eccentrics really did extinguish the lamps. But the Yezidis have never been caught at it, and in all probability never will.^{†79} At festivals, men and women may dance together, and this alone shocks puritans, both Christian and Islamic—but in fact most anthropologists are struck by how strait-laced the Yezidis always appear, and their obsession with purity is extreme. We must look elsewhere for orgies. Antinomianism does not imply them. The Yezidi “lodge rules” are said to prohibit “lying, fornication, conceit, dissention, drinking, gambling, false-witness, eating of dead animals, pork, envy, sloth, and anthropomorphism.”^{*80 27}

The question whether Yezidis pray or not is much discussed. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sheikh Adi or (Shams) is said to pray on behalf of all Yezidis, relieving them of the duty. But prayer is indeed practiced, for instance in the charming custom of kissing sun-and-moonbeams, or in the pilgrimage to Lalish, as at the White Spring (Kaniya Sipi), the secret and holy place where infants are baptized, and which is said to have the leaven or “rennet” of the Yezidis. (They must not accept bread leaven or yeast from nonbelievers, but only from co-religionists, or from the air.)



8

SYMBOLIQUE

I borrow the title of this chapter from R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, the eccentric Egyptologist who also (secretly) made up part of the composite persona known as Fulcanelli, author of the most important original book of the alchemical tradition in the twentieth century, *The Mystery of the Cathedrals* (Paris, 1926).^{[*81](#)} Schwaller's use of the word *symbolique* as a technical term in his writings about religion and Hermeticism means (I think) to indicate the whole *imaginal* field (to borrow a term from Corbin) in which, like Indra's net of gems, "every jewel reflects all other jewels"; but within the complex certain "chains" of gems (to borrow from Giordano Bruno) are linked in series of correspondences or occult identities, and cross-linked with others. "The symbolique includes imaged writing as well as gestures and colors, all aimed at transcending in a functional manner the esoteric significance of a teaching whose inner meaning remains inexplicable by any other form."^{[1](#)} Moreover, the symbolique is not static and timeless but kinetic and creative, and though it spins off archetypes, these are not lacking in Spenserian *mutabilitie*. The symbol both represents and (mysteriously) "is" that which it represents; thus it does not merely represent but *presents*, and constitutes a *presence*.

To give an example of such a chain, let us recall that the lion symbolizes the sun. But the sun (as “head” of the series) is also symbolized by cockerel, diamond, sunflower, and gold—or, at a lesser intensity, alchemical sulphur (the moon then representing silver or mercury), hence the Philosophers’ Stone—and so on. Each of these things “stands for” the others, but on an esoteric level “is” all the others. According to one alchemical source (now mislaid), because a cockerel possesses more solar nature than even a lion, it transpires that a rooster can terrify a lion. Whether this is “true” may not be the right question. The red cock crowing at dawn “is” the sun—and also, as it happens, an aspect of Melek Ta’us. The links make up an un-flat n -dimensional pattern, leading us in many directions simultaneously or sequentially. This field comprises the *symbolique*.

The Yezidis worship a great Holy Being in the form of a peacock—the vain bird who is almost the perfect example of Corbin’s *deus patheticus*. In Islamic culture, the peacock appears at the Devil’s side as a collaborator who helped him penetrate the Garden of Eden.² One hears Iblis called “Peacock of the Angels” for his beauty, and the association antedates Islam. Asatrian and Arakelova mention that “In the Old Iranian beliefs highlighted by Eznik, an Armenian theologian of the fifth century, the peacock is presented as a creation of Ahriman, or the devil.”³ Other sects have much the same identification of a Satan-type figure with a peacock, including (according to Açıkyıldız) the Druze, the Takhtadji (“woodcutter”) Alevi, and the Mandaean (on whom see Albert de Jong, “The Peacock and the Evil One”).⁴

In the *Nahj al-Balagha* or “Way of Eloquence” attributed to the Imam Ali,^{*82} there is an encomium to the peacock, claiming “that the females drink teardrops from the eyes of the male, and from this become pregnant.”⁵ This echoes not only the story of Melek Ta’us putting out the fires of Hell with his tears, but also the Yezidi tale of al-Hallaj’s sister becoming pregnant by drinking from the “gurgling jar.”

Collins mentions that in one incarnation, one of the angels of the Ahl-i Haqq claimed to be the mythical bird called the *Anqa* (mentioned in the Yezidi sources as *Enker*, *Ankar*, and other spellings);⁶ the *Anqa* is the Arabic version of the Persian *Simurgh*, whose mythical Aryan homeland, the

Airyana Vaijah or “Eranvej” of the *Bundahishn*, may perhaps be ancient Kurdistan.^{*83} Attar in his *Conference of the Birds* makes the Simurgh the king of the birds, and in effect their god. By a pun, *si-murgh*, meaning “thirty birds,” the thirty-bird delegation makes the perilous seven-stage journey to the Simurgh’s court only to discover that “Thou art That”: in a mystical collective sense they *are* the Simurgh. Collins also adds that the old belief that peacock feathers prevent decay links the peacock to the Simurgh as the source of a “drug of immortality.”⁷ The brass stand on which the statue of Melek Ta’us is perched—the *sanjak*—may stand for the divine tree on which the Simurgh as *saena* is seen as symbol of all knowledge and wisdom.⁸

The erudite James Russell tells us about Zal, son of Sam in the *Shahnameh*, who is rescued by the Simurgh:

Aelianus . . . reports the tradition that the Persian Achaemenes (founder of the eponymous dynasty) was reared by an eagle. . . . [I]n manuscript illustrations of the *Shahnameh* the Simurgh is shown with the bright and multi-colored (rainbow) plumage that one might associate with that of a peacock, not an eagle. In Armenian is found *siramarg*, “peacock.” . . . The Armenian saint Nerses Klayeci “The Graceful” (d. 1173) wrote:

Simamarg osketip nkar hogi

The peacock, golden image of the soul . . .

A Zoroastrian legend claims “that Ahriman created the peacock (*siramarg*) in order to show that he was unwilling to create other beautiful creatures, rather than unable to do so.”⁹

Asatrian and Arakelova finalize the argument by establishing that the Armenian *siramarg* for peacock is

an Iranian (rather, Parthian) loan-word, going back, probably to **ser(a)marg*, which has its attested parallel, *senmurv* in Middle Persian . . . both from Old Iranian **saina-* (or *saira*)*mrga-*, that is,

perhaps, “colourful bird.” On this subject, it is this very word, *simir* (Kurdish), that acts as a substitute of the tabooed name of Malak-Tawus as used by the Yezidis in requests and appeals: *bidi xatire tayre simir*; that is, “do it for the sake of the bird *simurgh* (Malak Ta’us).”¹⁰

As is Iblis, Jibra’il (Gabriel) is sometimes called *Tawus al-Mala’ika*, or “Peacock of the Angels” (and Melek Ta’us is sometimes identified as Jibra’il). And the twelfth Imam of the Shiites, the expected Mahdi or messiah, who lives on an emerald island in the imaginal world, is called *Tawus ahli-’l-Janna*, or “Peacock, Dweller of Paradise.”¹¹ Pinkham makes a connection between the Simurgh and King Jamshid and Mithra, who all dwell on Mount Alburz, the world-axis for Persian cosmology, Jamshid being a *typos* of Lucifer as fallen-but-redeemed light-bringer and Mithra as sun and *typos* of Christ. Pinkham calls Simurgh a version of the Primal Dragon, with the head of a dog or horse and a tail of peacock feathers, and says that during the historical Sasanian dynasty the Persian kings adopted the Simurgh as their royal emblem.¹²

As the sun, Melek Ta’us “is” also the cockerel, the sun-bird par excellence whose epithet is “red” no matter what color he may be. The crowing rooster symbolizes resurrection, hence Jesus (and perhaps the crowing of the cock before his denial by Peter). The Old Iranian culture venerated the cock, whose meat is still taboo in Baluchistan, as well as to certain families of Yezidi Sheikhs. The white cock chases away bad spirits; the Prophet Muhammad kept one. He is the bird of Sraosha, the Zoroastrian messiah. In the Avesta he is *paro-daras*, “he who foresees (the coming dawn).” And Jewish folklore concurs. Islamic lore envisions a giant rooster-angel in heaven beneath Allah’s Throne, archetype of all roosters who call creation to morning prayer.¹³ Some eyewitnesses say the bird on the Yezidi *sanjaks* resembles a cockerel (or dove) more than a peacock.^{*84 14}

”The Song of the Commoner” uses the following color terms for the cockerel’s feathers: white, red, yellow, green, many-colored—perhaps envisioned as an alchemical sequence culminating in that “stage” called *Cauda Pavonis* by Western alchemists: the resplendent “Peacock’s Tail.” It “calls from the Throne”:

The cockerel, its feathers are white.
It is calling from the High Throne,
It is with the pre-eternal Angel.
Our shouts and cries for help are directed to the
assembly of Sheykh Adi.

The cockerel, its feathers are red.
It is calling from the throne below,
It is with the Angel who presides over baptism.
Our shouts and cries for help are directed to the
assembly of the *qibla* of the full moons.

The cockerel, its feathers are yellow.
It is calling from the throne on high,
It is with the Greatest Angel.
Our shouts and cries for help are directed to
Sheykh Shems the Tartar.

The cockerel, its feathers are green.
Do end this sleep!
Get up and ask Sheykh Adi for a livelihood, for
berat, and for sustenance.^{[15](#)}

Ainsworth tells us that Nergal, god of the Cuthites (2 Kings 17:30), was worshiped in the form of a cock. (*Nergal* was the Babylonian name for the red planet, Mars.) He also attributes cockerel worship to the Chaldaeans and Assyrians, referencing a cylinder seal found by Layard depicting a priest praying to a cock on an altar, and suggests (yet another) link with the *iunges* of the Chaldaean Oracles.^{[16](#)}

Recently I was researching a beautiful etching by Leonora Carrington, the great Hermeticist Surrealist painter and writer. It's entitled, "Dog, come here into the dark house. Come here Black Dog" (1995). It reminded me

that black dogs have great magical power. Saint Cyprian of Antioch (a Syrian now venerated as the patron saint of black magic!)*⁸⁵ gives several spells involving black dogs, including one requiring the eyelashes, nail clippings, and hair of a black dog, burnt to ash and rolled in a cigarette; you puff the smoke at one whose love you desire.^{†86}

The seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi (1611–1682),^{†87} who visited the Yezidis around Mosul, mentions “some extremely curious bans about stepping on an onion or striking a black dog.”¹⁷ Asatrian and Arakelova point out that the dog is sacred in Zoroastrianism—but the opposite is the case in Islam, where dogs are “unclean”¹⁸—except for *salukis*, Egyptian lion hounds, or so I was told in Iran.

The dog’s links with the underworld (e.g., Cerberus) parallel its ties with death (obligatory presence of a dog at Zoroastrian funerals) and Faery (the sons of Finn MacCool, who are transformed into dogs). Asatrian and Arakelova translate the passage by Evliya Çelebi that was summarized in Spät’s *Late Antique Motifs* (brackets and ellipses in the original):

[The Yezidis of Sinjar] first give to their children milk of a black dog. If somebody dares to hit a dog he is mercilessly killed. Each Yezidi holds from five to ten dogs in front of the doors (of his house). Food is first given to a dog, and only then, when the dog is satisfied, they eat themselves. One black dog is sold for 1,000 *kurush* and ten mules. . . . Adding of black dog’s hair to the shroud of the deceased is general tradition [among them]. . . . In this region they usually arrange great feasts when a black dog is born. And when the dog dies, its body is washed with the sap of [napiform] onion and it is buried at a special dog cemetery. For the [peace of the] soul of a dead dog the rest of the dogs are given roasted mutton. The dogs of those people resemble lions indeed. There are no wolves at all in this country. It is strange that the mount Sinjar, known as a blessed land, sheltered such infidels.¹⁹

Similarly, the Zaza-Qizilbash Alevis (of central Anatolia) also “worshiped a black dog as the symbol of [a] deity.”²⁰ And some Yezidis were called *halta*, “dogs’ collars,” by their Turkic neighbors.²¹ Some Muslims believe

in a black dog demon like the Pooka; possibly the Yezidis admire black dogs *because* of that diabolic reputation?

Guest gives us a few more of Evliya's Yezidi observations:

He describes an outlaw's paradise, watered by seventy springs and peopled by stocky, shaggy-haired men with round, black eyes, wearing multi-colored woolen clothes, silk belts and turbans, and heavy bamboo shoes, equipped with swords, scimitars, battle axes and guns "capable of hitting a flea in the eye." Their women wore their hair ankle-length. Dogs, plentiful and mostly black, were cherished. The daily diet was millet bread, supplemented by mutton and occasionally quail. They also raised manna, honey, grapes, raisins, silk, all highly esteemed by merchants in Mardin and Baghdad.

He did not inquire into the religion of the Sinjar Yezidis, whom he describes as "godless." He noted that, in addition to Yezidis, the population of the mountain included Moslem Kurds and Arabs. . . . Any Moslem who cursed Satan, Yezid or "the black dog" risked instant death; the same penalty was imposed for stepping on an onion or striking a black dog.²²

The Yezidi *qawwals* say their caste came with Sheikh Adi from Syria (that is, Baalbek), and sometimes are called his *salukis*, "a term they enjoy in the belief that Shaykh Adi gave this name to their two ancestors as they were serving him as quickly as *salukis*."²³ These dogs are considered the *ne plus ultra* in loyalty, intelligence, bravery, and cleanliness in the Middle East. Sami Said Ahmed, however, claims there is no truth in the myth that a Yezidi "bride is placed in a dark room with a black dog while all dance outside."²⁴

In the long text of mixed prose and poetry called "The Story of the Appearance of the Mystery of Ezi,"²⁵ it is told that Caliph Yazid had a miraculous talking dog, whom he sent to the mosque in Damascus to summon his father Mu'awiya:

His dog went to the door of the mosque where they were delivering the sermon, and said, “Peace be upon you!” When they all looked over their shoulder they saw that a dog had entered the mosque and had called and greeted them. (They did not know what to do.) Should they return its greeting? But it was an animal! should they ignore it? But after all it had greeted them!²⁶

Instead of following the dog, Mu‘awiya sends two ambassadors to Yazid, and upon their arrival “Sultan Ezi prayed over them and turned them into stone on the spot.”²⁷ Finally, Mu‘awiya goes in person, for what seems to be his first meeting with his son.

Rabia al-Adawiyya (in the hymn devoted to her) also meets a talking dog, who complains of thirst. Rabia cuts off “her dark plaits” and fashions them into “a luminous reed” to fill her shoe with water for the dog, whereupon “she received much benefit from that creature” in return for her kindness: a vision of the Throne of God, the Bull and Fish, the seven spheres of earth and seven spheres of heaven, “the spire and the orbs.”²⁸ In short, the dog is an angel, or a shamanic spirit-guide.

Russell, in describing the Armenian veneration of the dog, traces it tentatively to Harran, where the god Marduk was still worshiped (well into the Christian and even the Islamic era) as “resuscitator of the dead” and “lord of the dogs.”²⁹ I too am inclined to suspect Yezidi links with Harran (see Tamara Green’s *City of the Moon God*), but whether this supposition can be proved or not, I think we are here approaching the deep esoteric hermeneutic of the Black Dog. The Yezidi customs concerning this mystical beast (now largely forgotten) are, like so many of their “folkways,” deeply rooted in the *symbolique*, the “field of correspondences” or signatures. The Black Dog both *represents* esoteric antinomianism—the dark path that is suffused with secret light—and is its very avatar.

As for onions, Evliya Çelebi tells us that the Yezidis

carry onion and *jajezil* [a sort of cheese with pungent flavoring]. If anybody smashes or squashes onion, his head will be smashed and he will be killed by them.^{*88} And most important is that if a rich person dies, he is washed with onion juice and onion is planted on

his grave. I asked the captives [Yezidis] several times about it, but never got a straight answer. “Onion is good,” they said. There is a parable. It says that a Yezidi was asked what he would do if he became a king. I would eat onion, he answered. And indeed Kurds [here: Yezidis] like onion very much.³⁰

Although bread and onion are a typical poor person’s lunch in the Middle East (sometimes with feta-type cheese and perhaps a few fresh herbs), they are treated as sacred. I have seen people (from Morocco to India) pick up scraps of bread in the street and place them where no one would step on them—just as they would with scraps of paper with printing or writing (in case even one of the words might be sacred). Bread has been conceived as the body of (a) god since the Neolithic Period (still ongoing). But why onions?

The early twentieth-century Armenian intellectual Sion Archmandrite Ter-Manuelian said of the Yezidis that “Onion is their whole-hearted love, which they will never change for anything else; this love and worship came to such an extent that it turned into parable.”³¹ Asatrian and Arakelova mention a number of these superstitions and leftover remnants of religious practices and beliefs. The ancient Egyptians worshiped onions, and in the nineteenth century, Gérard de Nerval surprised his Egyptian servant in the act of adoring a garland of onions. Throughout the Iranian culture area, onions are used in magic rites (e.g., pierced with a needle and pointed toward an enemy’s house). My guess is that onions and bread grains were among the very earliest cultivars and thus “contain,” so to speak, the memory of the original magical love relations between proto-gardeners and the plants that mysteriously followed them.^{*89}

For the animist, all things are alive, some more so than others. The Yezidis share the near-universal awe of the mandrake or mandragora because (like ginseng) it resembles the human body. It has medical uses but primarily proves useful in love magic; indeed the Persian name of the plant is *mehrgyah*, “love plant.”³² As a nightshade, it is said to have narcotic effects, and modern “psychonauts” report entheogenic results from eating mandrake. Witches’ brews famously contained it, and I suppose the effect would resemble datura and other “disassociative” drugs, which can be poisonous but do have adaptive uses in some cultures. (I met an Indian

saddhu, Ganesh Baba, who claimed to have used datura for spiritual purposes.) Apparently the Yezidis know the lore about not picking mandrake (lest its death-cry slay the gatherer) but tying a dog's or goat's tail to the plant and letting the animal hear the shriek instead. The plant glows like silver in the dark but if approached hides in the ground unless splashed with women's urine.

The category of holy plants includes the mulberry tree (whose link to Satan was noted at the end of chapter 5); a particularly sacred mulberry is found in Karabak.³³ A fig tree in Bashiqe, near Lalish, even has a name: Sitt (Lady) Nefise. Russell relates that the Armenian "Children of the Sun" (Arewordik) had a cult of the poplar tree (as well as sunflower, heliotrope, and other solar plants), and here again note the use of poplar in black dye for sacred Yezidi garments.³⁴

Harut and Marut, the angels of the grave in Islam, who also appear in Yezidi lore, are in the Armenian language turned into the flower called *hawrot-mawrot* (the hyacinth), gathered by girls on Ascension Day; in Kurdish the duo is named Khorud-Mordud, and sometimes becomes a pair of lovers, or even Christian apostles.

The *sanjaks* of Melek Ta'us (and other sacred objects) are ritually cleansed by water from holy wells infused with sumac.³⁵ The cup of sumac water is called the "Taus (peacock) cup."³⁶ It would be red and resemble wine. Sumac is known even in America by this Arabic name; it is used as a red dye, and also as a lemony condiment, ground like pepper, on rice and meat.^{*90}

In general the plant world is considered good and holy. "Greenery" appears as the sign of the essential beneficence of creation. "Shade, cool water, green things, a beautiful face," as the hadith says, make the world lovable. No trees may be cut down in Lalish.

In Lalish is a tank that—if I understand correctly—is filled with the water of the White Spring, and is the home of large "piebald newts called *hori* after the Houris of Paradise."³⁷ Like fish in sacred wells in Ireland (or, for that matter, everywhere in the world), these creatures are considered holy. Some *special* things must stand for the truth that *all* things are alive and holy; even the "primitive animist" does not stop to bow to every rock or breeze. It is enough to know that the gods (spirits, angels) are not merely

ideas, but real things—which also are all *persons* in some sense, animate, responsive, relational.

Most conspicuous in the category of holy animals, the black snake can perhaps be seen as the chthonic form of Melek Ta'us, whose celestial form is the peacock. (So said the “Yezidi princess” quoted in chapter 5.) The Yezidis may hesitate to tell this to outsiders for conventional or taboo reasons. The serpent belongs to Ahriman—but also Jesus can be depicted as a crucified snake in alchemical manuscripts.^{*91} In the Mahabharata an entire marvelous volume is devoted to the nagas, were-snakes and demigods. All over India primitive naga shrines (beneath banyan trees) remind us that the “immortal” snake is one of the deities of prehistory, no doubt even of the deep Paleolithic.

In another Yezidi version of the Flood, the water starts to flow from an oven, showing that (as the *Testament of Alchemy* says) heat is the key to the Work—and water (or “firewater”) can be a form of it; thus a river of Syria was turned to wine by Yazid. When the Ark is perforated by the peak of Sinn el-Kilub in the Sinjar Mountains, the resourceful snake curls itself up and plugs the hole—“fixation” again.^{†92 38}

The snake as a barrier between the Ark and the Flood mirrors the Mandaean snake/dragon called Ur, who holds up the seven firmaments of the heavens and rests upon the seven underworlds of darkness; the Yezidis also know of fourteen levels or spheres of creation. Ur's breath is fire, “his belly is now fire and now ice,” and his mouth is a whirlwind. Like the Ourobouros (which is possibly the same as Ur), “sometimes he is depicted as holding his tail in mouth.”³⁹

In Armenia, the Sheikh-caste Yezidi clan of Dara Miraza “has preserved a figure of a dragon serpent made of brass as an important relic, although with no detailed explanation provided by the relic holders.”⁴⁰ The Shamsani clan of Sheikh Mand have a snake for their emblem, and are known for their ability to handle snakes and cure snakebite. In 1940 Lady Drower met and photographed a father and daughter of the family, draped with live snakes, five or six feet in length, which they kissed. The daughter's name was Jahera, meaning “snake poison.” This clan were called descendants of Sheikh Mand, “the Black Sheikh”—a son of Fekhrudin who turned himself into a black snake in order to frighten the Hawari tribe into giving up their

conversion to Islam.⁴¹ (Thus the snake embodies Yezidi apostasy as esoteric antinomianism.) The “secret hymn” *Qawle botabore*, says

O wisest amid the Pirs

I am a slave of the Black Sheikh—Sheikh Mande-
Farkha.⁴²

In Asatrian and Arakelova we read that “A cave in Lalish called ‘the Gorge of Sheikh Mand’ harbours many snakes, and it is regarded as the tomb of their lord. . . . A dismal chthonic image, beside the snakes having power over scorpions, spiders and other ‘creepy-crawly’ creatures, Sheikh Mand understands their language.”⁴³ As we know, he is also Lord of the Graves and guardian of the cemetery, like Baron Samedi in Haitian Voudoun.

Henry Field also met “a fierce-looking Yezidi snake-charmer,” but “as a result of an unpleasant incident in Jebel Sinjar during which a snake-charmer was bitten while demonstrating his courage and aptitude with vipers, we were forced to seek other Yezidi subjects for anthropometric measurements and observations.”⁴⁴

The “Beyt of Nightingales” refers in passing to a “Book of Snakes”⁴⁵ as if to a lost scripture. The prayer and *qewl* devoted to Sheikh Shams exults that



Figure 10. Sheikh Mand and his daughter handling snakes.
Photographer unknown

All snakes, all mice
All that is wet, all that is dry
That too shall have a share and a part in (the
sphere of) Sheikh Shems.

All tortoises, all snakes
All that is hidden, all that is open

Its refuge too is with Sheikh Shems.⁴⁶

I read this as a symbolic complex in which snakes represent alchemical “wetness” (volatility, Mercury, the yin principle, etc.) and the mouse stands for “dryness” (heat, fixity, sulphur, yang, etc.). The two beasts of Apollo relate as *solve et coagula*, the basic operation of alchemy. The tortoise is a “hidden” form of the snake, which by contrast is “naked” and open: thus the esoteric and exoteric. The next line of the *qewl* assigns “all roses” to Shams, and also the Kurdish tribe of Goran. There happens also to be an Ahl-i Haqq group called Goran/Guran, “the oldest surviving Ahl-i Haqq community . . . living in the mountains to the north of the Baghdad-Kermanshah road.”^{93 47} And the rose is, of course, the Philosophers’ Stone, the perfect balance or “Chymical Wedding” of Sulphur and Mercury.

The story behind “The Hymn of the Laughter of Snakes” is told by Rashow: One day Sheikh Adi, Melik Sheikh Sin (Hesen) and Sheikh Shems, walking on the road, met a snake. It approached Adi, and he recoiled. It approached Sheikh Sin and he too recoiled. The same with Shams. The snake then laughed and said, “I wanted to come and kiss the hand of Sheikh Adi, because he is King of the Religion and the Hereafter, and from his light came the four directions of Earth, the bottom of the Sea, and all wise ones all around prostrate themselves before him, but even he recoiled from me and did not allow me to kiss his hand.” He then said the same to Hesen (“the Lord of the Traditions, the Lord of the Tables and the World”) and Shems (“whose brilliance created the Earth and the Sky”). The three sheikhs then told the snake: “We acted in this way, not allowing you to come and kiss our hand, so that respect and awe for you would remain among humans forever, and they would fear you.”⁴⁸ And so it was, and still is so.

Not only does this tale reveal the esoteric snake-given titles of these three great Holy Ones, but it strikes me that the narrative also symbolizes *Yezidis themselves* as snakes, whom other people fear as poisonous vipers, brigands and satanists—laughing snakes, and adoring ones. Nature (secretly) smiles for the true mystic.

“One is the serpent whose poison

is doubly composed.”

CLEOPATRA *CHRYSOPOEIA* OF *CLEOPATRA*

Alchemy may be described, in the words of Baudelaire, as a process of “distilling the eternal from the transient.” As the art of transmutation par excellence, the classical applications of alchemy have always been two-fold: *chrysopoeia* and *apotheosis* (gold-making and god-making)—the perfection of metals and mortals. In seeking to turn “poison into wine,” alchemy, like tantra, *engages* material existence—often at its most dissolute or corruptible—in order to transfer it into a vehicle of liberation.

AARON CHEAK, *ALCHEMICAL TRADITIONS FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE AVANT-GARDE*⁴⁹

Of course there exists a dialectic of the snake: a “good” aspect, a “bad” aspect, and a *coincidentia oppositorum* or “synthetic” aspect. So naturally the Black Snake is a highly ambiguous figure. In return for plugging the leak in the Ark, according to one variant of the legend, it demands human flesh. (Noah burns the snake and turns the ashes into fleas, which bite humans and thus fulfill the bargain!)

The Mithraic statue of a lion-headed god whose body is encircled by a giant snake seems to represent the dual aspect of the reptile; Mithra himself as sun god often appears with a snake. In modern Kurdistan one sees popular representations of Shahmaran with a woman’s head and snake’s torso, and six more snakes (seven in all) as legs; and deities with seven snakes’ heads are known in India.

The *Shahnameh* preserves an extremely archaic myth of a figure with two snakes growing out of his shoulders; similar figures appear in very archaic cylinder seals from the Mesopotamian region.^{*94} Açıkyıldız recorded this version from a sixteenth-century text by Sharaf Khan Bidlisi:^{†95}



Figure 11. Shahmaran, Queen of Serpents.

After the death of Jamshid (the first ruler of Iran) the tyrant Zahhak usurped the throne and established a reign of terror. Besides his natural cruelty he suffered from a strange condition that increased his oppressiveness: two snakes grew out of his shoulders and caused him severe pain. The best doctors tried in vain to cure him but failed, till Satan (i.e. Angra Mainyu) appeared (disguised as a physician) and told Zahhak: “The only remedy consists of the brains of two young people, applied to the places where the snakes grow.” When this horrible cure was tried Zahhak in fact felt some relief, but the effect faded, so that each day two young victims were sacrificed under the sword of inequity of the barbarian tyrant, and their brains applied to his shoulders. Now the man charged with kidnapping and killing the young folk was moved to sympathy with their misfortune, and instead of killing two, he slew only one each day and mixed the brain with that of a sheep. The others he secretly set free and told them to flee into the distant and uninhabited mountain ranges. There a multitude eventually gathered, married and settled, and became known as the Kurds.^{[50](#)}

Eventually Zahhak (or “Ahi Dahaka” in Zoroastrian sources) is overthrown and imprisoned under volcanic Mount Damavand, where he still lives. Collins points out that the kings of Media (modern Kurdistan) were called *Mar*, which in Persian means “snake.”⁵¹ Astyages, the last historical ruler of Media, who was dethroned by Cyrus the Great, was called Rshti-vega Azhi Dahaka; later, the Armenians spoke of a “dragon (*vishap*) dynasty” of Media, descendants of Azhi Dahaka.

Azhdaha is a modern Iranian word for snake. Collins says the Mesopotamian two-snake deity was called Ningiszida, “Lord of the Good Tree,” guardian of the underworld (or perhaps the Gate of Heaven). The “good tree” may suggest a link with the Biblical myth of Paradise, the forbidden trees, the serpent. It appears that the Kurdish version of the story sometimes actually identifies Zahhak himself as the “hero” or anti-hero who creates the Kurds; he is a great *daevas*, and apparently the “original” of Sultan Sahak, the angelic avatar of the Ahl-i Haqq. Otherwise the “hero” is the tyrant’s assistant, or a blacksmith named Kaveh. In certain uprisings of the Kurds against one tyrant or another it has happened that a blacksmith’s apron has served as the banner of revolt. Even in our day the great Kurdish intellectual and militant Abdullah Öcalan has identified the Kurds as Medes (and Magi) and looked to the story of Zahhak for an origin myth.^{*96}

The two-snake theme appears in attenuated form in the Yezidi story about Sheikh Adi’s takeover of the Christian monastery of Henna and Mar Henna. (Here “Mar” is an ecclesiastic title meaning “saint,” but also a pun on the Persian word for “snake.”) The monks were invited to leave, but refused, and Adi withdrew to a cavern nearby. Then “Henna and Mar Henna, intending to kill Sheykh Adi, assumed the shape of serpents.” Adi in turn took on the form of the monks’ former master, and compelled them to resume human shape and accept the cavern as their new home, “and lent its dust the miraculous power to heal diseases of the mouth, thus affording the monks a livelihood in the form of alms from pilgrims.”⁵²

In another poem, three Sufi shaykhs, Abd al-Qadir Jilani, Ibn al-Rifa‘i and Abu ‘l-Wafa’,^{*97} visit Shaikh Adi and try to frighten him with a snake:

But I hit it with my spear, I tore it to ribbons
Water streamed from its mouth, which, oh miracle,

Was like a clear spring.

QASIDAH III⁵³

Kreyenbroek also mentions an Armenian legend of two *vishaps* (snake-dragons) who attack a Christian saint; he makes the sign of the cross, the snakes are turned to stone, and water gushes “from the navel of one of them.”⁵⁴ This reminds Kreyenbroek of the Armenian hero Vahagn, “equivalent of the Avestan Verethraghna . . . the Iranian counterpart of the Indian Indra” who, in the Rig Veda, slays a serpent (Vritra) to release the waters of cosmic becoming from the monster’s cave.⁵⁵ Kreyenbroek also adduces a Vedic verse referring to Indra as having “released the seven streams.”



The vast importance of the Black Snake’s looming presence, carved in bas relief on the main gate of the shrine at Lalish, provides a valuable clue to the significance of other carved symbols there, and in other Yezidi shrines.^{*98} The lack of interest shown by scholars and travelers in the *meaning* of the snake is exceeded only by their dismissal of the other symbols and their significance for an understanding of Yezidi doctrine. Let’s make an attempt to unravel some of these skeins of the *symbolique* (the “convolution,” as De Quincey calls it).

Açıkyıldız mentions, near the snake, another horizontal serpent, three hooked sticks, a torch or mace, and “an object resembling a skimmer.”⁵⁶ And she quotes earlier descriptions, since over time the carvings have worn down, been recarved, or even replaced. From a description of 1951, she lists two circles, an axe, a large comb, three Arab staffs, two saucers, “two animals resembling dogs, between which is a cross.”⁵⁷ From Badger (in *The Nestorians*, 1852) she adds “an animal that resembles a pig in a circle . . . two birds, two star medallions, two other birds above the portal.” Layard saw a lion, a hatchet, a man, a comb; Querinot “a kind of broken-head.”⁵⁸

Açıkyıldız lists other shrines with black snakes, for example, the mausoleums of Sheikh Amadin in Sinjar, Sheikh Mend Pasha in Behzane, Kabartu and Sinjar, and Sheikh Abu Bekr in Mem Shivan. Lady Drower

saw them at the shrines of Sheikh Nasr el-Din and Sheikh Shams at Lalish, but these are not extant.^{†99}

Lady Drower has already introduced us to some of these symbols as women's tattoos (see chapter 1). We can be certain that symbols cut into both stone and flesh are not "mere decoration." The *gopal* or stick (I'd call it a shepherd's crook) sketched on page 183 of *Peacock Angel* holds a star or sun symbol in its hook; it has eight rays. It appears near an upward-pointing comb at the shrine of Sheikh Mohammed at Lalish. Four and five-ray wheels all appear at Sheikh Shems and these probably represent the sun.⁵⁹ Lady Drower also mentions lions and pairs of lions and pairs of leopards, reminiscent of very archaic Mesopotamian, Iranian, and Scythian animal-combat motifs, often with solar significance; also moons, crescent and full. She says the *gopal* signifies the sheikh (as "shepherd," no doubt), and the comb symbolizes the long hair and beards of the *qawwals* and sheikhs (and perhaps of the Sinjari *mirids* with their long tresses).⁶⁰ She saw a carved *shebab* flute with five stops, a perforated ladle for cooking grain (Açıkyıldız's "skimmer"?), a spoon, and a worn-out lion. A seven-spined stick was described by her *feqir* informant as a "mace" or *gurgeyza*⁶¹—but I wonder if this could have been a seven-branched snake.

It is worthwhile to compare these images with a list of Yezidi holy objects stolen from Lalish by Ottoman troops:

Five bronze peacock images (of Daud, Shams, Yezid,
Sheikh Adi, and Hasan al-Basri)

"Khalil er-Rahman Kotchy," a bronze ram

The bronze rod of Moses

A cast bronze snake

The Shahrur, a cast bronze nightingale

The cummerbund of Ahmad al-Rifa'i

The rosary of Ahmad al-Bedawi (called Sheikh Ahmad
al-Kebir by the Yezidis)

The comb of al-Junayd of Baghdad (al-Hallaj's teacher)

The wooden staff of Abd al-Qadir Jilani

A bronze cup “connected with the glory of Solomon”⁶²

Sami Said Ahmed adds to these a Ram of Abraham (bronze), and of Ismail, a cane of Moses, and the “window frame” (*barshbaki*) and rug of Sheikh Adi.⁶³

In his list of Yezidi symbols and *topoi*, Kreyenbroek discusses the cup, but does not mention Solomon. (I wonder if Solomon’s Cup was imagined, like the Cup of Jamshid, as a kind of magic mirror in which the king could see events transpire in the past and future—a gift of the djinn?) Kreyenbroek mentions “two birds” as symbols of God and Melek Ta’us sitting together in a tree, and says “the account has a parallel in the Ahl-i Haqq tradition.”⁶⁴

The carved “circles” could perhaps represent *berat*, the little balls of earth made from Adi’s grave dust and holy spring water, which Yezidis carry and with which they are buried. This idea somewhat resembles the *mohr* or “seal” of clay from Kerbala (site of Imam Husayn’s martyrdom) used by Shiites to press their foreheads against holy ground in prayer. Or perhaps the circles stand for the Yezidi custom of swearing an oath in a circle drawn in the dust, which has given rise to the belief that the Yezidis are constrained by “magic” circles. Circles “decorated internally [are] called ‘shields,’”⁶⁵ which suggests a form of heraldry, as do the carved emblems. Kinship and clan/tribe affiliations probably lie behind some of the images, but I can’t prove this. The art historian Carl Schuster believed that “primitive geometric abstractions” were almost always “charts” of kinship, and indeed for Neolithic societies *kinship* explains everything.^{*100} If you read, say, Robert Graves’s book on Greek mythology, you will see to what extent it deals with family relations and stories, which structurally reveal the myths’ *meanings*. And of course Claude Levi-Strauss’s structural analyses of myth begin with analyses of kinship patterns.

In his reading of the hatchet or axe symbol, Ainsworth notes that Baal also carried one.⁶⁶ “He hath also in his right hand a dagger and an axe.”⁶⁷ Layard shows an Assyrian relief of this subject, in which Baal carries an axe and a bundle of sticks.^{*101 68}

Spät mentions “small metal rings and other objects believed to have a deeper, esoteric meaning” called *nishan*, meaning “symbol” or “sign”; they

are “pinned to a sacred sack” in which *berat* are kept. The *nishan* (which resemble the metal objects of magical *vertu* attached to shamans’ bags and robes in Siberia) “symbolize the holy lineage of a *pir* or *sheikh* and are usually inherited by the oldest members of the family.”⁶⁹ Said to be ancient, some are clearly fairly recent—but the followers of the holy men kiss and venerate the *nishan* and bestow tithes on the owners.

One could perhaps claim that the *nishan* or “symbol” symbolizes the *symbolique* itself; there seems to exist a kind of Mallarméan purity floating about them, like a scent. If I were to say that the Yezidi love of lighting torches, candles, and many small lamps at Lalish would signify the mirroring on earth of stars as angels; or that it could hide and reveal Zoroastrian “survivals” of fire worship; or that it could emblemize *enlightenment*—and so on—I would be doing no more than hinting at the atmosphere of life amid a “forest of symbols”—life as a *performance* of symbolic “peak experiences” (to borrow a phrase from Abraham Maslow via Colin Wilson), a life infused with *poiesis* and the aesthetic of mysticism.

Forty maidens of the ocean were in [the primeval sea]
Among them there was one luminous one
She had collected rubies and pearls, and arose from it

The rubies and pearls of those oceans
She offered to those venerable men.
She would not listen to the entreaties of all the kings.

It is morning, the day has five watches,
The holy men and angels distributed well-being,
The symbols (*nishangeh*) of Sultan Ezid were the
khirqes, they stayed on earth.

THE QEWL OF FAITH⁷⁰

The dervish cloaks of the Holy Beings remain on earth for humans to wear as symbols or “signs” of esoteric reality, like jewels from the sea of

gnosis bestowed by mermaids or *houris*, ideal beloveds from Paradise—signs of the erotic nature of the *symbolique*.

All pearls are ultimately identical with *the* Pearl, the cosmic jewel that also resembles the Orphic Chaos Egg, hatched (as it were) by a brooding Peacock Angel. Pearls are thought to be raindrops transmuted into gems hoarded by Chinese dragons, and venerated by Gnostics—portions of godhead disseminated into our world of visible and symbolic beauty.

Another symbol of symbolism itself (and used as such by Mallarmé in his “Throw of the Dice” and “Sonnet in X”) is the *polestar*, said by Ainsworth (quoting Layard, quoting a “Hymn of Yusuf” at Lalish) to be the Yezidi *qibla* or spatial focus of prayer. Field says the Yazidi dead are buried facing the North Star.⁷¹ As the pivot of the cosmos, the polestar in the Bear constellation has served this function from the moment the precession of the equinoxes “moved” Polaris into the axial position, which is the Seventh Heaven and the shaman’s goal. Perhaps this is indicated by the image Hesên’s skullcap in the “*Beyt* of Sheikh and Pir”:

He is the crown of happiness
Hesên, the skullcap of happiness
Is from the Treasury of Power
Hesên will come to you from above.

Your crown is of gold
Oh Hesên, your skullcap is of gold
It circulates in the seven heavens
Then it returns to your head.⁷²

Finally, the space of the *symbolique* can be symbolized as the cave. First and archetypally, this is the cave at Lalish, which non-Yezidis are forbidden to enter. Small and dark, lit by one sacred lamp, it combines (for Kreyenbroek⁷³) Islamic and Iranian light symbolism. A small passage leads to a larger cavern, through which flows the water of Zemzem, brought miraculously to Lalish from Mecca by Sheikh Adi. Lady Drower’s Yezidi

women friends told her *Kaf* was the name of a god; it is in fact Arabic for “cave.”



9

COLOR AND ALCHEMY

The Yezidis observe many taboos, most famously their ban on the word *shaytan* and words that sound like it. Almost as well known is their taboo against the color blue. John S. Guest relates that “around the middle of the eighteenth century a Kocheh declared to the Baba Sheikh that in a vision during the night it was revealed to him that the indigo colour of the shirts then worn by Yezidis was unlucky and displeasing to Melek Taus.”¹ Probably most religious taboos derive from such “visions” and have no ulterior or utilitarian motive. Jews and Muslims, for instance, do not refrain from pork because Moses and Muhammad had somehow intuited the cause of trichinosis, but because God told them pigs were unclean. (Rabbi Raphael Patai thinks pigs were venerated as totem animals by the ancient Semites, as they were by the Celts—hence either forbidden or sacred, or both forbidden *and* sacred, and *haram* in every case.)

Religion not only has no need of rationality, it positively eschews it. Nevertheless, writers have indulged in hypothetical explanations for the Blue Taboo. I, for one, have long noticed that, all over the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world, *blue beads* are used against the Evil Eye (tied around babies’ or donkeys’ necks, etc.), and it occurred to me that perhaps

the color blue is offensive to Satan (if indeed Satan is repelled by the Evil Eye); Seabrook had the same idea.²

But isn't the peacock itself blue? According to Asatrian and Arakelova, the "eyes" of the peacock's tail are seen as "evil eyes" in some European traditions,³ and I have often heard that using peacock feathers as wall decorations brings bad luck. Blue human eyes often seem spooky, as for example to the Bedouin woman who told Lawrence of Arabia that his blue eyes looked like the desert sky shining through the sockets of a skull.⁴

Collins suggests that since turquoise blue is the Persian royal color, it was perhaps resented as oppressive.⁵ Erik Davis found other "reasons" for the prohibition: "some say blue represents Noah's flood, or was a color worn by a conquering king."⁶ Davis also says he once came across the notion that the Yezidis dislike blue because it's the color of Heaven, which rejected Melek Ta'us. None of this makes much sense. Davis gives as his own opinion that blue, as the heraldic tint (so to speak) of Melek Ta'us, is avoided out of deep respect, like Satan's name. It is too *esoteric* for quotidian display.

Asatrian and Arakelova mention that words for *lightning* are also taboo, because of their use in cursing (e.g., "may lightning strike your house"), and the Yezidis are forbidden to curse.⁷ The radiance of lightning is called its *plough* in Kurdish (perhaps because it ploughs the clouds?). In place of words for "lightning" (*birusk*, *bobalisk*, *birq*), Yezidis use the word for "blessing" (*bimbarak*). Is lightning *too holy* to be directly named? Is this true for blue? For the Devil? Archaic circumlocutions are known in other languages: "good people" instead of fairies, "the Kindly Ones" instead of the Furies, and so forth. The Yezidis resisted installing electricity at Lalish for a long time,⁸ perhaps not simply from conservatism. Açıkyıldız points out astutely that many Yezidi taboos are meant to prevent pollution (physical or spiritual) of the Four Elements: no spitting; fires put out with earth, not water; no gargling of water; no shoes worn at Lalish, no garbage dumped, no trees cut. Her note on the taboo against blue is good: "according to the Yezidis, the word *shin* has two significations . . . the colour blue, and . . . despair, mourning, death. Over time these . . . have become indistinct."⁹ She adds that peacock-blue and sky-blue colors are sacrosanct, too sacred for daily use. Just to complicate the matter a bit more, it must be acknowledged that Yezidis sometimes do in fact wear blue.

Field recounts his meeting with the “beautiful princess Wansa,” wife of the Mir, who was wearing a “dark blue robe.”¹⁰ (Wansa was later to renounce Yezidism and convert to Islam.) And Yezidis too have been known to wear blue beads against the Evil Eye.



Figure 12. Princess Mira Khatun Wansa, circa 1985.

Photographer unknown

Pinkham adduces a rather poetic theory whereby Melek Ta’us emerged “from the Light of God as the Seven Rays and colors of the rainbow, a form he is still associated with among the Yezidis (usually as a rainbow around the Sun). . . . The Seven Rays of Tawsi Melek eventually separated as the Seven Great Angels with himself the high frequency First Blue Ray.”¹¹ Thus again *blue* would equate with the esoteric name of Azazel, and so share in the taboo on its enunciation. (The term *blue ray* might remind us that orgone rays are said by followers of Reich to be blue.)

Ainsworth muses that the ziggurats comprised seven levels, each painted a different color according to the colors attributed to the seven planets by “the Sabaeen astrologers” as “handed down from the Chaldeans.”¹² The same scheme is inherited by Nezami (d. 1209), who in his *Haft Paykar* (“Seven Beauties”) assigns these traditional colors to the planets:

Saturn	black
Jupiter	orange (or sandal-wood)
Mars	scarlet
Sun	gold
Venus	white
Mercury	azure
Moon	green (or silver) ¹³

Thus once again we receive a hint of a link between Hermes (Mercury/blue) and Melek Ta’us.^{*102}

The rainbow myth is also recounted by Erik Davis, who, however, points out that the rainbow “isn’t really there,”¹⁴ and quotes this Yezidi poem of praise for Khuda (God), translated by Asatrian and Arakelova:

You have no home, no shelter,
You have no colouration, no colour,
You have no voice, nor sound,
No one knows what you are¹⁵

Colorlessness as a symbol of spiritual excellence was analyzed by my old teacher Toshihiko Izutsu in his contribution to the 1972 *Eranos Yearbook* on color symbolism. To be “beyond” color reflects being as prior to becoming. Izutsu draws analogies with the unqualified awareness of Zen meditation; one might also think of the Tao that cannot be described prior to

its split into yin and yang and thence the 10,000 things. This creation of the world is of course mirrored in the alchemical process, and Yezidism in turn echoes alchemical becoming, whether consciously or unconsciously, speaking of a first stage that is analogous (in folk terms) to the *nigredo*:

Oh Lord, in the world there was darkness
There were neither mice nor snakes.
You brought it to life for the first time
Flowers almost burst from it. . . .

The Pearl burst open in its awe of God
It could not contain itself; it moved upward
It became adorned with such colors
Red and white became visible in it.

HYMN OF THE CREATION OF THE WORLD¹⁶

Red and white are yang and yin, sulphur and mercury, gold and silver. The many colors of Paradise “are” the *Cauda Pavonis* or Peacock’s Tail, the polychromatic display of Creation at its most creative, fecund and variegated—the “good world” of Yezidism, referred to later in this same hymn.

The great “Hymn of Mullah Abu Bekir” refers also to a mysterious “red and yellow book” whose ideal reader is “the Forgiving angel”—who is also al-Hallaj, Shams-i Tabrizi, the Ark of the Flood, and the alchemical metals:

I am the ship that came to rest on Mount Judi
Gold and silver and copper am I
I am gold, my origin is copper
The ignorant saw this mystery and did not recognize it
Thus they rejected the truth of Sultan Ezi.¹⁷

The transmutation of copper into gold is the work of the Elixir or Philosophers' Stone. And the sulphur that causes mercury to coagulate is called "rennet" by alchemical authors: literally, an extract from a calf's stomach used to curdle milk for cheese making, and figuratively, the coagulant that solidifies the unformed chaos of potentiality into the form of creation. *Solve et coagula*.

Thus speaks my King, the luminous:

Bees and *zerguz* and sheep

The rennet of all three is from the White Spring.

HYMN OF THE BLACK *FURQAN*¹⁸

Bees are themselves alchemists who make honey and wax out of flowers; *zerguz* is the poplar which makes black dye for the *khirqes* of the *feqirs*, which are woven of sheeps' wool: this triad stands for Creation itself.

The Testament of Alchemy reports Morienus's instruction that the coagulant must be prepared before all other stages of the work are undertaken;¹⁹ subsequently, in order to complete the Work, a ferment must be added to the composition, "for the fermentation of gold is like that of bread."²⁰ The result of the correct operation will be "fragrance and incense. After its color is refined, there remains in it nothing of darkness."²¹ This color sequence describes—both symbolically and actually—the alchemical transmutation or perfection of metals, and, by extension, plants, and of creation in general.

From one perspective (for example, that of many Christian alchemists), the highest color would be red, which is visualized as the color of the Stone itself—the color of the humble red flower picked and attached with dabs of clay to the walls of the shrine at Lalish during the spring festival,^{*103} or the color of bull's blood—or wine.^{†104}

Sultan Ezi is called "red" because the Yezidis believe Yazid was a redhead, with a pale yellowish freckled complexion. Another red angel is Sheikh Muse Sor, the Red Moses, "a Yezidi atmospheric deity controlling the winds and the air."²² He is invoked during threshing, for a breeze to separate grain from chaff (itself a quasi-alchemical operation):

O Red Shēxmūs [Sheikh Moses]

Give a great deal of wind,

Then we shall prepare for you red baked loaves.²³

These “loaves” are pancakes left near the threshing floor to thank the red god, who is also called *Sore Soran*, “Red of the Reds” (perhaps to differentiate him further from the blue that is the negative of red). As befits the Biblical Moses with his written tablets, Sheikh Muse Sor is a patron of the Adani clan who are allowed to read and write. The Ahl-i Haqq know him as Pir Musi, who is the angel Israfil or Raphael.

The bride in a Yezidi wedding wears a red veil.²⁴ Red manifests the life principle, like blood. In chapter 2 (“Cosmogony”), I mentioned red agate, which could be seen as a Yezidi version of the red/ gold Philosophers’ Stone. To understand this symbolism, we can turn to a non-Yezidi text by the Persian Shiite (Shaykhi) mystic Mohammed Karim-Khan Kirmani, *The Book of the Red Hyacinth*, as detailed in Henry Corbin’s Eranos lecture on “The Realism and Symbolism of Colors in Shiite Cosmology.”^{*105}

Color is not illusory. It exists already *in potentia* even in darkness. Contra Newton, colors are real *because* they are symbolic. Light *manifests* color; it does not *produce* it.²⁵ Light is the spiritual aspect—the angel—of color. No light without color, no spirit without body (including the subtle body)—this is the central alchemical principle.

For “saving the phenomenon” of color, there are several schemes:

FOUR ELEMENTS

white	water	touch
yellow	air	sound
red	fire	color
black	earth	taste

SEVEN LEVELS

white	world of Intelligence
-------	-----------------------

yellow	world of Spirit
green	world of Soul
red	world of Nature
ashen	world of Matter
dark green	world of the Image
black	world of the Material Body

FOUR PILLARS OF THE THRONE

white	world of Intelligence	Seraphiel
green (or black)	world of Soul	Azrael
yellow	world of Spirit	Michael
red	world of Nature	Gabriel ²⁶

Kirmanî and Corbin offer the following *ta'wil* or esoteric hermeneutic of the color red: The Creator creates a red hyacinth. Under his gaze, it melts and becomes Water. From its foam comes Earth, and from its vapor (air, mist) arises Heaven. The hyacinth symbolizes Nature, Water is its mother, Heaven its *mundus imaginalis*, and Earth its telluric mass—the world of bodies.²⁷ Red therefore epitomizes the whole alchemical process, and symbolizes its realization as the Elixir or Stone itself. Interestingly, for Kirmanî it also emblemizes the blood of the martyr Husayn, while for the Yezidis, it is the heraldic color of Caliph Yazid, who was implicated in Husayn's death (see chapter 11). On the esoteric level, might they share a secret sympathy or identity, as revealed by the red hyacinth? A strange idea!

Above all other colors, it would appear that the sacred color of Yezidism is black. As noted above, black is the sacred color of Shiism as well, and here again we get a hint of something paradoxical beneath the surface of the supposed anti-Shiism of Yezidism.

Spät hints at the existence in Yezidi lore of a “black star,”²⁸ and the Kurdish statesman Kamuran Ali Bedirxan (1895–1978) called it a black sun

(*soleil noir*)—yet another alchemical image we shall have to unpack.^{[*106](#)}
The idea of *luminous blackness* lies beneath the most important black object in Yezidism, the black *khirqe* or dervish cloak adopted (probably from the Adiwiyya) by the order of *feqirs* centered at Lalish. The origin of the *khirqe* is told in the “Hymn of Faith”:

Sultan Ezi brought forth pearls from the oceans
Sheikh Adi put them in the palm of his hand
From them he made the crown and the mantle, and the
luminous black *khirqe*.
He brought these forth and put them on himself.^{[29](#)}

In the “Hymn of the Black *Furqan*,” Sheikh Adi produces a number of these garments, and “By their light things were revealed before dawn”^{[30](#)}—like the colors that exist even in total darkness. The luminous black crown or headdress is worn by Adam as well as Adi. In the “Beyt of Mir Mih,” Fate asks a *feqir*:

Miserable one! What are you doing in Mecca and
Medina?
Your dress is the *khirqe*, you should be clad in the
black mantle
The crown on your head lights up
Yezidis do not make pilgrimage except to Lalish
the luminous,
and the seat of Mir Sherfedin.^{[31](#)}

Spät translates a “Hymn of the *Khirqe*” from the Kurdish of Bedele Feqir Heji:

Before the world existed
On that day the *khirqe* was already there

The *khirqe* was the garment of God itself (or alone) . . .

Khirqe is a cloth of Light (*nurani*)

It came forth from the treasury of power.³²

The *khirqe* is “baptized” with poplar and the water of the White Spring; it is the garment of Ezi the Red. It “is” the faith. In the “Hymn of Sherfedin” we learn that the *khirqes* are kept in “red and yellow boxes,” and “green and red boxes,”³³ suggesting Kirmani’s symbolism of Nature. Despite the hints of Eszter Spät,³⁴ I do not agree that the Yezidi black robe and crown can be equated with the Manichaean robe and crown of light. For Mani, light was *other* (alien) to matter, whereas for the Yezidis matter is (alchemically) “saved”—or redeemed, like Melek Ta’us—it is *coincident* with light. Thus: black light, luminous blackness. “The commoner (*mirid*, lit. ‘disciple’) has become a Prince dressed in Black,”³⁵ says the “Song of the Commoner.” Aside from rather dubious testimony that the Yezidi Mir is known as “the Black Pope,”³⁶ Sheikh Fekhr is genuinely dubbed “the black” in the “Hymn of the Lights.”³⁷ An entire hymn is devoted to “The Black *Furqan*” (see chapter 10, “Esoteric Antinomianism”), which may refer to the Black Book.^{*107} On a “dark morning” that is also “pleasant, red, proud and precious,” the speaker (Sheikh Fekhr) is given a “black line” of mystical text, summoning him to heaven, where (among other esoteric insights) it is revealed to him how Sheikh Adi caused dry land to appear out of the primordial waters of Creation:

My King threw rennet into the Ocean, the Ocean
coagulated

Smoke rose up from it

The four heavens were created with it.

Then Sheikh Fekhr asks: “With the help of which holy man did you invest the *khirqe*?” Sheikh Adi responds:

Sultan Ezi is my Pir of the *khirqe*

That is my creed and that of all believers
He is the light of both my eyes.

Sultan Ezi put his hand to the lamp of power, he
brought out a Pearl
Sultan Sheikh Adi placed it in his hand,
And produced from it the crown, the robe, and the
luminous *khirqes*.
They were given to Sheikh Adi's holy men
. . . By their light things were revealed before dawn.^{[38](#)}

We have already read in this hymn about the bees, the poplar, and the black sheep, all needed to produce the luminous black *khirqes*, dyed in the ceremonial color of power. Black seems to precede the other colors and produce them, as in the “Hymn of the Creation of the World”:

Black nights, dark nights
Everywhere flowers appeared from it^{[39](#)}

In the “Tale of Soltan Zeng,” Sheikh Mend, the snake angel, is called the “black star” that fell on Mosul and “turned it upside down” in order to rescue Sheikh Hesen.^{[40](#)} Iblis's embrace of the color is shown in Ayn al-Quzat's *Tamhidat*:

They said to Iblis, “Why do you not cast aside the black carpet of God's “curse” [Koran 15:35] from your shoulder?” He said:

I will not sell this carpet—I will not sell!
If I should sell it, my shoulder would be bare.^{[41](#)}

The Yezidis seem to have embraced the same curse. Their confidence in the color black is shown in “The Hymn of Ezdina Mir,” which begins with a whirl of color:

We divulged the hidden secrets through that
We made them from the colours red, white, green and
yellow
Through that we cut off the power of the Shari‘a.

In the end, however, the color black prevails:

We have entrusted ourselves to the colour black.
Black makes a good robe of honour, [although]
White is useful against all ills.⁴²

Aaron Cheak begins his essay on “The Perfect Black: Egypt and Alchemy” with two apt quotations:

The essence of darkness reveals itself to
Whoever looks at the sun

EGYPTIAN BOOK OF THE DEAD

The black color, if you follow me, is light of pure
Iipseity;
within this darkness is the Water of Life.

SHAMS AL-DIN LAHIJI’S COMMENTARY ON SHABESTARI’S ROSE
GARDEN OF SECRETS^{*108 43}

The word *alchemy* itself is often said to be the Arabic version of the ancient Egyptian word *khem*, “black earth”—that is, Egypt herself. It also relates to the Greek root from which we draw *chemistry*, and also to Chemmis (= Akhmim = Panopolis), home of Greco- Egyptian alchemy.^{†109} Plutarch gives *chemia* as not only “black land” but also “black (or pupil) of the eye,” which Cheak relates to alchemy very astutely. Following Schwaller de Lubicz, he quotes from Hermetic sources regarding a Greco- Egyptian tradition of “the perfect black (*teleio melani*),”⁴⁴ or as G. R. S. Mead calls it, “the Black [Rite] that gives perfection.”⁴⁵ In one sense this is

melanopsis or *nigredo*, the initial black stage of the work—*putrefactio*—followed by white, yellow, and purple/red (*iosis* or *erythrosis*).

However, there exists another way of looking at blackness, not just as the beginning of alchemy but as its “end,” its goal.⁴¹⁰ Thus in *Man of Light* Corbin discusses blackness from a rectified Gnostic or spiritual docetist perspective, in which one may speak of black as “light-without-matter,” antithesis of the Ahrimanic darkness.⁴⁶ This is not Gnostic dualism in the Manichaean sense, because the sensory is perceived “on the plane of the *mundus imaginalis*, the *imaginal* world wherein ‘what is corporeal becomes spirit and what is spiritual assumes a body’ (‘our method is that of alchemy,’ said Najm al-Din Kobra).”⁴⁷ Corbin’s Sufis (including Najm Razi and Alaoddowleh Semnani) speak of seven stages, each characterized by a color, of which the last is sometimes called *nur-i siyah*, black light; thus listed by Najm Razi:

White light	Islam
Yellow light	fidelity of faith (<i>iman</i>)
Dark blue light	benevolence (<i>ihsan</i>)
Green light	tranquility of soul
Azure blue light	firm assurance (<i>iqan</i>)
Red light	gnosis
Black light	passionate, ecstatic love ⁴⁸

When Lahiji said the Water of Life is found in darkness, he was no doubt referring to the legend of Alexander and Khizr, who voyage together to seven mystic lands of various colours (Nezami’s *Iskandernameh* is a lovely version). In the last stage, while Alexander is lost in the darkness, Khizr discovers the fountain of immortality and drinks. This symbolizes the *wahdat al-wujud* or Oneness of Being of Ibn Arabi and his school, but also the Elixir of alchemy. “As in Hermes’ vision, angelophany is associated with the symbol of the ‘midnight sun,’ of luminous Night, because the first Intelligence, the Angel-Logos, is the initial and primordial theophany of the *Deus absconditus*”⁴⁹—a perfect definition of Melek Ta’us!

Semnani wanted the final stage to be green, because it is the Muhammadan heraldic color (and also the color of the spagyric or vegetal stone of Paracelsus, based on herbs rather than metals). But Lahiji, as a Shiite, prefers black. (Green and black, as we recall, are interchangeable in Kirmani's system.) Utmost spiritual poverty, according to Lahiji, allows the mystic to say, "I am God" (as Sheikh Adi did), and this stage is Black Light. "How shall I find words to describe such a subtle situation? *Luminous Night, dark Middy!*"⁵⁰

The alchemical color stage of *Cauda Pavonis* is so named because it manifests in the alembic as a beautiful display of variegated iridescence like a metallic rainbow. Thus in Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeterna* (1602), the Work is emblemized by birds: raven for *putrefactio*, swan for *albedo*, phoenix for *rubedo*.^{*111}

Athanasius Kircher, *Ars magna lucis* (1665), assigns light (or sun) to the double-headed eagle, and the many colors (or the moon) to the peacock. Count Michael Maier, *Viatorium Oppenheim* (1618), depicts the peacock in company with the athanor or oven, along with the Green Lion (mentioned also in *Testament of Alchemy*), the eagle, the snake, the dragon, the raven, the swan, and the phoenix, each representing a stage or major ingredient of the Work.⁵¹

Jacob Boehme and his great illustrator D. A. Freher (in William Law's 1764 translation of the *Works of Boehme*) give two radically different interpretations to the peacock, which symbolizes "the night of decay," but is classically associated with Juno, who for Boehme is a "source spirit of the world of light."⁵² For the famous Basil Valentine, the *Cauda Pavonis* occurs under the rule of Venus in the sign of Libra;⁵³ it is this tradition that makes its finest artistic appearance in the exquisite manuscript of Salomon Trismosin's *Splendor Solis* (dated 1582), where each stage is depicted by an allegorical painting under the appropriate planetary sign.

In Trismosin's painting we see Venus arriving in her chariot attended by Cupid, drawn by two birds (wrynecks? hoopoes? parrots?). Around the peacock, we see a summery northern Italian landscape, possibly early in Libra (September). Figures in the landscape are enjoying the "good world" in innocent pleasures: lovers are strolling in the garden or dancing on the green to the music of viols and lute, while a family feasts and drinks wine at a table set out-of-doors under a hedge. Near them, an alchemical basin (a

bain-marie?) holds two pitchers—perhaps of *hippocras*, spiced wine punch—or is it alchemical sulphur and mercury?⁵⁴

The *Cauda Pavonis* is not considered the final stage of the Work, just as Melek Ta'us is not the highest god. Above the many-colored stage is that of the phoenix, the symbol of immortality attained through fire; and above Melek Ta'us is Khuda (or Yazata), the highest deity. But Melek Ta'us rules this world, and makes it good for his loyal adherents.



Figure 13. A detail from the *Splendor Solis* of Salomon Trismosin, circa 1535.

Call to mind the white Pearl
The pre-eternal Angel
The Mystery of Ezid.
Oh Sheykh Shems, at the assembly of Sultan Sheykh
Adi,
Give hope to your house, and also to us.
Call to mind the red Pearl
Ezdina Mir
The *qibla* of the full moons.
Oh Sheykh Shems, may our shouts and cries for
help come to the Angel on high.

Call to mind the yellow Pearl
Soil, Water, and Fire,
Earth, Heaven, and Stone,
Ezdina Mir and all Four Mysteries.
Oh Sheykh Shems, do answer the cries for help of
your house, and ours also.

THE EVENING PRAYER^{[55](#)}

It was April the seventeenth, the fourth of Nisan. Early as we rose, the Yazidi girls had been out on the hills before us to gather bunches of scarlet ranunculus, for no other flower is used for the feast. . . . Everyone was making and receiving gifts of hard-boiled coloured eggs. The favorite colour was orange, the bright vegetable dye which the women use for their hand-woven *mezyars*, but we also saw purple, green, and a madder colour produced by binding onion skins around the eggs when boiling them. None were blue, for blue is a forbidden color to Yazidis.

LADY DROWER ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE SPRING FEAST CELEBRATED
IN 1940 AT BASHIQA^{[56](#)}

Morienus, the Hermit of Jerusalem, to Khalid ibn Yazid ibn Mu'awiya: "The things in which the entire accomplishment of this operation consists are the red vapor, the yellow vapor, the white vapor, the green lion, ocher, the impurities of the dead and of the stones . . . " [57](#)

White vapor "Virgin's Milk"

Green Lion any dilute acid that would "devour" metals, typically forming green copper salts

red ocher fire

impurity of
the dead earth

Caesar to Ares: "Expound unto me concerning these colours which change from colour to colour: are they from one compound or from various compounds?"

Ares to Caesar: "Nay, from one compound and one thing; and as often as the fire gives it a new colour we give it a new name. . . . Then will appear the blossoms and the colours will change and the Elixir will clothe itself in the raiment of kings and make thy labours sweet."

TESTAMENT OF ALCHEMY [58](#)

The development of variety from unity is often symbolised by the image of many colours springing from white. The theme of the White Pearl acquiring colours is a common one in the *Qewls*. At an early stage of the transition, Paradise was "created many-coloured." Sultan Ezi's aid to a painter for whom he produced a thousand colours from a single one belongs to the "Time of Sheikh Adi" but aptly demonstrates the link between the ability to produce colours and supernatural creative powers.

KREYENBROEK AND RASHOW, *GOD AND SHEIKH ADI ARE PERFECT* [59](#)

God created belief
He gave it ninety-nine colours

PRAYER OF BELIEF

The angels fashioned the heavens and hells
To these they attached ninety-nine colours in all

PRAYER OF AGREEMENT⁶⁰

Amun-Re [the High God or Creator in Egyptian myth] hides in radiance,
not darkness:

I have seen by means of his circuit
his visible form did not shrink from my face
(namely) the one who sails within his eyes,
his radiant eye having clothed his *true* form.

FROM A SARCOPHAGUS OF THE 26TH DYNASTY⁶¹

“It is I who clothe with light all things possessing light. Every beautiful thing, everything gracious and brilliant, is raised by my art and by my work. That which I clothe with a part of my vestment realizes complete beauty and total lustre because my colour is the greatest, the most beautiful and the most lustrous of all colours.”⁶²

FROM THE BOOK OF THE SEVEN STATUES BY BALINAS (APOLLONIUS OF TYANA, D. CA. CE 97), TRANSLATED FROM GREEK INTO ARABIC BY THE ALCHEMIST JALDAKI (D. 1342), FROM ARABIC INTO FRENCH BY HENRY CORBIN, AND FROM FRENCH INTO ENGLISH BY AARON CHEAK



10

ESOTERIC ANTINOMIANISM

In 1597 there appeared the book known by the name of its author (Sharaf al-Din Khan Bedlisi) as the *Sherefnameh*, “Book of Glory,” sometimes called the “Chronicles of the Kurds,” wherein we read this early description of the Yezidis:

They believe falsely that Sheikh Adi has taken upon himself their duties to fast and to pray, and that on the day of resurrection they will be carried to heaven without being exposed to any punishment or any reproach. These Kurds have sworn hatred and the most implacable enmity against the virtuous sages of Islam.^{[1](#)}

Allowing for the author’s bias, these “charges” are simply true. The fascinating thing about Yezidism (and, from the Islamist point of view, the repugnant thing) is that it began as a pagan sect, then became a Sufi order, then deviated into heresy and ended in schism. It is not simply a non-Islamic religion; it is an *anti*-Islamic religion. It should be emphasized that Yezidism cannot be structurally compared with “Satanism” in the anti-Christian or anti-religious sense, because Yezidism does not view Melek

Ta'us (who is esoterically “the devil”) as a principle of evil. The *Meshef Resh* makes it clear that he is only considered evil by outsiders, but it appears to be the case that he is *beyond good and evil* because he rules this world without reference to the “slave morality” of monotheism. The world is good, for those who see it in the light of Lucifer. Now, “beyond good and evil” doesn’t mean *to do evil*—Nietzsche is firm about this, and only a fool of a Satanist would ignore it. The Yezidis and the “Satan worshippers” amongst the Ahl-i Haqq are free of what Nietzsche called “moralic acid.” In fact, Yezidi praxis is based on purity and decent behavior. To discover their inner, esoteric antinomianism, we must perform a hermeneutic unfolding of their texts; we must “trace them to their source” (*ta’wil*) in the mystical realization of what Rimbaud called *liberté libre*: “free freedom.” In doing so, I maintain, we will discover that their closest analogues in Occidental tradition are not Satanists but the Ranters and the Brethren of the Free Spirit.^{*112} The Yezidi “Declaration of Faith” (*Shehda Dini*) makes clear their refutation of Islam, both Shiite and Sunni; Moslems are called swine and heretics. “We have remained separate from the heretics, from the Shari’a,”² the Declaration states.^{† 113} The “Tradition” with which it is declared that “we have cast our lot” is not the Islamic Sunna (as Kreyenbroek sometimes seems to suppose) but Yezidism itself—and in the eschatological “Hymn of Sherfedin” this is made apparent:

When the Mehdi arises
Neither lords nor judges will remain.
On that day the community of the Tradition will be
comfortable.

The Tradition will be comfortable
To whom Melek Sherfedin shows his mercy and
benevolence
He will invest us with spiritual clothes.

A kind of utopia will come about on earth. The faithful will all be dressed as *feqirs* (in luminous black *khirqes*) and “will abolish laments and injustice from this world.”

In this same hymn, Sultan Ezi is chided for not doing what lies in his power:

Oh Sultan Ezi, you have the power to do it and you
are not doing it
You can raise Melik Sherfedin from the Cavern
You can make rebellious people obedient to him!³

The future king always sleeps in a cave. King Arthur, Emperor Frederick, King Sebastião of Portugal—an archetype perhaps originating in the Old Stone Age of the painted caves and the shamanism inherited from Neanderthal dreamers.^{*114} It is a prominent motif of the Yezidi hymn:

All nights, all days
The House of Tradition is free from sin, free from
guilt, sincere
This world is in the hands of the Shari‘a, for us it
has become a hell.

All nights, all days
The prayer of the House of Tradition is always:
Melek Sherfedin, come out of the Cave for us!⁴

“The Hymn of Mullah Abu Bekir” must be counted as one of the world’s most antinomian poems. Here again, the “Tradition” in question is not the Sunna but the Yezidi way:

We are wholly thankful
That we have stayed aloof from the Shari‘a
Praise be to God and thanks
That we have cast our lot with the Sheikh of the
Tradition.

We are grateful to the holy men
That they have stayed away from the pigs
Praise be to God and thanks
That we have cast our lot with the Sheikhs and
Pirs.

. . . .

I was taken to the realm of the robes
Mullahs and Sufis flocked to me
Saying: Didn't Mullah Abu Bekir become a
Muslim?
I said: No indeed, by God!

. . . .

I was taken to the long, far realm
There I abandoned religious salutations, fasting
and prayer
They caught hold of Mullah Abu Bekir's arm and
said: Come, tell the Truth!

So I come to affirm my faith in what is good
To paint the mosque with undiluted wine
Whilst explaining the truth of Sultan Ezi. [*115](#)

Any books they bring
They darken with stains of wine
At the head they put the name of Sultan Ezi, the
sweet, the noble

A hundred books, a hundred tomes
They gave into the hand of Mullah Abu Bekir in
large quantities
All went and sided with the wine stains.

It is a red and yellow book
I shall read it from beginning to end
The names of Sultan Adi and Sheikh Shems the
Tartar are in it.

I am a researcher of books
Going from place to place, I am Mount Qaf
I am the middleman for the House of Adi

They took me to the realm of the pure, deep ocean
The cup-bearer contemplates that ocean from
afar^{*116}
The diver in that ocean is the Forgiving Angel.⁵

The mixed prose and poetry “Tale of Soltan Zeng” is another compendium of anti-Islamic sentiment, in which Sheikh Hesên “abrogates Islam” and says the Yezidis have no need to visit Mecca—only Lalish.⁶ And in the “Hymn of the Black *Furqan*” it is said that Hell was made “for those who sin against the name of Tawusi Melek three times a day”—that is, faithful Muslims who curse Satan in their everyday prayers.⁷ (Incidentally, this verse proves that Melek Ta’us really “is” Satan—despite the cavils of certain scholars!)



Another contention with which I must respectfully disagree is that Yezidism can be categorized as a Gnostic dualist religion. Spät’s *Late Antique Motifs* certainly demonstrates rather conclusively that Yezidism was influenced by Gnostic *motifs*, but I contend that these are limited to mythemes and metaphors, and do not implicate Yezidism in any dualist disdain for the Creation or hatred of the body in a Manichaean (or Marcionite or even Valentinian) metaphysical sense. Like many Gnostics, the Yezidis reconsidered the role of the devil, but not in order to exalt him over a “stupid” Jehovah or Demiurge, or as a principle of uncreated immaterial spirit infinitely superior to fleshly creation. Superficially, one might mistake

Melek Ta'us for the Serpent of the Ophites, because their stories appear so similar. But Melek Ta'us presides precisely over a material world that is *good in itself*. The Black Snake represents the Peacock's Shadow (to borrow a Jungianism)—but the Shadow is integrated with the Self here, not alienated. Melek Ta'us is indeed beyond good and evil—but as the Creator's viceregent he bestows good on his devotees, and on the green world. Only his enemies see him as negative, because they have failed as mystics (i.e., as esoteric antinomians). Thus Khuda, the Creator God, is described as an ocean of “Light without beginning,” and as “perfect.” This god has gone into retirement, so to speak, and left governance of the world to his beloved angel, but remains the one true god; he is no Ialdabaoth. If this were not so, great mystics like al-Hallaj, or Sheykh Hesên, could not have been both divine and “part of this world,” as Pir Khidr Sileman told Kreyenbroek—though “even now the Yezidis are afraid to say such things openly.”⁸ In Gnostic religions the ocean hides the pearl, as matter hides the divine Spirit sunk in it; “great efforts must be made” to rescue it.⁹ In Yezidism, by contrast, the ocean nurtures the pearl and reveals it to the angels. The ocean is “positive.”¹⁰ Yezidism can most usefully be conceived as a dialectic *reversal* of Gnostic dualism.^{*117}

This world is a good world
Neither fear nor mercy has remained in the hearts
of the Mirids
We take refuge in Sultan Ezid.

HYMN OF THE CANDLE¹¹

Here we see that the Yezidi “yes” to the world is a Nietzschean affirmation, leaving no room for slave morality or pity in the degraded sense; Soltan Ezi is the obvious patron saint of this Dionysian attitude, and Yazid's wine is its inspiration:

What a wine!
Any creature that has a little of it
Gives his life and his house for it

In his eyes this world becomes a feast.

THE GREAT HYMN^{[12](#)}

In the “Hymn to Earth and Sky,” two halves of Creation debate about which has most honor. If Sky (as Spirit) should prevail (“You are impure, I am holy”) we might conclude that the hymn leans toward dualism—but Earth (as Body) puts up a powerful counterargument:

The sky says to the earth:

My origin and yours are from the same place.

We were created from one essence.

A (divine) gaze shows me compassion.

. . . .

On me one finds roses and lilies.

Peaches and camomile, willows, apples and olives

These also have flourished on me.

. . . .

You are my brother on high

Opposite me a flame becomes visible

On me one finds charm, benevolence and wine.^{[13](#)}

Heaven boasts of angels, but Earth claims to have angels as well, “roaming on the face of the earth.” Finally

The Sky says to its sister

God is both my and your witness

But I pity you, by God!

For your sake, oh Merciful One,

Earth and Sky came together

Like sister and brother.^{[14](#)}

Earth is to be pitied because it is the scene of tribulation—but it is not a lesser partner. In effect there takes place a *hierogamy*, as in alchemy, the same way in which yin and yang are both children of the Tao. (This is the secret of Egyptian pharaonic brother-sister marriage, and the incest of the Greek gods.)

Two opposing views of alchemy prevail in modern times. One (argued by Newman and Principe, admittedly with interesting results) is basically physical, and takes alchemy as the historical precursor to chemistry. The other view is spiritual and allegorical (Burckhardt), or psychological (Jung). Against both of these reductionisms, there persists the argument of alchemy itself—that it is both spiritual *and* physical. It is “at the moment of conjunction of that spirit with that body” that the wonders of the Work are seen.

But Morienus fell silent and, casting his gaze downward, reflected deeply for some time. Then he raised his head and spoke: “Truly, this matter is that created by God which is firmly captive within you yourself, inseparable from you, wherever you be, and any creature of God deprived of it will die.”^{[15](#)}

And in a separate dialogue (the Late Antique *Dialogue of Cleopatra and the Philosophers*):

Ostanes and those with him answered Cleopatra: “In this is concealed a strange and terrible mystery. Enlighten us, casting your light upon the elements. Tell us how the highest descends to the lowest and how the lowest rises to the highest, and how that which is in the midst approaches the highest and is united to it, and what is the element which accomplishes these things. And tell us how the blessed waters visit the corpses lying in Hades fettered and afflicted in darkness and how the medicine of Life reaches them and rouses them as if wakened by their possessors from sleep.”^{[16](#)}

This principle is Life itself, or in modern terms “negentropy,”^{[17](#)} and, as Ibn Umail said in *The Silvery Water* (known in Latin as the *Tabula chemica*):

“Nothing is commoner on earth than this mysterious thing.”¹⁸

In the radical monism of Yezidism, as with other antinomian sects such as the Ranters or Brethren of the Free Spirit, matter and spirit are one; they can be separated (*solve*) but also united (*coagula*), and this operation comprises the whole of alchemy. The precipitating substance is called rennet or leaven, as we have seen. Mixing the water of the White Spring with the dust of Adi’s grave produces the *berat*, the clay pellets which symbolize alchemical transmutation—that is, Creation itself. The leaven is love.¹⁹

Let us recall that Melek Ta’us has extinguished the fires of Hell with his tears,²⁰ and that “when Sheikh Adi came from Mecca, he told his followers in one of his sermons: “God commanded me to tell you that there is no need of prayer; believe in the power of Melek Tâ’ûs and ye shall be saved.”²¹ In *al-Jilwah*, the Angel says, “I participate in all the affairs which those who are without call evil because their nature is not such as they approve. . . . I allow everyone to follow the dictates of their own nature, but he that opposes me will regret it sorely . . . [and if] anyone obey me and conform to my commandments, he shall have joy, delight, and goodness.”^{*118 22}

In the “Hymn to Melek Tawus” we read “O my Lord . . . You are the desired, we are the desire.”²³ As Avicenna said in the *Recitals*, the principle that keeps the cosmic spheres in motion (generating Life) is *desire*, the longing of each archangel for the angel of the next higher sphere. Iblis eternally desires God, because Iblis lives in separation, not union; paradoxically, separation must be accounted the higher state. According to the Mamluk historian al-Maqrizi (d. 1442), “In the course of Time, the excesses (of the followers of Adi) increased to such an extent that they finally claimed that it was Sheykh Adi ibn Musafir who granted them sustenance, and that they often said, ‘We are not content with food that does not come from Sheykh Adi.’ . . . They neglected the prayers prescribed for day and night, saying ‘Sheykh Adi prays in our place.’ They declared forbidden sexual intercourse licit.”²⁴

Not all antinomianism has the same metaphysical justification or the same sexual code. Among Gnostic dualist tendencies there exists a strict “puritan” attitude of total abstention from carnality (invariably linking sex

and meat eating), as, for example, with the Cathar Perfecti—but the rank-and-file Cathar “Hearers” were free to marry and even reproduce, on the understanding that they were imperfect but would be reincarnated as Perfecti. (If any of the Troubadors were secret Cathars, by the way, this would be consistent with their cult of chastity, of loving their beloveds outside of marriage and without “union.”)

Other dualists have engaged in a full spectrum of sexuality (although often eschewing reproduction, on the grounds that it causes the exile of souls into flesh), because morality was, after all, empty of meaning in a world where escape from the world comprised the sole true “salvation.” Related to this idea is the doctrine of “exhaustion of sin”—the belief that all sin must be experienced in order to transcend it. This notion seems to have inspired the Carpocratean Gnostics of second-century Egypt, as well as later antinomians like the Russian Khlysty, and the much-maligned Rasputin. Most Christian Satanists are just mirror-images of these dualists, except that they embrace evil for its own sake. The Yezidis do not align with any of these.

Outside of religion per se, one might adopt antinomian-style libertine behavior out of Epicurean agnosticism, either in the restrained and sensible style of a Lucretius, or in the unrestrained and obnoxious style of de Sade, who would justify hurting others because it gives him or her pleasure to do so. I, personally, object to sadism, and in response to Max Stirner would insist that my freedom logically involves a “price,” which is the recognition of other people’s freedoms. Of course, I could declare war on all humanity, like the pirates—but then I must be prepared to bear the cost: a short life, and perhaps none too jolly after all.

If the Yezidis ever had an antinomian sexual code, it would have to have been justified by a radically *monist*, not a dualist, position. Reality is one, not two (as we learned from the “Hymn to Earth and Sky”). The dyad, like yin and yang, is reconciled on the higher level of the Tao, the “oneness of being” (Ibn Arabi’s *wahdat al-wujud*). The antinomian experiences this reconciliation not as a promise for the eschatological future (because this would mean “God is unjust” to *us*, who are not allowed to live in this future state) but as present reality: Paradise Now! This perspective is afforded by the central Yezidi mythos of Azazel’s reconciliation with Khuda, and the consequent “abolition of Hell.” We are (always) already free from sin. We

are (already) perfect—we *cannot* sin. A modern Yezidi is quoted: “We believe (Malek Ta’wus) is a proud angel who rebelled and was thrown into Hell by God. Now he is reconciled to God.” Asked if Melek Ta’us is good or evil, he answers, “He is both. Like fire. Flames can cook but they can also burn. The world is good and bad.”²⁵

The “justified” antinomian can of course fall into delusion, as in James Hogg’s dark masterpiece *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Not all Ranters and Brethren of the Free Spirit strike us as completely sane. (True undeceived *Übermenschen* are very rare, it seems.) Nevertheless, in historical moments of fervor and realization, such as the Nizari Qiyamat, or the early Fourierist movement, or May 1968, it is possible to glimpse the reality of antinomian claims. I believe that at one time the Yezidis experienced such a moment.^{*119} Later it must have faded and been replaced by taboos. But it left its unmistakable perfume behind it. This essay is my attempt to recover it, by means of exegesis of Yezidi myths, readings of the hymns, and *ta’wil* or esoteric hermeneutic of the *symbolique*.

If a distinction can be made between religious antinomianism and mystical antinomianism, it would be found in the existential experience or visionary subjectivity of the mystic, as opposed to the faith (or “mere belief”) of the religious exponent. I don’t know if theory can be distinguished from practice here:

It has been said that one of the Sheikhs (probably Baba Sheikh) at a certain time brings water in closed vessels while the commoners bring roosters covered with handkerchiefs. Afterwards that Sheikh recites a certain secret incantation and the water in the vessels reportedly boils and every Yezidi present shakes his shirt and utters “I have been clean(s)ed of any sins,” and then they dance and rejoice.²⁶

It seems to me that “belief” in a state of liberation from “sin”—as a matter of theological certainty—would necessarily be difficult to distinguish from a psychological certainty at the deepest level of conviction. To act on the mere supposition that one has been “saved” would lead either to disillusionment or to experiential certitude—but finally even the simplest existentialism would seem to lead inexorably to a *participation* in the

mystical antinomian state; the “leap” to commitment and its performance would either fail or succeed, and if it succeeded it would *feel* indelible. One sees the water boiling—or not. There exists no in-between state.

Sheikh Erebeg Entush is not identified by Kreyenbroek, but he has a hymn named after him,²⁷ and it can serve as a primer on the whole phenomenon of esoteric antinomianism. It begins by criticizing the “heedless” who remain adamantly blind to “the Mystery” (*Sur*, the Angel)—or “the Mystery did not see them”²⁸—which makes sense, since the realization of a mystery must be reciprocal. But if gold is thrown in the fire it is not consumed, only changed in shape; similarly, the true mystic is already alchemically perfect, and only needs heat in order to melt.

Verse 6 addresses the “People of the Book,” and asks “Who was it who made the daughter licit to the father?”

Before he (began to) speak,
It was Adam who made the daughter licit to him.
He embraced her with lion-like vigour.

I dare not say it.
If I say that it is a custom from before Adam’s
time
I shall be stoned.²⁹

We have already seen that *pre-Adamite time* is a guarded mystery in Yezidism. Here we realize it as a “Golden Age” like Saturn’s, when the concept of “sin” is not known. Adam inherits this “time” as his birth-right, despite the intervention of religion and its new dispensation—but he cannot reveal the secret openly.

Kreyenbroek in a note suggests that, like ancient Zoroastrians, the Yezidis may once have considered consanguineous unions licit, although one of his informants “confidently claimed that the text must be a forgery.”³⁰ Metaphysically (though not in practice), incest is an antinomian act because it symbolizes divine unity, and because it is practiced by “the gods” while being forbidden to mere mortals. Ergo, humans who practice it

would achieve apotheosis. It may be that the religious forbidding of certain forms of sexuality was the original move in the ideologization of Stone Age spirituality into a control mechanism for the emergent State. This would explain the myth of the Saturnian Age (whether in Hecataeus or Hesiod, Macrobius or Ovid), and the Hyperboreans who knew no form of repression. Under classical paganism, the Saturnalia makes a periodic reappearance as “pagan license,” and a *sign* that the original freedom has not (yet) been erased from human possibility.

Turning back to the “Hymn of Sheikh Erebeg,” we hear:

Eighty thousand trials and tribulations will come
upon you each day
(But) do not look with envy at the house of the
Shari‘a. . . .

When the (followers of the) Shari‘a are present,
(there is) disgust and blame.
They are the enemies of the Sultan.
On the Last Day, that mill will grind their blood.

One day there will be a call.
The (followers of the) Shari‘a will be left naked
and wailing.
Heaven preserve us from those swine.

The pig itself is a good creature.^{[*120](#)}
It is morning, the sun is coming up.
It, too, generously bears witness to the name of
God.^{[31](#)}

This is the same hymn that tells us the hashish smoker is “free of rancor and disgust.” But hope is to be found only in the family of Adi, Sheikh Mend, and Shems the Tartar, true intercessors, lords of “the dark Mysteries.”

In our following chapters on the life, legend, and literary works of Caliph Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya, much use will be made of the long “Story of the Appearance of the Mystery of Ezi” as a hagiographical source—but here I want to make use of one anecdote from it as an illustration of my “antinomian” thesis. Certain figures in Yezidism carry more of this teaching than others, and it is Ezi/Yazid in his angelic manifestation and his historical being who exemplifies the heroic aspect of the Yezidi revolt against Islam—Yazid, who “abrogated Islam” and “gave us permission to drink wine.”

In the story, Yazid’s father Mu‘awiya, in consultation with the religious jurists of Damascus, resolves to “throw (Yazid) into the sea” in order to punish his apostasy. But Yazid preempts them:

Sultan Ezi took his friends away
He put them in the middle of the ocean
He set up a tent, pulling the tent ropes taut
And placed the tambourines and singers inside.³³

An orchestra of “124,000 strings” entertained these rebels, and “golden shining flasks of pure wine” circulate joyfully.

So Mu‘awiya and the jurists nominated the Qazi (judge) to remonstrate with Yazid. With as many Qur’ans as he could hold under his arm, the Qazi went down to the sea, followed by a crowd of curious Damascenes. Ezi cheerfully invited him to join the revels. “But how can I reach you?” said the Qazi. “I dare not enter the water!”

Ezi said: “Say: By the power of God and Sultan Ezi!” The Qazi did so, and at once a pod of whales appeared, forming a living bridge to Ezi’s floating tent.^{*121} The Qazi passed over in safety, and at once began to upbraid Yazid for drinking wine.

“Suppose,” said Yazid, “I put a single droplet of wine on my little finger-nail. You drink it, and then tell me whether I should ever indulge in wine again. If you forbid it, I will abstain. I wonder if this droplet will suffice to cheer you up!” The Qazi agreed, and licked the wine from Yazid’s finger. At once

The Shari‘a judge yelled and shouted
He said: Brothers, drink, it is lawful!
It is sweet to the heart, and a little bitter on the
tongue.

The Shari‘a judge no longer reads papers
He has become a member of this group of friends
He has become a dancer at the feast.

The Shari‘a judge abandoned all his papers
He tore them all to shreds
He threw them into the ocean.

. . . .

The judge became a dancer and danced
He became a diver and dove
The Shari‘a judge became an initiate of that
mystery.

Sultan Ezi changed the cup of the Shari‘a judge
He adorned it with colours
He let it go round under the ocean.^{[34](#)}

Eventually the judge receives a vision of Ezi, clad entirely in red (the color of the Philosophers’ Stone).

Modern secularized inhabitants of a disenchanted universe may wonder how Rabelais, for example, can exalt wine into a principle of what he calls “Pythagorean” (i.e., Hermetic) wisdom. It may seem a bit blasphemous to attribute an *entheogenic* quality to wine in a Christian/ alchemical context, given the doctrine of transubstantiation (i.e., transmutation) of wine into the blood of a god—too Dionysian! But quite appropriate, at least for Rabelais.

In the Islamic context, wine gets its entheogenic “kick” from a dialectical drama: it is forbidden, hence desired. As the Qur’an states

(37:47), in Paradise it will be allowed, and will cause no hangover—surely a characteristic of a good psychedelic high. Sufi poets play with this imagery, but the official story holds that Sufi wine is strictly metaphorical. Of course this isn't so. Princes have always given themselves permission to drink, and Sufis are princes of the Unseen. The secret of Yezidism is that the *forbidden is allowed* when understood in its mystical truth. Inner becomes outer for the liberated antinomian. Wine is a sacrament because everything has been made “lawful” to esoteric consciousness. The *materia prima* of alchemy, as the *Testament* reveals, is Life itself. And all that lives is holy.



11

LEGEND AND LIFE OF THE CALIPH YAZID IBN MU'AWIYA

The Yezidi version of the Legend of Yazid can be gleaned from two texts translated by Kreyenbroek: “The Story of the Appearance of the Mystery of Ezi,” and “The Great Hymn,” a long poem.¹ I have already quoted many lines from these works, so here I’ll use the plot summary given in Spät’s *Late Antique Motifs*, which quotes Kreyenbroek and Rashow throughout—although it is difficult to resist the temptation to reproduce the entire thirty pages from Kreyenbroek and Rashow, especially “The Story,” which is a masterpiece of mixed esotericism and humor, rare in mystical literature.

Spät begins her summary by emphasizing the doctrine that the historical Yazid was “the physical manifestation of the *sur* . . . of Ezi, that is, Sultan Ezi, God.”² Thus he occupies the same rank for the Yezidis as Imam Ali does for extremist Shiites (such as the Ali-Ilahi) who consider him to be an “incarnation” (*hulūl*) of Allah—of course a rank heresy from the point of view of mainstream Islam, whether Sunni or Shiah. It might be said that

Yazid manifests the “Christic principle” for his followers, and “is” in a sense Jesus. But he

appears in Yezidi mythology as a subverter of soulless Islamic Shariya, and a true Yezidi leader, who turns people from Islam back to the true religion. According to Feqir Haji, Yezid was conceived when at the order of God the *sur* “entered the body of his mother,” the ninety-year-old wife of Mu‘awiya, who turned into a fourteen-year-old virgin on her wedding night. “Ezid himself was *sur*, *sur*, which came down from the sky.” The *qewl* and the *chirok* or “tale” on the birth and deeds of Yezid attribute a great importance to the *sur*. Mu‘awiya chases away his wife, Mehwer, when he realizes she is carrying a being of *sur*, who will turn away people from Islam:

When Sultan Ezi appeared in his mother’s body The mystery
(*sur*) became apparent to Mu‘awiya Mu‘awiya was
overcome with fear.

Thus Yezid’s mother was abandoned in the desert carrying the “mystery (*sur*) of Sultan Ezi.” The daughter of the judge of Basra, a most pious and devoted maiden, always performed her prayers to “Tawusi Melek and to the Lord of Mystery (*sur*)” “on rooftops and hills, so she would be able to see the mystery (*sur*) as soon as it arrived.” Then, one day, she saw the pregnant Mehwer riding nearby toward the city with light shining on her forehead, and she realized at once that the other woman was the bearer of the *sur*. She took her home to Basra, and that very night all domestic animals in Basra gave birth to two female young, and all pregnant women had twin sons, a miracle due to the presence of the *sur*. Once grown, Yezid goes to Damascus to confront his father and Islam and introduces himself saying, “I am light, my essence is light. . . . It is I, and my sweet name is Sultan Ezi.” Then, he goes on to perform a number of miracles, including turning the river into wine, through his *sur*, bemusing the Muslim population of the city, and finally turning them away from Islam (back) to Yezidi faith. Both the hymn and the

chirok repeatedly emphasize that Yezid is the *sur* of Sultan Ezi, manifestation of the Mystery (*sur*) of Truth.³

This version of Yezid's nativity (as summarized by Spät) retains the motif of the elderly bride made young, as in *Meshaf Resh* (see above chapter 2, "Cosmogony"). There is no shaving of Muhammad's head, nor any licking of his blood. Instead, Mu'awiya is stung by a scorpion at the beginning of "The Story of the Appearance of the Mystery of Ezi," and this is the reason he must get married: to save himself from its toxin:

Mu'awiya went to the house of doctors, saying
Bring me a medicine for this pain

The doctors said:
Mu'awiya, find yourself a wife!

Mu'awiya said:
The wife I take shall be like this
She will be too old to move about
So that she will not bear a child.⁴

As I've said elsewhere, esotericism is always a matter of toxins. Some poisons kill you, and some make you temporarily a god. In this case, the poison (*pharmakon*) itself becomes the god—rejuvenating the bride and engendering Sultan Ezi, the *Sur*, the Mystery dressed in red, who says:

I am light, my essence is light
I make the cup go round, (full) of pure wine
It has been promised that, in the City of Damascus, I
shall abrogate
Writing, books, tracts and scripture.

What a happy morning!⁵

While Yazid is still a child, the mullahs wish to instruct him in the Qur'an—but his mother says: “He has no need of the knowledge of the Qoran, but you should do as you wish.” Soon, Ezi pronounces wine to be “lawful,” and the mullahs are mortified, asking Mu'awiya “How can your son be a libertine?”⁶

The incident of the dyer who is told to invoke Ezi's name over his dye pots is now inserted in the story; each single color is transmuted into “a thousand and one colors”—but Sultan Ezi says:

Dyer, you mustn't shout out the mystery
What you gather for yourself, you keep to yourself
Until the hour when you surrender your soul.⁷

But the dyer can't help announcing “the esoteric truth,” that is, the *Cauda Pavonis*, and as a result he is persecuted by Mu'awiya. At this point Ezi performs the miracle of turning the river to wine,^{*122} and pitching his tent on the surface of the “sea” (meaning perhaps the river). The Qazi tastes the wine and converts to Yezidism, and Mu'awiya capitulates and bestows the Caliphate on Yazid.

The cosmic Ezi/Yazid has always existed, and even in the time of Adam already appeared on Earth as “half angel and half man.” Because he was “unable to marry a mortal's daughter” he was presented by Melek Ta'us with a houri of Paradise, and from this union sprang the Yezidi race. Alternatively, the Yezidis descend from Adam's male progeny, but the religion was later reformed by Yazid, after he studied religion with Sheikh Adi.⁸ Moreover, the *mirs* (or emirs) of the Yezidis claim direct descent from Yazid, and have a generalized tree to prove it.⁹

Another major source for the lore of Sultan Ezi is “The Hymn of the Thousand and One Names,” whose title plays the ninety-nine-plus-one names of Allah against the *Thousand and One Nights*. Ezi knows the number of “the masses of water in the ocean”—that is, he can elucidate the esoteric inwardness of the Ocean of Gnosis, telling how many fins the Fish

has (seventy-two), how many angels on the Bull's head (seven), and so on.¹⁰ “The Pearl developed waves”: unity differentiated itself. The singer of the hymn says:

I was with some who went stealing
I was with some who shouted
I was with some who said a theft is taking place
there^{*123}

Oh Sultan Ezi, you yourself are the wind. . . .
You cause the clouds to drift
You cause the rain to fall
You cause the great oceans to coagulate
You set the world in motion
You are religion and faith to us
If only I could have a soul
To which you would give, and from which you would
not take!¹¹

“Sultan Ezi is Lord of the Cup” that is handed down from saint to saint. He is “in keys and boxes,” with grooms and brides, with Christian archbishops, and priests, with prisons and prisoners, markets and grocers. His legend intertwines with the mystical praxis of the *feqirs*, the dervish-order within Yezidism, both symbolically and through practical association. For instance, the cord the *feqir* must wear around his neck at all times is called “the chain of Yazid.” According to some Yezidis, the head of the order (known as the *Kak*, or “guide”) resides in Syria near Aleppo in total seclusion at a shrine in which Yazid is said to have lived for some time.¹² Yazid himself is one of the figures who are believed to be the messiah, and “will return to Earth” some day;¹³ sometimes he is even called God, or Melek Ta’us.¹⁴

“Follower of Yazid” is one definition of a Yezidi. In the rite of baptism—always in water of the White Spring—a *feqir* blesses the baby with the

formula “You have become a lamb of Yazid; may you be a martyr for [or *witness to?*] the way of Yazid.” The “lamb” symbol befits the oral tradition that Yazid “is” Jesus Christ,¹⁵ and so do the allusions to Jesus’s nativity and infancy in “The Story of the Appearance of the Mystery of Ezi.” Yazid has three resting places (at least!): an authentic one, about which more anon, a false one in Damascus, and an “imaginal” one in Lalish, near Sheikh Adi.¹⁶

For a more “historical” (or historicist) view of Yazid we turn to the major study, *Le Califat de Yazid Ier* by Henri Lammens, S. J. Basing his work on primary sources, the Jesuit scholar published it serially in *Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale* over the years 1910–1914, and in 1921 it was published in Beirut as a single collected volume by Imprimerie Catholique.^{*124}

According to Lammens, a badly attested hadith recounts that one day the Prophet met Mu‘awiya in a Meccan street, leading a donkey which carried the infant Yazid—and he cursed them! The story is impossible, given that Yazid was born after Muhammad’s death.¹⁷ Later, Yazid would be called the “Pharaoh of Islam,”¹⁸ which resonates interestingly with al-Hallaj’s later claim that “Pharaoh” was one of his teachers.

Yazid’s mother was Maysun, a Christian (and a poet) of the Kalb tribe who were prominent in north Syria (and this union is tied by some to Mu‘awiya’s “tribalist” approach to the Caliphate and its removal to Damascus). Yazid’s birth date is uncertain, but he seems to have been “less than forty” when he died in November of 683.¹⁹

Later in his life, Yazid established horse races in Huwwarin (eighty miles from Damascus on the edge of the desert), where he had spent his childhood and where he would die. He often held court there. He also loved Sinnabra, a winter resort founded by his father near Tiberias.²⁰ Yazid went for the medicinal baths, in the company of his favorite son, Khalid the future alchemist.²¹ Could one of these towns possibly be the site of the shrine later devoted to Yazid by the Yezidi *feqirs*? (How I would like to make an expedition to Syria to find out!)

Yazid’s reputation is tainted by Shiite blame for the death of Husayn, and even the Sunnis find him an embarrassment (except for fanatical Salafis on the Internet who approve of his aggression against Ali’s followers!). But during his lifetime he had been admired. The poet al-Akhtal (admittedly a

paid panegyrist) called him a trustworthy man, loved by his friends, who never hid himself away when one demanded his affection. Lammens compiled this physical description and character sketch from various contemporary sources. Yazid had a “swarthy complexion, eyes very black, thick crinkly hair, a strong figure, altogether handsome despite a few traces of smallpox.”^{*125} From Mu‘awiya and his grandmother he inherited corpulence, long tapered fingers, and a large head, signs (so the Arabs believed) of a disposition to eloquence, which was hereditary in the Umayyad family. And Yazid was one of the five best orators of the Quraysh.²²

G. R. Hawting’s *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article on Yazid mentions several leading figures who saw him in a positive light, as a righteous caliph and even as “King of the Holy Land” after his father, and quotes the praise of *The Byzantine-Arab Chronicle of 741*, which says that Yazid “never . . . sought glory for himself by virtue of his royal rank but lived as a citizen along with all the common people.”²³ This was praise from the enemy, to be sure: the Byzantines were subject to raids during Mu‘awiya’s caliphate, and Yazid participated in them, at least occasionally. In 668, after the assassination in Sicily of the emperor Constans, a Byzantine general in northeast Anatolia called Sapor (a Persian name) conspired with Yazid’s father Mu‘awiya and invited the Arabs to support his bid for the throne. In Chalcedon (Kadiköy) on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus, the Umayyads were halted by winter, hunger, and disease. The caliph proposed sending relief. Guest says: “His son Yazid, twenty-six years old and newly married, reportedly expressed his unconcern in a poem:

Stretched softly upon rugs at Deir Morran,
emptying the morning cup
with Omm Kolthum beside me

What care I, forsooth, about the
poxes and fevers that waste
our troops at Chalcedon?”²⁴

However, the following year an enthusiastic Islamic army set out for Chalcedon, with Yazid at their head. Arab historians report they reached the walls of Constantinople, but were unable to carry out a successful incursion,

so they lifted the siege and withdrew after some weeks, laden with booty.²⁵ Yezidi legend, on the other hand, claims that Yazid *did* conquer the city that became Istanbul almost a millennium later.

Mu'awiya's long reign ended with his death in 680. Yazid then began his own short reign. Guest sums up his character:

[H]e enjoyed the pleasures of music and wine and the company of poets and artists, Christian as well as Moslem. . . . Skilled with horses, dogs, falcons and cheetahs, he loved to hunt gazelle, often accompanied by his pet monkey. But with all these qualities, he lacked the stuff to rule; indeed Gibbon calls him "a feeble and dissolute youth."²⁶

Certainly Yazid had detractors in his lifetime. A delegation from Medina to the caliph's court in Damascus returned with this report: "We have come from a man who has no religion, who drinks wine, who plays lutes, who passes his time with songstresses, who plays with dogs and spends his evenings talking to robbers and young men. We ask you to bear witness that we repudiate him." One member of this delegation, Mundhir ibn al-Zubayr (who later supported his brother Abdullah's uprising against the Umayyad Caliphate) said: "By God! Yazid made a gift of a hundred thousand dirhams to me but what he did to me does not prevent me from telling you about him; I will speak truthfully about him. By God! He drinks wine and gets so drunk that he misses the prayer." Al-Tabari, who reports the tale, goes on: "Al-Mundhir vilified him with not only similar vilifications but also harsher ones than the ones made by his companions." "O God," Yazid said, when al-Mundhir's backbiting remarks were repeated to him, "I treated him praiseworthily and generously. Then he did what you (God) have seen. Remember him for lying and disruption of relations."²⁷

When the Umayyad garrison in Medina was first attacked by rebels and besieged in their headquarters, they sent a letter to Yazid in Damascus begging for aid. The letter-bearer later told: "I took the letter and went with it till I reached Yazid. He was sitting on a chair with his feet in a brass basin filled with water, he was experiencing pain in them. It is said that he had gout. He read it, and then, as we have been informed, he recited [a verse which may have been proverbial]: "They have changed the clemency that

was part of my nature / Therefore I have substituted harshness toward my people for gentleness.”²⁸

Another reason for disliking Yazid seems to have been his favoring of Christians. His minister Sarjun, a Christian who had served Mu‘awiya, became his chief drinking companion.^{*126 29} Lammens also comments on his “preference for Christians”³⁰—very interesting, given the strong Christian influence on Yezidism we have already noticed. Lammens (who is generally pro-Yazid) also notes his reputed generosity, literary taste, liberality, dislike of ostentation, and affability. Yazid is cursed, he points out, for “wearing of silk [a violation of Sunna], love of wine, tolerance and open-mindedness,” and calls him “a bedouin lord mislaid on the Throne of the Caliphs.”³¹

“Intelligent, a brilliant talker, heart and hand always open, Yazid inherited the family charm from his father. In less troubled times he could have won over all his subjects, as he was already the idol of the Syrians. . . . [His enemies in Medina] insisted on the scandal of his behavior: incestuous, a musician, keen hunter, keeper of monkeys and a pack of hounds, addicted to wine.”^{*127 32}

The historian al-Mas‘udi says Yazid was the first (in the Islamic era, he means) to have music performed in Mecca and Medina.³³ Another scandal: he loved cock-fighting, which was strictly forbidden.³⁴ He had fighting cocks that could “tear the head off a dog.”

There were even eunuchs at Yazid’s court. Of course, centuries later, eunuchs were to play a big role in Islamic affairs of state; until recently there lived a corps of holy eunuchs who guarded the Prophet’s tomb in Medina. But in these early days their proximity to the caliph was outrageous.

We can easily understand how Yazid was felt to be objectionable enough as a ruler to provoke revolts; but then, so was Imam Ali, who was actually overthrown, and is still venerated by his adherents of the Shiah. Ali’s sons also had claims on the Caliphate—claims of piety, ability, and above all blood: as grandsons of the Prophet (by Ali’s wife Fatima, Muhammad’s daughter) they were felt by many Muslims to be the legitimate successors. They were also of Quraysh, and belonged to the same clan as the

Umayyads. In 680, the first year of Yazid's rule, the Alids of Kufa invited Husayn to accept their support in a rising against Umayyad hegemony, and Husayn left Medina with a small band of supporters. On his way to Kufa, he was surrounded at Karbala by an army under Yazid's governor of Iraq, Ubaydallah ibn Ziyad, on Ashura, the tenth of Muharram (October 10, 680). In a sense, this was the founding event of Shiism as a separate sect: Husayn and his followers were slaughtered and his family captured and taken to Yazid in Damascus. These acts have been reenacted and/or commemorated every year since then; in Pakistan and Iran in the 1970s I witnessed the ritual processions with dramatic self-flagellation, the sessions of ritual weeping, the passion plays, and so forth, which have kept fresh the memory of the tragedy of Karbala for over a millennium.

It is clear that Yazid ordered the suppression of Husayn's rebellion. It is not clear that he ordered the massacre. When a messenger came to report to him an account of the battle, he was, according to a report in al-Tabari, horrified: "'Woe upon you!'. . . Yazid's eyes filled with tears and he said, 'I would have been satisfied with your obedience without killing al-Husayn. May God curse [his killers]. By God! If it had been I who accompanied him, I would have let him off. May God have mercy on al-Husayn.' Yazid gave the messenger nothing."³⁵

When the severed heads of Husayn and his followers were brought before Yazid, he showed remorse, and protected Husayn's son Ali and his daughter Fatima. He invited young Ali to dine with him and his own favorite son Khalid, and told him he would have spared Husayn's life. He gave his protection to the whole family. One of the women (Husayn's young and spiritual daughter, Sukayna) said, "I never saw a man who did not believe in God who was better than Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah"³⁶—in Lammens's translation, *le plus chevaleresque des infidèles*.³⁷

Not all stories report Yazid's behavior as commendable. According to one, when Husayn's head was sent to him in Damascus, he poked it with his cane.^{*128} Al-Tabari says he recited this verse:

[Swords] split the skulls of men who are dear to us
but they were more disobedient and oppressive.³⁸

This anecdote also conflicts with the report of Yazid's tears. But Lammens explains that it was Ubaydallah ibn Ziyad who did the poking at Karbala, and that the whole scene was transferred to Damascus by Shiite authors.³⁹

In the next chapter's translations of Yazid's poetry (selection 3) there is an anecdote of Yazid and Husayn meeting in Medina as youths. Yazid teases Husayn, who is pious and naive, and tries to trick him into tasting wine—but Husayn forgives him. No one, as far as I know, has before suggested that *on the esoteric level* a strange quasiidentity seems to pervade or underlie the superficial enmity of Yazid and Husayn. I am reminded of the recently rediscovered Gospel of Judas, in which the supposed betrayer of Jesus appears as the closest disciple of the Savior (a typical Gnostic paradox). Jesus secretly asks to be betrayed because he knows he must be unjustly sacrificed to save humanity. The kiss of Judas is also the kiss of Jesus. Of course there is no comparable apocryphon in mystical Shiism or in Yazidi tradition (as far as I know). Nevertheless, there seem to exist hints of a *coincidentia oppositorum*. Yazid and Husayn appear almost as mirror images of each other: reversed, but reflected. A strange notion, no doubt—but I feel rather haunted by it.

The other major revolt against Yazid was launched in Arabia by Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr, a nobleman of the Hijaz who declared himself Caliph in 683. In a dramatic speech in al-Tabari, Abdullah declared the Umayyads inferior to the Husayn whom they had killed:

“Should we accept their covenants? No! We do not regard them as worthy of that. Indeed, by God, they killed a man who stood in prayer at night for long hours, who fasted frequently during the day, who had more right to govern than they did, and one who was more entitled to it in terms of religion and outstanding merit. Indeed, by God, he would never exchange the Qur'an for singing, nor would he exchange weeping out of fear of God for such [chanting], nor would he exchange fasting for drinking forbidden drinks, nor would he exchange gathering in religious groups to remember God for rushing off in pursuit of game.” He was alluding to Yazid.^{*129 40}

Ibn al-Zubayr's stronghold at Mecca was besieged and bombarded by Umayyad catapults, and on October 31, the Kaaba was actually set on fire. But the uprising was to outlive Yazid, who died at Huwwarin in Syria in 682 or 683. After a period of disorder, the Caliphate passed from Yazid's Sufyanid branch of the House of Umayya to the branch headed by Marwan I.⁴¹ (Khalid ibn Yazid was offered the caliphal throne, but wisely refused it and retired to study alchemy and astrology.)

Wellhausen passes along an anti-Umayyad legend of the siege. Yazid had a chain of silver made and sent to Ibn al-Zubayr in Mecca, as a coded message to surrender. Ibn al-Zubayr says to the messenger, "What have I to do with thee? I am but a dove of the doves of the sanctuary; wilt thou kill such a dove?"

The messenger bends his bow and aims the arrow at one of the doves of the Kaaba, saying, "Dove, does Yazid drink wine? Say yes and I will shoot!" Then, according to legend, Yazid's Syrians set fire to the Kaaba, whereupon the holy stone burst and became black.^{†130}

Different sources give different death dates for Yazid, and varying ages: November 11, 683 at thirty-eight or thirty-nine years old, or November 21, 682, aged thirty-five.⁴² Lammens thinks he may have reached forty-three.⁴³ It is alleged that he fell from his horse, drunk, during a hunt—or died of a heart attack, or of pleurisy. Shiites imagined an especially baroque end for him: spontaneous combustion! All sources agree he died at Huwwarin, two days north of Damascus toward Homs. Ibn Arada said he died tranquilly in his bed:

You Bani Umaiya, the last of your rulers
is a corpse in Huwarin, there at rest for ever.
Fate overtook Yazid with a beaker
by his pillow and a brimming wine-flagon.⁴⁴

A century later one Abu Hamza, a Meccan polemicist, recalled:

Yazid, friend of drink, friend of falcons and leopards, Yazid, friend of the hunt, companion of monkeys! Criminal! He opposed the Koran in his attachment to soothsayers. For a companion he chose an ape, and abandoned himself to his passions till his last breath. Allah curse and damn him!⁴⁵

Al-Mas‘udi quotes an anonymous satire on the monkey, whose name was “Abu Qais”:

Hold tight, Abu Qais, to the reins
of your mount—nothing else
keeps you from a fall
Come see the monkey on his she-ass
outrunning the steeds of the
Commander of the Faithful! ⁴⁶

Yazid himself is said to have composed an elegy for the monkey, because it was Abu Qais who died from a riding accident—or perhaps *Yazid* died by falling from his horse while racing against the monkey on its ass.⁴⁷

Yazid’s sons included Mu‘awiya Abu Layla, who was supposed to have succeeded him but died young, the alchemist Khalid, and another named Abu Sufyan. The mother of these was Umm Khalid. Marwan, a champion horseman and archer, was the son of Yazid’s wife Umm Kulthum. Other sons were born to various concubines, including Omar (killed by a lightning bolt), Abu Bakr (a gourmand), Abd al-Rahman (pious and generous), and several more of whom nothing much is related.⁴⁸

Khalid was present at Yazid’s death and said the prayers.⁴⁹ Al-Akhtal (a Christian poet) composed this elegy:

Console yourselves, dwell steadfast, O
descendants of Harb—who here below is
promised immortality?

I swear by Him in whose Name one halts in the
valley of Jam‘^{*131}

You have come to render your last greetings to a
prince to be mourned

The tomb dug by you will carry an incomparable
generosity, munificence and steadfastness

Fearsome we found him to enemies—beloved and
honored by his subjects

Loyal, inspiring confidence—no one could fear his
measure or the rightness of his intentions

The enemy henceforth lives free of fear—Those of
good will are struck by loss

Pray God to raise up amongst you a support for the
friends of religion

and reestablish your caliphate with a new splendor
as refuge against the surprises of chance, to restore
the perspectives of happiness and well-being

The caliphate of your Lord! intrepid Lions! Keep
watch as in the past over this privilege.

Your elders will train the youth until such time as
all opposing parties let down their arms and
accept their subjugation

This heritage Yazid received from his father—
receive it, O Mu‘awiya, from the hands of
Yazid.⁵⁰

Standard panegyric fare, to be sure—but still rather touching, I think.

Just as many members of Ali’s family were exalted as Imam or Mahdi or Caliph by the Shiites, each with their own sect or following, so too extremist heterodox Sunnis have been known to hive off interesting cults. A cult of Yazid arose not long after his death, or so we learn from a *Treatise on the Licitness of Cursing Yazid* attributed to Ibn al- Jawzi.⁵¹ If this cult

expected Yazid's return, its was not recorded. Field mentions a Mohammed al-Batini ("Mohammed the Esoteric") who pretended to be a son of Yazid and leader of the Yezidis; no other source speaks of him.⁵²

The cursers of Yazid used to stone his supposed tomb near the Bab al-Sagîr in Damascus.⁵³ His (perhaps) real tomb at Huwwarin, known as "the castle of Yazid" (apparently a Roman ruin), is pointed out by the local Chaldaean Christians—or *was*, I should say, in the time of Father Lammens. Al-Akhtal also said:

Yazid reposes in Huwwarin
and will not leave it
How the shades of morning refresh
the tomb and its guest!⁵⁴

Although Khalid ibn Yazid turned down the Caliphate in order to pursue occult studies, he did serve for a time as governor of Homs, and died in 704 or 708, during the reign of Abd al-Malik.^{*132 55} Khalid's alchemical work predated the great program of translation and scientific experiment of the early Abbasids, and so did his collaboration with Greek and Aramaic Christian scholars and alchemists (principally Morienus, the Hermit of Jerusalem).

Stavenhagen's commentary in *The Testament of Alchemy* calls Khalid a "minor son" of Yazid, which is not true. He was Yazid's favorite. It is also suggested that Khalid was disappointed not to attain the Caliphate, and turned to esoteric studies in recompense or to gain wealth, whereas we have read that he refused power out of love for knowledge.⁵⁶

After the fall of the Umayyads, both Mu'awiya and Yazid were venerated by loyalists who constituted a veritable *ghulat* or "extremist" movement verging on heterodoxy, according to Lammens.⁵⁷ Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir was himself of Umayyad descent (from the Marwanid line)^{*133} and it seems possible that he migrated to the Hakkari mountains in order to find the remnants of the anti-Abbasid resistance that had long ago disappeared into that remote region and amalgamated with an ancient cult of sun

worshippers, or perhaps devotees of Ahriman and the primordial *daevas*, who may already have been known as “Yezidis.”

The Adiwyya Sufis seem to have been a secret society of Umayyad Legitimists.⁵⁸ Kreyenbroek in his article “Yazidi” for *Encyclopaedia of Islam* endorses this view.⁵⁹ Al-Sam‘ani (d. 1167), a contemporary of Sheikh Adi, wrote in his *Kitab al-Ansab* (Book of Genealogies):

In Iraq, in the Jebel Hulwan [i.e. the Kurdish mountains] and in the surrounding areas I have encountered many Yazidis. They lead an ascetic life in the villages of those mountains, and take *hal*.^{†134} They rarely associate with other people. They believe in the Imamate of Yazid b. Mu‘awiya and that he was righteous.⁶⁰

“Some time after the death of Sheykh ‘Adi,” the Syriac Orthodox churchman Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286) described certain Kurds who “came down from the mountain and caused much destruction in those lands [near Mosul]. . . . They did not follow Islam but persisted in their original idolatry and the religion of the Magi. Moreover, there was mortal enmity between them and the Muslims.”⁶¹ No doubt these were Yezidis.



12

POEMS OF THE CALIPH YAZID

The verses in sections 2 to 10 were translated by Peter Lamborn Wilson with David Larsen. For Yazid's collected poems in Arabic, see *Shi'r Yazid ibn Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan*, edited by Salah al-Din al-Munajjid (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 1982).

1

Verses of Yazid to his father, Mowiah, who reproached him for drunkenness. [*135](#)

Must then my failings from the shaft
Of anger ne'er escape?
And dost thou storm because I've quaffed
The water of the grape?

That I can thus from wine be driv'n

Thou surely ne'er canst think—
Another reason thou hast given
Why I resolve to drink:

'Twas sweet the flowing cup to seize
'Tis sweet thy rage to see;
And, first, I drink myself to please,
And, next—to anger thee!

2

The Deaths of Eminent Men is a biographical dictionary by Ibn Khallikan (d. 1282), where three poems by Yazid ibn Mu'awiya appear in the entry for Abu Abdullah al-Marzubani (d. 994). Al-Marzubani was a literary scholar of Baghdad who was the first to collect Yazid's poetry. "After him, other persons undertook the same task, but they inserted in the collection a great number of pieces which were not Yazid's," Ibn Khallikan says, adding then a personal note: "The poems of this prince, though not numerous, are highly beautiful. . . . I conceived so great an admiration for Yazid's poetry that, in the year 1235-6, being then at Damascus (where Yazid had lived and reigned), I learned it all by heart, and succeeded in distinguishing the genuine pieces from those which were falsely ascribed to him. I examined the latter with attention, and was enabled, by my researches, to discover by whom each of them was composed; these results I should set forth here were I not apprehensive of lengthening this article too much."¹

The restraint of the biographer (who seems to be the number-one fan of Yazid's poetry in the thirteenth century) is regrettable. His selection consists of the following three short excerpts.^{[*136](#)}

When I yearned (from so far away)
for a glimpse
of Layla to snuff the flame of ardent love
between my ribs & organs

The women of the tribe mocked: “You long
to behold the beauties of Layla?
You might as well croak from the sickness
of your vain hope

You dare gaze on Layla with
eyes that look
on other women, as yet unpurified
by tears?

You hope to enjoy converse with her
when your ear-holes
are still ringing with the chatter
of other women?”

O Layla—absent from my actual eyes
I’ll see you
only with a heart that’s humiliated
and submissive

In the second, another graceful poem, he says:

When cups go round, she & I know
a burgeoning of magic that sunders
anxiety’s chains.

I’d rather be censured (it would be a delight)
than suffer ungratified wishes. The spread
of ardent desire is finer than a breeze.

And in another:

Sometimes guests call on me when the Pleiades
are high
as the Hyades running behind Aldebaran's stallion

and I am given a cup by a saqi who
is as if born with perfumed fingertips

When the ruby surged in it I took the bubbles
for a constellation of pearls, a mirage in the
carnelian sky

Its effects creep up on you like recovery from
disease
till the drinkers' faces are clothed with veils of
anemones

& the boy said, "Take what blots out
consciousness
of our sad time's treacherous order"

I'm content with delights that belong to our era:
sweet conversation & the flow of old wine

They are what they are. Nothing remains but them:
amiable wit and exquisite vintages.

3

From the *Kitab al-Aghani* ("Book of Songs") of Abu 'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, an odd tale.

Once, during the caliphate of his father Mu'awiya, young Yazid paid a visit to Medina, where he sat down and poured himself a drink. Just then Abdullah ibn Abbas (the famous exegete) and Husayn ibn Ali appeared

outside the door, intending to pay Yazid a visit. Yazid called for drinks to be brought in; but his servant whispered to him, "If Ibn Abbas gets a whiff, he'll know what it is!" So Yazid refused entry to the scholar, but invited Husayn to come in.

At once Husayn smelled the wine's bouquet and exclaimed, "What a wonderful perfume! And I thought *I* was good at blending scents! [An art much esteemed in old Arabia.] What is it, O Ibn Mu'awiya?"

"O Husayn, this is a cologne crafted for me back in Syria," Yazid said, downing one glassful and then another. He said to his servant: "Lad, give some to Husayn!"

Husayn said, "Man, your drink has overtaken you. But I cast no eye of aspersion."

Yazid took a third drink and said:

My companion, when I called you
to the Marvellous you did not respond
to the singing-girls and delights
of wine & song
The Lords of the Arabs
have sat around
many a pitcher
Your heart too has been touched
but you do not repent!

Whereupon Husayn leapt up and objected, "Nay, it is your heart that is touched, O Ibn Mu'awiya!"^{[*137](#)}

4

Three poems of Yazid from the *Genealogies of the Noble* by al-Baladhuri (d. 892). First, an ascetic poem:

How many strive to gather wealth

only to bequeath it in misery
to their foes

Some take it to the grave
others leave it to their kin
but most wills are woes

& whoso prays for things to go their way
will some day get an answer that will
disappoint them—God knows!

Next is a poem on party etiquette:

My drinking companions all deserve
the highest respect
for sure

so, when we're together,
they can have
all they want

Even if I'm really drunk I'll refrain
from egging them on to "Have another!"
when they've had enough

No, long life to them, and all due honor
I'll protect them from harm & let them pour
as much as they want

& if they pass out on my couch I'll not
shake them awake nor

shout in their ear

Sleeping near me, they sleep soundly.
& when they wake it won't be to some
insult to their honor

The backstory of this third poem is told prosaically in al-Tabari,² and thus in Abu 'l-Faraj al-Isfahani's³ "Book of Songs":

Salm ibn Ziyad was a boon companion and fellow drinker of Yazid's [and the brother of Ubaydallah, on whom see the previous chapter]. One night the Caliph said to him, "Why don't I make you governor of Khorasan?!"

"Definitely!" said Salm. "And why not Sijistan too!"

So Yazid appointed him that very night, saying:

Serve me a pert vintage that'll
irrigate my soul
then go & pour one like it
for Ibn Ziyad
My homeland is a safe & sacral place
Its borderlands
are where I make my raids
& do jihad

5

This next poem is in the *History* of al-Tabari (d. 923), and shows Yazid in a military pose. Perhaps it was on a parade ground of Damascus that he stood, reviewing the cavalry on its way to Medina and Mecca, "wearing a sword and leaning on an Arab bow," when he improvised these verses:

Take word to al-Zubayr:
 When night is afoot
& our troops descend on Wadi al-Qura
 twenty thousand strong
youths & mature men, will you think
 this company was mustered
by a drunkard? Or was it a man alert,
 awake, self-disciplined?
I marvel at the spineless apostate
 who deceives the faithful, I really do!

6

These two poems appeared in *Tazyin al-aswaq fi akhbar al-'ushshaq* ("Ornamenting the Bazaars with Reports of Impassioned Lovers") by Da'ud al-Antaki (d. 1599).

When a messenger comes from you
 and your faraway land
musk & incense diffuse from him
 like an atmosphere
I leap up & wear him out
 with a hundred questions



On her hand (but not on mine)
 a design in henna that
 makes me feel faint

As if ants had left red tracks
on her fingertips—or like a garden
embroidered with hail

Fresh when the rising Sun sees her
rising from a dream of someone,
some day

I begged for a liaison. She said
“Fool! who seeks union with me
will die of grief.”

Later she relented & asked for
news of me. They told her, “The breath
in his breast is shallower a handsbreadth”

7

This poem is in the *Dictionary of Countries* of Yaqut (d. 1229) under “al-Matirun.”^{[*138](#)} It is a poem of love for a Christian woman, who retired to a hermitage in the garden of al-Matirun in Damascus:

Anxiety returns, draws near me
& banishes sleep for good
I sit & keep watch on the stars
from each one’s appearance to
the moments they vanish
beneath the horizon
It is the season when the ant begins
to eat its stores, and she, at al-Matirun,
has enough to eat till spring

when she will remember the churches of Jilliq
& the domes of Daskara
where the olive grows

8

This is from *The Debates of the Scholars* by al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 1108), the chapter on “Drinks and Drinking.”

The poet al-Husayn ibn al-Dahhak told how once in Mecca with Abu Nuwas, “We heard a boy recite from the Koran (2:20): ‘The lightning all but takes away their power to see. When it lights up for them, they walk in its glow, and when it falls dark they stand still.’ Abu Nuwas exclaimed, ‘This must be a description of wine!’”—and then declaimed these verses by Yazid:

Dark night’s gloom began to mount—
those excellent travelers
lost their way in the murk

& heard a voice declaim:
‘Among our party
there’s a youth who sings from drunkenness’

Then in the distance there blazed up
for them the lamp
of our wine, like a fire in the night

& as we guzzled it they beheld
lux in tenebris
(even cut with water) & it lent them a lordly air

I told that band of riders what cup

inspired their exaltation
& summoned them to passionate love & drunken
song

Take your share (I said) of blessings
& delight
because everything (even eternity) comes to an end

Don't put off glad days to some
unknown future
that may well bring (at best) uncertainty

This world here below—if it possessed
the power of speech—
would say something like *Carpe diem*

but the happiest life of all
is thanks to
the shiftings of night, when day's asleep.

9

Nuzhat al-'ashiq (“Divertissement of the Passionate Lover”) is a verse anthology compiled for the delectation of al-Malik al-Mughith ibn al-Malik al-'Adil, who at one time commanded the anti-Crusader fortress of al-Karak, but died in prison, reportedly at the behest of al-Malik Baybars, in 1244. Little is known of al-Mughith, except that he was an Ayyubid—that is, a scion of the Kurdish dynasty founded by the famous Saladin shortly after the death of Sheikh Adi.

The manuscript is in Spain, but is in Eastern handwriting.⁴ Of the twelve short poems it credits to Yazid, the last belongs to Ibrahim al-Ghazzi (an itinerant poet from Gaza who died on the road to Balkh in 1130), and is omitted here. Some of the others are debatable cases—but authenticity is

not my criterion. Even poem 10, which states that Yazid was born in Mecca (a falsehood: Yazid was born in Syria) deserves consideration. Poem 11 is a queer love poem attributed to Yazid. That these poems were attributed to him suffices to command our attention; they demonstrate for us Yazid's *reputation*, which has a reality of its own.

The first poem resonates with the gurgling jugs of later Yezidi legend, as discussed at the end of chapter 2 (the weeping of Melek Ta'us, the miraculous rebirth of al-Hallaj, and the resulting Yezidi avoidance of narrow-necked jars that gurgle). In its first line, the word "mansion" translates *burj* ("tower"), which also means a zodiacal sign.

1. Yazid ibn Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan ibn Harb said:

On the vine there is a sun
whose mansion is the hollow of a jug

The saqi is its place of rising.
Sunset takes place in my mouth

We greet this wine, hands held as if
to the Kaaba itself

When through a screen into a serving vessel it is
poured out from the jug
that gurgles like Zamzam or the Holy Spout^{[*139](#)}

In the Faith of Ahmad it is forbidden,
so we'll take it up in the faith of
the Messiah, Mary's Son.

2. He also said:

Wine was not forbidden by God as a joke

but because of a secret it hid
For when He saw that humans adored it
& that all were hungry for its meanings
He revealed the prohibition out of pride & fear
lest all should worship it, not Him.

3. He also said:

How I still remember that white wine
golden in a blue flagon,
served by a white hand

Wine is a sun, the grapes are planets
the saqi's hand the Pole Star
the flagon the sky

4. He also said:

I tell my eye, when it weeps until
bystanders are like to be drowned:

“Take a share of her beauty while you can
& save your tears for the day of parting.”

5. He also said (the third poem in selection 2, above)

6. He also said:

I go so far to keep a secret
that my reputation has suffered:
I concealed my love for you until

secrecy itself became a secret

7. He also said:

Garlanded with a wreath
the color of ruby
& surrounded by aristocrats like myself
who are nothing to me but slaves
In my eyes, no one appears great.
not even the great, whoever they may be.

8. He also said (the poem in selection 10, below)

9. He also said:

My eyes never rest from weeping
from specks of dust that fly into them

from the collyrium painting her lids and brow.
How could I look Sulayma in the eyes

when, addicted to tears & sleeplessness, my eyes
are an affront to her eyes?

All day long I weep, yes, and her eyes
are causes of mine overflowing.

10. He also said:

By night Zaynab visited me, as camels were
lowing

at a place south of Khebt, and the rain
fell gently in the vale of Alamayn, and
the Lofty Star trembled
from fear of Scorpio.

Peace and greetings to her dream-vision,
peace and greetings & welcome.

How did you find me? who guided you? doesn't
Falj lie between us, and the mountains
of Minaj and Marqab?

Your family forbids you, such is their hate for me
& my own family treats me even worse

Don't I have confederates who will do me favors
when
you are far away, & one in particular who
aims to please?

I swear, by your ancestor, that only my intellect
prevents me from falling into depression.
Still, my heart is movable

I'm a son of Zamzam & the Spout
I was born in Mecca and nursed in Yathrib

in the house of Abu Sufyan. Who else
can claim such pedigree?

If a man alive could enter Paradise
by the eminence of his lineage
I would not be overshadowed—
I would be *there*.

11. He also said:

O woman of Adnan's tribe
be my shield against this tormentor!
the young gazelle I chanced to meet
beautiful as the full moon
even if he serve me poison at my final hour!
I can't claim
I was overcome
by alcohol
nor even lovesickness

—But who will protect me against this moon-
madness?
It's put the torch to my élan vital!

He is the Mecca of
my pilgrimage!
my religious duty and probity
my faith and afterlife
my hell! my paradise!
Oh, my head
throbs from nape to crown as if
pecked by a flock of vultures!

10

This is the most popular poem attributed to Yazid. By some, it is credited to his son Khalid, the alchemist. We have it in three different versions, one from the Escorial Manuscript, one from Da'ud al-Antaki, and this one (the longest) from an anonymous Internet source.

Detain that woman with the embroidered sash
for with my own eyes I saw my blood on her
hands!

I'm jealous of her father & mother
jealous of the toothpick that touches her gums

jealous of the clothes that hold her tight
when she wraps her blessed body in them

envious of the cups that touch their rims
to her lips when they pour into her mouth

Clap her in cuffs! Guilty! my blood's on her!
She's killed me! —But no, spare her, she's my
blessing!

Don't hurt her! don't execute her!
Do interrogate her, though. How was my blood
spilled?

Tell her, "O desire of his soul, are you aware
that you've slain him with mad love?"

Not with a sword, the deed
was done with arrows fired from her hills

She is wise as Luqman, shapely as Joseph,
blessed as David, chaste as Mary

and I am sad as Jacob, desolate as Jonah,
sick as Job, miserable as Adam

First I wept, then she wept, then
I tried to cure my soul before remorse set in

but then she wept again & stirred up my tears
& so my grief is owed to her account

I weep for whoever ornamented her with beauty
Arab or foreigner, there is none like her

with eyelashes of a Medinan, torso of a Meccan
pupils of a Hilali, lips of a Tayyi

Combed with musk, her waves of hair
exude her scent. Her teeth are pearls well strung

With her eye, she made a nonverbal sign
signaling fear of her family's vigilance

but to me its message was one of welcome
and greetings to a lovesick fool

By God! If I had no fear of God nor any hope of
mercy
I'd embrace her neck within sight of the Kaaba

& kiss her ninety-nine times
like lightning flashes on her hands, cheek, mouth

and give her my arm for a pillow.
For me it would all be licit, even during Ramadan

But then I found her fingers dyed red
as if with pomegranate or henna

& accused her: “You’ve stained your palms
in my gore. Is this how you requite my madness?”

Then she revealed her own passions
& spoke compulsively to excuse herself, saying:

“I swear, what is this pigment? Ah, I know!
Don’t blame me, don’t wrong me with slander

It’s not your blood but mine! When you were far
away,
you who are my hand in life, and my wrist,

I wept tears of blood, and used these hands
to wipe them away & so my fingers were stained.”



APPENDIX

INDIA

The frontispiece of Empson's *Cult of the Peacock Angel* (1928) depicts a supposed Yezidi *sanjak* in the British Museum—but it is now thought to be a south Indian bronze peacock connected to the cult of Shiva's son Murugan, such as can nowadays be seen in temples around Madras. Real *sanjaks* have since been photographed (see Spät, *The Yezidis*), and look rather different. The birds are less obviously peacocks, and the stands do not resemble that of Empson's statuette.¹ Nevertheless, the photograph perhaps constitutes a “fortuitous misunderstanding.” It seems there really does exist a link between South India and the faraway land of the Yezidis. A persistent legend has always claimed a Yezidi presence—or even origin—in India. Let us investigate.^{*140}

In the tenth century a Shaivite sect (now apparently extinct) spread over much of India; it was called the Drunken Peacocks. They revered Murugan as Kumara the Youth, son of Shiva, and venerated his peacock.^{†141}

Sami Said Ahmed mentions supposed Yezidis from Afghanistan who “came to Lalish in 1956.”² Also, during World War II some Yezidis met soldiers from India who “confessed their Yezidi faith.” These avowals are

denied by Sami Said Ahmed, but “it is possible they were referring to . . . the small Mauri tribe who reportedly venerate the peacock.”

Joseph reports (on the authority of Anastase-Marie) that “some regard the Lepchos of India as Yezidis, who, in the early appearance of the sect, went there to proselyte the Hindus.”³ I have myself seen the Lepchas, a jungle tribe near Darjeeling, and heard nothing (in 1969) about peacocks or devils—although who knows?

Kreyenbroek hypothesizes an Ur-religion of the Indo-Iranians before they split into Vedic and Avestan sects, and imagines that this primordial cult may have shaped certain later developments in remote mountainous regions of west Iran, (i.e., proto-Kurdistan).⁴ In this way, parallels between western Kurdistan and India would be expected.

Collins notes that the peacock enjoys special veneration in Rajasthan (northwest India), and is supposed to have power over snakes.⁵

A Yezidi *qawwal* told Lady Drower that “we used to take the *sanjak* . . . as far as Russia and India,” but that war and border controls put an end to such voyages. Drower says, “I had not known there were Yezidis in India. He replied that there were.”⁶

Asatrian and Arakelova mention that the Yezidis call the constellation Aries “Baran” (Ram), which is identical with the Yezidi “deity” Mame-Shivan, patron of small cattle; they compare Baran with Bharani, a constellation in the Indian tradition, but draw no conclusions.⁷

The Yezidi text “The Beyt of Nightingales” is a kind of folkloristic *Conference of the Birds*; the last line rather abruptly tells us that the Nightingale, the hero of the poem, “went in search of the Indian Peacock (*hindi Tawuse*).”⁸ Clearly this is Melek Ta’us—but then the poem ends and we are not told what happens next!

Ahmed points out that Yezidis and Hindus both have fourfold caste systems, although their respective organizations do not much resemble one another.⁹ Other Mideastern sects (e.g., the Druzes) also have closed “caste” systems, so there is no reason to suspect (nor to discount) “Hindu” influence.

The Yezidi elders interviewed in Spät’s *Late Antique Motifs* claim that Yezidis were not involved in Noah’s Flood: “When the Flood rose we

Yezidis were all in India” (where the waters never reached), and “We never entered the Ark.”¹⁰ This contradicts other myths, but contributes another interesting slant to the Yezidi origin legend.

Possibly the most profound link between Yezidism and Hinduism has occurred only recently, when the Yezidi Baba Sheikh (who is a refugee from Iraq) visited a Hindu temple in Washington D.C., where he witnessed Skanda Sashti or ceremony held for Kumara or Skanda Murugan, on October 29, 2014.

Murugan, “the tender youth,” is associated with poetry and love—but as Skanda he is a war god, and the six-day ceremony celebrates his victorious struggle against “demonic forces threatening the earth.” Skanda Murugan is variously depicted as mounted on, or accompanied by a peacock (and cobra), or else as a boy with a peacock’s tail—like Melek Ta’us in certain myths. Brass lamps with peacocks (resembling the statue depicted in Empson) were used in the ceremony, in which the Baba Sheikh participated.¹¹

The author who has made the most of this story, Mark Amaru Pinkham, mentions that Murugan dresses in red robes and is accompanied by a red rooster—symbols we have seen before—and should be “identified” as both Jesus and Melek Ta’us.¹² Pinkham also recounts the tantalizing story that Saint Thomas the apostle—who is believed to have been martyred and entombed in Murugan’s town of Mylapur, near Madras—was transformed into a peacock just before he was murdered, and is now commemorated in south India by a dance ceremony wherein an actor dressed as a peacock plays the role of Thomas.

What to make of all this? Pinkham makes a great deal, proposing what amounts to a universal syncretic mystical path centered on peacock and snake deities from virtually all traditions, and especially on Melek Ta’us. His introduction to the mysteries of the Order of the Peacock Angel can be located by a diligent search of the Internet, and I prefer to let him propound the system to those who seek initiation. I conclude only that, even if a connection between India and the Yezidis was lacking before, a connection between them exists today.

FOOTNOTES

- [*1.](#) Alternatively, the name may be connected to *yasdan* meaning “good spirit,” or *yezid farfar*, “evil spirit.” The Persian city Yazd derives its name from the root, and some accounts have claimed the Yezidis come from Yazd, which seems unlikely. Another possible origin is a pun on the words *ez da*, “I [God] created”—and there are others. Sami Said Ahmed, *The Yezidis: Their Life and Beliefs*, 23–25.
- [*2.](#) Wahid Azal is the head of the Fatimiya Sufi order, which can be researched online. Perhaps his most historic accomplishment so far has been to obtain a *fatwa* from a leading Shiite authority in Qom, declaring ayahuasca to be permissible.
- [*3.](#) Chapter 12, on the poetry of Caliph Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya, constitutes an exception, as it contains original translations of Arabic poems that have never before appeared in English. To begin with chapters 11 and 12 (“Legend and Life of the Caliph Yazid ibn Mu'awiya,” and “Poems of the Caliph Yazid”) would be a novel reading of Yezidi “origins.” I placed them last for a reason, however, which has to do with the “musical structure” of my book, and I suggest saving these chapters for last.
- [*4.](#) Azal arrives at this position via a fascinating take on Babism, the neo-Shiite religion of Mohammed Ali the Bab, who was martyred in Iran in 1850. His designated successor, Subh-i Azal, was largely displaced by the schism of the Bahá’ís, and died forgotten in exile in Cyprus. For a marvelous description of wild antinomian Azali dervishes in nineteenth-century Kerman, see E. G. Browne’s memoir, *A Year among the Persians*.
- [*5.](#) *A Testament of Alchemy*, the first Arabic text on alchemy to be translated into Latin, features as one of its speakers Khalid ibn Yazid, the son of the second Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya, who is

considered one of the “founders” or incarnated angels of Yezidism, perhaps identical with Melek Ta’us himself. I find many resonances with Yezidi teachings in this alchemical source.

- †6. Utnapishtim “is” Noah, survivor of the Flood, but also Khizr, the Green Man or Immortal Prophet identified with Elias, Saint George, Saint Sergius, and so on. Noah and Khizr are both venerated by the Yezidis.
- †7. See my *Shower of Stars* for a discussion of homologies between text and mystic vision or dream, and the way in which books can be persons, affording their destined readers a heart-to-heart pre-sentience.
- *8. The Hakkari country is a dependency of Mosul, and inhabited by Kurds and Nestorians (Joseph’s note).
- †9. Or, as Browne has it, “the people of the Hawran” (which is a different location).
- †10. Marwan I, the fourth Umayyad caliph, who ruled but briefly (CE 684–685).
- *11. Asatrian and Arakelova put more stress on Near Eastern sun and moon gods named Sin than on either of the historical Hasans in their discussion of Sheikh Hesên/Sin; Asatrian and Arakelova, *The Religion of the Peacock Angel: The Yezidis and Their Spirit World*, 71. I see no reason to exclude or insist on either genealogy for the angelic mystery (*sur*).
- *12. Owing to Earth’s axial precession, the celestial pole is subject to change. Polaris in Ursa Minor was not always the “polestar.” But the *symbolique* of the central axis need not depend on a specific asterism.
- †13. In an interview with a Yezidi informant, William B. Seabrook asked, “Do you believe in God?” The answer was “[O]f course . . . but our difference from all other religions is this—that we know God is so far away that we can have no contact with him—and He, on his part, has no knowledge or interest of any sort concerning human affairs. It is useless to pray to Him or worship Him . . . He has given the entire control of this world for ten thousand years to the bright spirit, Melek Taus, and Him, therefore, we worship.” Seabrook, *Adventures in Arabia*, 325–26.

[*14.](#) When the Chol family took over the princeship from the extinct line of Sheikh Adi, they could claim no prestigious lineage and so claimed their ancestor had been born from the Abyss (*chol*).

[†15.](#) See also my *Temple of Perseus at Panopolis*, 157–59.

[*16.](#) The womb is often figured as a jar whose neck is the cervix. As we'll see, the Yezidi "taboos" include a ban on jars that make gurgling sounds when poured out. Such jars or vessels are associated with birth and with magic births specifically. Also, Melek Ta'us fills jars with his tears to put out the fires of hell. Boxes and caves also play important roles in the *symbolique*; I suggest that all these things exemplify interiority or "esotericism."

[*17.](#) *Kunsiniyat*, "an obscure term" (Joseph, *Devil Worship*, 84), is translated as "in the midst of the waters" in the shorter version of the Black Book by Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*, 212.

[*18.](#) Shiraz also has a Haft-Tan or "Seven Bodies," a shrine used by the Khaksari ("Dust- Head") dervishes, who venerate the poet Hafez and chant his poems in pitch darkness while weeping (see Shahrokh Raei, "Khaksar Order in Kurdistan"). They are said by Ivanov to be linked to the Ahl-i Haqq. They are the last wild dervishes in Iran, with begging bowls and patched cloaks. They burn *isfand* for a few coins to bless those who ask (especially travelers); this is "wild rue" (*harmal*), a red dye for carpets that happens to be psychotropic! I knew some Khaksaris in Isfahan whose master was a brilliant professional reciter of the *Shahnameh*. They ran a very genial teahouse.

[*19.](#) To speak a taboo word in Yezidi parlance is called "breaking the jar," (Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 41–43) which, as we'll see, is very significant. The toilet taboos resemble Islamic custom (squatting to pee). In the rural Middle East many people lack indoor facilities.

[*20.](#) See my "Note on Lettuce" in *Temple of Perseus*, 36–40, where I offer a completely esoteric exegesis. Nobody, by the way, seems to know who the prophetess Khassiah was.

[*21.](#) A similar tale is told of the proto-Sufi saint Rabia al-Adawiyya: that she ran through the streets of Basra one night carrying a bucket of water

and a torch, saying “I want to pour water into Hell and throw fire into Paradise so that these two veils disappear and it becomes clear who worships God out of love, not out of fear of Hell or hope of Paradise.”²⁴

^{*22.} Malek Salem, according to Ahmed’s “Yezidi friend,” was a manifestation of Melek Ta’us in the city of Yazd. “We know him as Melik Miran . . . Jesus will appear from him.” Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 240ff.

^{*23.} The eccentric but intelligent rogue scholar Andrew Collins attempts to connect the word *media* to the word *mehdi*, then to the Yezidi figure Sheikh Medi, and to Melek Ta’us. Sheikh Adi, he says, was a Magian. He has found the pleasing term *angelicans* to describe all the angel-worshipping cults of the Mideast.² Currently, the relics of the Three Magi repose in Cologne, which has become a center of Kurdish exile politics. The committee to free Abdollah Öcalan has offices there. Öcalan has defended the Yezidis, and his followers in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) helped to repel ISIS from Jebel Sinjar in 2014.

^{*24.} In the Black Book a list is given of ancient Yezidi “kings” such as Beelzebub, Ahab, Hemosh (a Moabite god), etc., and one of them is “Artemis.” See Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 156.

^{*25.} See *The Celestial Bear* by Frank Speck for details.

^{*26.} *Histoire de l’empire Ottoman*, vol. 4, 254–56. Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall was virtually the sole source for Brion Gysin and William Burroughs in their romantic visions of the Assassins and Hassan-i Sabbah (along with E. G. Browne’s equally stimulating account), but he is thoroughly unreliable on this and other subjects; see Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs*, for a critique and rectification. (Von Hammer-Purgstall happens to be a distant relation of mine, through my Scottish ancestors the Cranstons.)

^{*27.} See John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*.

^{*28.} Even today (or until recently) a branch of the (Muslim) Adiwiyya Order exists in Egypt.

^{† 29.} See Julian Baldick’s, *Imaginary Muslims: The Uwaysi Mystics of Central Asia*.

[*30.](#) The Muslim divine Sheref Bitlisi claimed that the Yezidis, “followers of Shaykh Adi ibn Musafir, . . . ascribe themselves to him. Their wrongful belief is that Shaykh Adi . . . ‘has done for us in his own days the requisite daily prayers and the fasting. Thus in the Day of Judgement, we will be taken into Paradise without being reproached or questioned.’ They bear unlimited animosity toward the exoteric ulema [i.e., to the Shariah or Islamic Law].” Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 75. Ismail Beg Chol, the Yezidi Mir, recounted a teaching in which Sheikh Adi and Melek Ta’us adopt the Yezidis as their “family”; those who “cut from their own flesh to feed me” will be pardoned of all sins, and the offering will substitute for prayer and fasting. Adi/Ta’us, acting as one salvific persona, will intercede for the believers with the “Just God,” and solicit Paradise on their behalf. Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 234.

[*31.](#) Or perhaps he “never died but disappeared miraculously his tomb but a monument.” See Field and Glubb, *The Yedizis, Sulubba, and Other Tribes*, 11.

[*32.](#) Alias Saint Thaddeus, one of the seventy-two disciples sent (after the Ascension) to King Agbar of Edessa. According to tradition, the monks of Lalish were “tricked” into becoming Yezidis, marrying, and giving up the cloister to Adi’s order. Christian inscriptions are supposedly still hidden there, and a library of Syriac manuscripts actually preserved at Jebel Sinjar. Some Christian customs are still followed, (e.g., baptism and the Eucharist). Joseph, *Devil Worship*, 71ff. According to a variant, Melek Ta’us himself tricked the monks, and Joseph found evidence that the usurpation was resented by the Nestorians. See Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 176–77 and 83–84. In fact, two monks transformed themselves into serpents to kill Adi, but he transformed himself into their abbot, and dissuaded them. Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 38. Note the “two snakes” motif again.

[†33.](#) This reminds me of Yama, Hindu-Tibetan god of Death, riding his black water buffalo.

[‡34.](#) The gurgling jar again—this time symbolizing spiritual (re)birth. The minaret would seem to symbolize Islam.

*35. Frequently Adi “is” both Melek Ta’us and Soltan Ezi (i.e., Yazid ibn Mu’awiya). In the “Hymn on the Laughter of Snakes”:

Sheikh Adi, Tawusi Melek and Sultan Ezi are one.

Don’t you regard them as separate,

They quickly make wishes come true.

KREYENBROEK AND RASHOW, *GOD AND SHEIKH ADI ARE PERFECT*,
392

*36. A Yezidi elder told Seabrook that Sheikh Adi received his teachings in Persia. Seabrook, *Adventures in Arabia*, 326.

†37. All brackets in the original.

*38. In cultic Taoism, the Otherworld is conceived as a giant meritocracy, like that of the Ming Dynasty government. Humans whose ghosts prove active are propitiated; then, if they seem beneficent, they are bumped up the bureaucratic grades from local tutelary deity, eventually to god of a whole province or profession. The goddess of the Atlantic Ocean, now also the divine patroness of America, was a virgin who drowned at sea in the eighteenth century. The Taoist canon may be the only major world scripture still being revealed today and still growing; so also its pantheon.

*39. Yet another Yezidi variant of this myth tells that Salome kissed the head of John the Baptist and threw it in the river (Jordan I suppose); later Salome herself fills a narrownecked jug from the river. “Glug glug, you killed me but your kiss was so sweet!” the waters seem to say. She drinks—and becomes pregnant with a son who is the ancestor of the Sabaeans (the Mandaean, the followers of Saint John). Again—the singing head of Orpheus! “*Jug jug!*” as the nightingale says. See Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 285–87.

*40. Spät herself notes that modern Yezidis “claim that anything that appears to be connected with Islam is a ‘foreign body’ added to pure Yezidi religion.” Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 137.

*41. Of course, one obvious source for Yezidi “devil” lore has already been proposed (in chapter 3) as the hypothetical “West Iranian” remnant of

the even more hypothetical Indo-Iranian religion in which *daevas* were considered gods along with *asuras*. Remnants of *daeva* worship would have had to survive the reforms of Zoroaster. James Russell is willing to speculate on such survivals as sources for pre-Christian and later demonology in Armenia and West Iranian culture in general. For instance, he mentions a Zurvanite demon named Mahmi, who learned the secret of *creating light* from Ahriman, the evil spirit of Zoroastrianism. Russell gives an entertaining roster of demons, including examples with two snakes growing from their shoulders (see ahead chapter 8) and other hints of ophiolatry, and mentions an Armenian Zoroastrian cult of Children of the Sun (perhaps related to Kurdish sun worshippers—the Shamsani who may have been proto-Yezidis). See Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*.

[*42.](#) I do this in *Ploughing the Clouds: The Search for Irish Soma*—but it’s an old idea, dating back at least to Sir William Jones.

[*43.](#) Not to mention the Yezidi “Hymn of the Lamp” (*Qewle Qendila*) which states plainly: “This world is a good world.” See Khanna Omarkhali and Kianoosh Rezania, “Some Reflections on Concepts of Time in Yezidism,” 342.

[*44.](#) Shaykh Iskandar Yusuf al-Hayik interviewed the princess at Lalish in the presence of a Yezidi elder. She defined her worship of Melek Ta’us as representing “the beauty of God.” She says, “The peacock represents the beauty of the worshiped and the snake his wisdom, because he is (both) beautiful and wise.” Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 222.

[† 45.](#) The lustrous black color of the snake used to be renewed with lampblack, nowadays with shoe polish.

[*46.](#) For example, the manuscript of the Black Book in the collection of Père Anastase-Marie published in *Anthropos* for 1911; see Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 333, note 950. Also, “Azazel is the soul of faith,” the statement of a Yezidi elder in Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*, 229.

[*47.](#) See also Birgül Açıkyıldız’s *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion*, 72ff.

[*48.](#) Pharaoh is a prototype of the evil ruler for most Muslims, but al-Hallaj eulogizes him as one of the great lovers of God, along with Satan, in the *Tawasin* (see below).

[*49.](#) Nasafi also allegorizes the peacock (Ta'us) as desire, and the serpent as wrath—both divine attributes.

[*50.](#) Several authors (e.g., Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 221, quoting Lady Dorothy Mills and Isya Joseph) mention a sect of devil worshippers in Seistan, a part of southeast Iran far from Kurdistan. The variants all involve Satan disguising himself as a mulberry tree. Mulberries are venerated by Yezidis in Lalish (in conjunction with holy wells). I have no idea whether this cult persists, but I do know several people, as I mentioned above (and in “Iblis, The Black Light,” *Sacred Drift*, 83–100), who visited the Ahl-i Haqq Satan worshippers (*Shaytan-parastiyyan*) in the 1970s (which might still be called the “ethnographic present,” I suppose).

[† 51.](#) There apparently existed an earlier Order of the Peacock Angel established in England in the early twentieth century by “a certain Syrian.” Two powers, the “Augmentation,” or Peacock, and the “Constriction,” or Serpent, were worshiped. There may have been a branch in America. See Asatrian and Arakelova, *Religion of the Peacock Angel*, 32, n. 3, for details.

[*52.](#) My own natal Episcopalian Church declares that no new saints have appeared since the Reformation. What does this sad fact tell us about the Reformation—or about God, for that matter? Catholicism has abolished ritual veneration of the angels, and erased most saints who can't be “historically” proven. Elementals of nature, called *orishas* in the Yoruba religion, are all banished. In the end one lives not just in a “secular” world but an empty universe. In the 1960s, occidental seekers drifted toward oriental paths hoping for real magic—which seemed to have been bleached out of the Western monotheisms.

[*53.](#) In Islam it is *sunnati* to trim the mustache, so wild dervishes and heretics sport Nietzschean facial hair to flaunt their sense of superiority to mere legalisms. Martin Van Bruinessen used to say his unkempt

mustache always made him welcome in such circles. Yezidis and Ahl-i Haqq have been martyred for their mustaches.

[*54.](#) According to the informative “friend” of Sami Said Ahmed, Sheikh Adi was born 749 years after the founding of Rome, on December 25—because he “is” Jesus. Since he “is” also God (and the sun) this makes sense. Jesus = Sheikh Adi = Melek Ta’us = the sun = Khuda.

[*55.](#) Ahmed relates the story that Sheikh Adi was once invited to a meal in the Seventh Heaven by God. He rode there with his followers, but they were shocked to discover that God’s barn had no hay for their horses. Adi sent back a follower (on his own horse, Bor, i.e., Buraq) to fetch hay from his own farm. The disciple finds a sack of hay, but as he rides back to heaven, some of it falls out through a hole in the sack, and becomes the Milky Way, or “Road of the Hay Man.” *The Yezidis*, 237.

[*56.](#) In the Hurufi or “lettrist” heresy of Sufism, a kind of esoteric analysis of Quranic letters was used (e.g., by the martyr Husayn Astarabadi) to abrogate literal meanings. A Nuqtawi or “pointillist” order carried this gematria even further. The Moghul emperor Akbar was a Nuqtawi. Turkish/Persian Hurufi influence could have reached the Yezidis via the Bektashi Sufis.

[*57.](#) It is said that there are two trinities in Manichaeism also: (1) Senior Magnitude, Mother of Life, Primeval Man—emanating as (2) the Master of Light, Spirit of Life and Mehr Yazd (Mithra).

[*58.](#) Following Layard, in *Nineveh and its Remains* (vol. 2, 462), Joseph connects the *iunges* with the bird demons of the Babylonians and Assyrians, and the *feroher* of the Zoroastrians. He points out that ornitholatry is condemned in Deuteronomy 4:16–7: “Lest ye corrupt yourselves and make a graven image, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of any winged fowl that flieth in the air.”

[*59.](#) For more on the *iunx*, see my *Temple of Perseus*, 352–66, where I make use of Charles Stein’s unpublished translation of the *Chaldaean Oracles*.

[*60.](#) See William Chittick’s translation of Shams-i Tabrizi’s autobiography, and also Shams al-Din Aflaki’s *Feats of the Knowers of God* (both

listed in the bibliography).

[†61](#). See *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, chapter 16.

[*62](#). “[O]ne root, four elements,” says the *Testament of Alchemy*; “Even so does man contain the four elements united in his body.” Stavenhagen, *A Testament of Alchemy*, 13–15.

[*63](#). For the polestar see Joscelyn Godwin, *Arktos*; for dew, see the anonymous *Mutus Liber* in Alexander Roob, *Alchemy and Mysticism: The Hermetic Museum*. The Bull and Fish probably refer to constellations.

[*64](#). Thanks to Erik Davis for a photocopy of this extremely rare book, which I could not find through interlibrary loan, and would have cost an arm and a leg to purchase!

[*65](#). Corbin never ceases to remind us that August 17, 1164, was exactly one year before the birth of Ibn Arabi. Sheikh Adi died in 1162.

[*66](#). Or perhaps originally Persian, according to René Guénon et al.

[*67](#). If I remember correctly, this was Maryam, daughter of the great Ahl-i Haqq reformer Hajj Nematollah Jayhunabadi, and sister of Ostad Elahi, the sage and musician whom I knew in Tehran. (See the bibliography for an album of Ostad Elahi’s tanbur recordings.)

[*68](#). Seabrook was enticed to make his expedition to Lalish by hearing of these fabulous towers or “Power Houses,” each one “a high white cone-shaped structure with bright rays flashing from its pinnacle” in which “sat continuously a priest of Satan, who by ‘broadcasting’ occult vibrations controlled the destinies of the world.” Of course the astral rays turned out to be a traveler’s tale, but the graceful fluted white towers are quite real (see Açıkyıldız, “The sanctuary of Shaykh ‘Adi at Lalish”).

[*69](#). Another link with Hermes: The monster Argus with its hundred eyes is set by Hera to watch over Io; Zeus urges Hermes to slay Argus; Hera gives its eyes to the peacock for its tail feathers—an allegory of mystical vision and Hermetic transformation.

[*70.](#) See David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, and my *Temple of Perseus*, 85–91.

[*71.](#) Soma also is “stolen.” Wisdom always partakes of the forbidden; fire from heaven.

[*72.](#) In *Ploughing the Clouds*, and in Bey and Zug, *Orgies of the Hemp Eaters*.

[†73.](#) This anonymous report, headlined “Orgies of the Hemp Eaters,” ran in the March 15, 1895 issue of the *New York Herald*, and appears in Bey and Zug, and supplied them with its title.

[*74.](#) That is, in high mountain pastures, the kind of landscape in which soma is found, according to the Brahmanas.

[†75.](#) As do the Siberian shamans with dried *Amanita muscaria*.

[†76.](#) Mushrooms are commonly believed to be “seeded” by lightning. Rings of mushrooms are associated with faery dances. *Amanita* can grow quite big.

[§77.](#) Note the parallels with the myth of Shahid ibn Jarr, the wheat grain, and other myths of Adam’s progeny in Paradise.

[*78.](#) See Carl Ruck, et al., *Mushrooms, Myth and Mithras*.

[†79.](#) In truth, the *lit* lamp is one of Yezidism’s most precious images—and practices. See Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 29.

[*80.](#) The Ahl-i Haqq Satan worshippers of Kerend and Sarpol-i Zahab renounce “legal standards of purity; they deliberately adopt pork and wine as their sacraments, and raise pigs”; see Membrado, “Hajj Ne‘matollah Jayhunabadi,” 19. The Yezidis sometimes refrain from wine, but at other times (e.g., the Feast of Ezid or Khizr-Elias) are more or less obliged to drink. See Khanna Omarkhali, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan*, 375, illustration 3.

[*81.](#) See the bibliography for his key texts (under Fulcanelli and Schwaller).

- [*82.](#) The attribution is questioned by Western scholars. When challenged on this point, the late Shiite scholar and theologian Allameh Tabataba'i (whom I met) said, "The person who wrote it *is for us* the Imam Ali."
- [*83.](#) An adjacent cosmic bird is the Varaghna or "Royal White Falcon" who bestows on Persian kings the *farr* or royal aura (imagined as a kind of halo or illumination).
- [*84.](#) Sami Said Ahmed quotes traditional sources for the story that God gave Adam a white cockerel, who crows the call to prayer. Satan will not enter a house that has a cock in it. Since the Yezidis were "originally Sufis," they used to honor the cock, but when they took up Satan worship "they forsook cocks for peacocks." However, another tale says Sheikh Adi was once listening to *qawwals*' songs in a state of ecstasy when the muezzin interrupted with the call to prayer. Adi was "greatly distressed, blamed the muezzin and said, 'You brought us down from the Throne to the carpet.'" He explained that the cock of the heavenly throne was calling them to prayer, and the muezzin's voice drowned it out. Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 250, n. 50.
- [*85.](#) See *The Book of St Cyprian, the Sorcerer's Treasure*, a kind of grimoire popular in Spanish and Portuguese lands, translated by José Leitão.
- [†86.](#) "Black dogs are seen as uncanny in many cultural traditions. Faust had a black poodle who was Mephistopheles. In Ireland the dreaded (but somehow cherished) Pooka can appear as a huge black dog with glowing red eyes. Incidentally, the psychotropic mushroom *Psilocybe semilanceata* or 'Liberty Cap'—named for the Phrygian cap worn by Perseus/Mithras—is called a 'pookie' in modern Irish." Peter Lamborn Wilson, "Dark House: Nocturnal Architecture in the Art of Leonora Carrington," *Scapegoat*, 180.
- [†87.](#) See the last chapter of Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle*, where Evliya Çelebi appears as a character. Unfortunately, there's no complete English translation of Evliya's work.
- [*88.](#) This suggests that the onion symbolizes the head, like nutmeg for the Ahl-i Haqq. Meanwhile, for Muslims, a hadith maintains that angels do

not like garlic and onions and will not transmit the prayers of one whose breath smells of them.

[*89](#). In the annual round of nomadic life, favorite plants would have gradually seeded themselves in the nitrogen-rich disturbed soil of camp sites and thus been there to greet the tribe the following year: happy origin of the garden.

[*90](#). Both sumac and poison sumac belong to the cashew family but look quite different. Edible sumac has bright red leaves in autumn and fuzzy red berry-like clusters. Sumac water prepared as a sun tea is very pleasant. Is the plant holy in itself? In any case it is auspicious.

[*91](#). This stands for the stage of the Work known as “fixation,” in which a volatile form of the Stone is made stable and usable as elixir. In magic, a spell can be called a “fix.” The heretical Ophites and Nassarenes worshiped a serpent Christ. The Ophites also venerated a septenary of angels, the last being “the son of fallen wisdom,” the Demiurge. Asatrian and Arakelova, *Religion of the Peacock Angel*, 35, n. 46. Jesus is invoked in late antique “pagan” Egyptian spells along with Isis, Serapis, Set, Astarte, Moses, Zoroaster, and so on.

[†92](#). A Yezidi “priest” told Seabrook that the black snake of the Gate in Lalish is ‘*alamat al-aql*: the symbol not of “wisdom” but of *intellect*.

[*93](#). See also Martin van Bruinessen’s article “Veneration of Satan among the Ahl-e Haqq of the Guran Region,” an updated version of the article “Satan’s Psalmists: Some Heterodox Beliefs and Practices among the Ahl-e Haqq of the Guran District,” which was never published. I was living in Tehran in 1976 when Martin returned from his field trip to Guran, and had to wait until 2014 to read this report! (At the time I referred to it in “Iblis, the Black Light,” I had not actually read it.) There *appear* to be no Yezidis in Guran, but there are so many parallels between the two religions that there must exist a link. The reference to Guran in this Yezidi hymn may provide a definite clue.

[*94](#). A Yezidi tradition traced by Sami Said Ahmed recounts that Shahid ibn Jarr, the mystical son of Adam, “had two male children attached to his shoulders. They were cut from his body by a sword and given the names Hashim and Khoraisa [that is, Quraysh; these are Muhammad’s

clan and tribe] and the Yezidis are all descended from the latter.” Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 245, n. 9.

†95. I’ve edited the text for clarity. This version differs from Firdawsi’s, representing a Kurdish “folk” recension. In the *Shahnameh*, Azi Zahhak is the son of Angra Mainyu/ Ahriman, who rules the *divs* and overthrows the first king, Jamshid.

*96. Abdullah Öcalan is a founding member of the PKK, now imprisoned in Turkey, who has inspired the anarchistic social revolution in Rojava, whose constitution grants protected status to the Yezidis. See my essay on Öcalan in *To Dare Imagining*, 33–41.

*97. All three are founders of major orders. Jilani was an actual companion of Adi. Abu ‘al-Wafa’, “the Crown of the Gnostics” (d. 1107), founded the antinomian Qalandar order of the Wafa’iyya, later absorbed into the Ahl-i Haqq or the Bektashis. In the 1920s a Naqshbandi shaykh Ahmed Barzani (of the famous Barzani clan) created a new sect with himself as God; he allowed his followers to eat pork, and directed them to venerate a Black Snake. The religion seems to have had traces of Satan worship and Yezidism. Even the orthodox Barzani clan members have said that Yezidism is the “original Kurdish religion.” Kreyenbroek and Allison, *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, 95–96. The Barzani revolt of 1931 was put down by the British in 1932.

*98. This reminds me of one of the huge steles at Göbekli-Tepe, which seems to foretell (by several thousand years) even the earliest Sumerian demon-imagery of such “Ahrimanic” vermin.

†99. Drower includes a photograph of “the Shrine of Kadi Bilben” which reveals two guardian snakes at the entrance (*Peacock Angel*, 164). This doubling of the Black Snake gives us the final clue to its *esoteric meaning*. They “are” Azi Zahhak, but also Munkar and Nakir, the Angels of the Grave who appear *on the shoulders of the dead* (like the angel and devil of conscience in popular cartoon art). As we know, in Yezidism they serve the Lord of Graves, and Sheikh Mend Goran, who is also the Lord of Snakes. He is described as a kind of Kala or god of blackness, the male Kali, in the *qewl* devoted to him. This funeral hymn is said to be highly secret and esoteric, I suppose because it (almost)

reveals the identity of Mend and Azi Zahha—in their positive aspects, although still terrifying, like the demons converted to Buddhism, or the *divs* and *djinns* converted to Islam. (“Positive diabolism.”)

[*100](#). Schuster was admired by A. K. Coomaraswamy, but nowadays seems forgotten (except in Mark Siegel’s fine book *The Thread-Spirit*). Schuster lived and died in Woodstock, New York, but the library there has none of his publications.

[*101](#). Empson claims the hatchet “forms part of the Mir’s insignia” and a comb “is supposed to guard against witches by entangling their hair.” He also mentions the “seven-branched sceptre” seen by Lady Drower, but absent since 1892. *Cult of the Peacock Angel*, 123.

[*102](#). For more on traditional Persian color symbolism, see Ardalan and Bahktiar, *The Sense of Unity*, 48–63.

[*103](#). Some say poppies, some say anemones; Guest says ranunculus in *Survival among the Kurds*, 38.

[†104](#). Rabelais for one uses white and red wine as symbols for mercury and sulphur in the last book of *Gargantua*, “The Island of Wine.”

[*105](#). The mineral *hyacinth* is usually identified as *sapphire*, but here Corbin uses it to translate Persian *yaqut*, actually a *ruby*. Kirmani (d. 1870) was the second leader of the Shaykhi school (after Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i, d. 1826). The Bab, Ali Mohammed, was a disciple of Kirmani.

[*106](#). Bedirxan, “Le Soleil Noir,” *Hawar* 4, no. 26 (1935): 12–15, cited in Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*. See also James Pontolillo, *The Black Sun Unveiled*, an overexhaustive study marred by excessive emphasis on Nazi use of this symbol, but still useful.

[*107](#). *Furqan* is sometimes a name for the Qur’an. If this hymn refers to the *Meshaf Resh*, it would legitimize that doubtful work as quasi-canonical, if not “scriptural.”

[*108](#). See Henri Corbin, *Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, 115.

[†109](#). See my *Temple of Perseus*, 21.

†110. Teleio derives from telos, which means “end” as finality, result, intention, and completion—and thus perfection—but also as rite that confers initiation and thus opens the possibility of perfection.

*111. See Roob, *Hermetic Museum*, 115.

*112. For the Ranters, see Abiezer Coppe, *Selected Writings*; Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*; and Nigel Smith, *A Collection of Ranter Writings*. For the Brethren of the Free Sprit see Raoul Vaneigem’s *Movement of the Free Spirit*.

†113. A more hostile declaration is heard in the *Hymn of Sheikh A’rabaghi Ant’uzi*: “The Talibs, sufis and mullahs / [They are] liars, stupid, / On the Doomsday their heads will be thrown to hell.” Asatrian and Arakelova, *Religion of the Peacock Angel*, 128.

*114. See also the Rig Veda in which the cows or waters are concealed in a cave; and the myth of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus; and the underground faery world of the Celts; etc.

*115. This trope is taken further in the “Hymn of Mezin,” hilariously: “Sultan Ezi has turned our very homes and houses to wine for us.” Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 169.

*116. The cupbearer (*saqi*) is often a figure for the *murshid*, the initiating teacher; Kreyenbroek suggests it refers to a Yezidi propagandist. Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 175, n. 163.

*117. Spät quotes G. Furlani, “L’antidualismo dei Yezidi,” *Orientalia* 13 (1944): 236–67, who argues that Yezidism is not just monist but “anti-dualist.” Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 159, n. 438. I have not seen Furlani’s work.

*118. As the Ranters used to say in greeting one another, “Rejoice, fellow creature. All is ours!”

*119. Logically, this would have been during the period when Sheikh Adi’s orthopraxy was being replaced by Yezidi “truth”—a process attributed to Hasan ibn Adi, but possibly inaugurated (secretly) by Adi himself.

*120. Van Bruinessen saw some Ahl-i Haqq raising pigs, and the heretical Barzani Naqshbandis ate them. The Yezidis abstain. Kreyenbroek

understands the hymn's praise of the pig as way of stressing "the distinction between the metaphorical 'swine,' viz. the followers of the Shari'a, and the actual pig or wild boar"³²—to the advantage of the nonmetaphorical pig!

[*121.](#) We might call a tent floating on water a type of "antinomian architecture"!

[*122.](#) Turning water into wine is of course Christ's special miracle. A legend says that the *sanjak* called Izdai (Yazid) is "a man made out of grapes," though no such idol appears to exist in reality. Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 231. The allegory of the dye pots goes back to Gnostic gospels of Jesus's infancy, and perhaps further.

[*123.](#) This appears to refer to a poem by Rumi in which the "beloved" is both the thief and the guard who shouts "Thief!"

[*124.](#) *Mélanges*, vol. 4 (1910): 232–312; vol. 5, no. 1 (1911): 79–267; vol. 5, no. 2 (1912): 589–724; vol. 6 (1913): 403–92; vol. 7 (1914): 211–44. Special thanks to the Woodstock (NY) Public Library Interlibrary Loan Department for getting me photocopies of this work.

[*125.](#) This conflicts with Yezidis' description of Yazid as blond or red-haired, although they do mention the pockmarks.

[*126.](#) Sarjun may have been the father of John of Damascus, aka Saint John Damascene (ca. 675–740), the theologian, liturgiologist, hymnist, iconodule, and author of one of the earliest Christian polemics against Islam, *The Fountain of Wisdom*. The saint's feast is on March 27.

[*127.](#) See Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 453, for the charge of incest raised by Yazid's Medinese detractors.

[*128.](#) The cane is a reminder of a strange Yezidi myth in which the children of Eve plot to kill the son of Adam that was born of the mystic pearl (see chapter 6, "Angelology"), but Melek Ta'us "came on that night and struck the mouth of Adam and Eve's children *with his cane*, and thus, they spoke different languages" and could not carry out the plot. Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 331, n. 944, italics mine.

[*129.](#) For a poetic response by Yazid to these insults see chapter 12, selection 5.

[†130.](#) See Wellhausen, *The Arab Kingdom and Its Fall*, 148–49, 165. In fact the stone was always black, being a meteorite such as Near Eastern pagans often used to worship, especially Syrians, like the Roman emperor Elagabalus. But the myth resonates nicely with later anti-Islamic Yezidi notions about the holiness of blackness as emblematic of esoteric antinomianism.

[*131.](#) A station on the Hajj, between Mina and Arafat near Mecca. It is here that pilgrims gather pebbles for the ritual Stoning of the Devil.

[*132.](#) See Stavenhagen, *Testament of Alchemy*, 62.

[*133.](#) In Yezidi legend, Sheikh Adi is a direct descendent of Yazid. Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 103–4.

[†134.](#) Hal is said by Kreyenbroek to be khat (*Celastrus edulis*), “consumed by some Sufis to lighten the burden of fasting.” Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 40, n. 5.

[*135.](#) From W. A. Clouston’s *Arabian Poetry for English Readers* (Glasgow, 1881), 107.

[*136.](#) These lines could pass muster in a Sufi ghazal. De Slane agrees: “These verses seem to have mystic import; the Beloved signifying the Divinity.” *Ibn Khallikan’s Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 3, 68, n. 3.

[*137.](#) Salah al-Din al-Munajjid, the editor of Yazid’s collected poems, raises doubts about this story: “Why would Ibn Abbas know the smell of wine, but not Husayn? What was the point of barring Ibn Abbas? When Yazid visited the Hijaz in 671, and again the next year, he was a person of no consequence—so why would Husayn, the Prophet’s grandson, pay him a visit? Furthermore, Husayn was Yazid’s elder by more than twenty years. How could Yazid invite him to drink?” *Shi‘r Yazid*, 51.

[*138.](#) The poem is elsewhere attributed to other poets of Yazid’s day, including al-Akhtal (a Christian), Abu Dahbal al-Jumani (a Shiite), and al-Ahwas al-Ansari (a roué of Medina).

[*139](#). Zamzam: the holy well at Mecca, believed by Yezidis to flow underground and reappear in Lalish, at the shrine of Sheikh Adi; the “Spout” is the rain gutter of the Kaaba, called al-Hatim.

[*140](#). Relevant to these matters, Martin van Bruinessen has an excellent article entitled “The Peacock in Sufi Cosmology and Popular Religion: Connections between Indonesia, south India, and the Middle East in the open-access online journal *Epistémé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman*.

[†141](#). See Richard H. David, “Praises of the Drunken Peacocks.”

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Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 106.
- [23.](#) Asatrian and Arakelova, *Religion of the Peacock Angel*, 61.

- [24.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 159.
- [25.](#) Corbin, “Realism and Symbolism of Colors in Shiite Cosmology,” 49–55.
- [26.](#) Corbin, “Realism and Symbolism of Colors in Shiite Cosmology,” 63, 74, 77.
- [27.](#) Corbin, “Realism and Symbolism of Colors in Shiite Cosmology,” 93.
- [28.](#) Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 135.
- [29.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 85.
- [30.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 98, discussed in Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 200ff.
- [31.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 338.
- [32.](#) Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 191.
- [33.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 369–70.
- [34.](#) Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 316.
- [35.](#) Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 320.
- [36.](#) Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 327; Seabrook, *Adventures in Arabia*, 311.
- [37.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 91.
- [38.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 96, 98.
- [39.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 187.
- [40.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 125.
- [41.](#) Awn, *Satan’s Tragedy and Redemption*, 143.
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- [44.](#) Cheak, “Perfect Black: Egypt and Alchemy,” 55.
- [45.](#) Mead, *Thrice-Greatest Hermes*, 149.

- [46.](#) Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, 100, 103.
- [47.](#) Corbin, *Man of Light*, 106.
- [48.](#) Corbin, *Man of Light*, 107.
- [49.](#) Corbin, *Man of Light*, 117.
- [50.](#) Corbin, *Man of Light*, 118.
- [51.](#) Alexander Roob, *The Hermetic Museum: Alchemy and Mysticism*, 263, 357.
- [52.](#) Roob, *Hermetic Museum*, 556.
- [53.](#) Roob, *Hermetic Museum*, 678.
- [54.](#) Roob, *Hermetic Museum*, 151.
- [55.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 221–23.
- [56.](#) Drower, *Peacock Angel*, 102.
- [57.](#) Stavenhagen, *Testament of Alchemy*, 39.
- [58.](#) Stavenhagen, *Testament of Alchemy*, 74–75.
- [59.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 26.
- [60.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 104, 110.
- [61.](#) David Klotz, *Adoration of the Ram*, 180.
- [62.](#) Cheak, “Alchemy as Hieratic Art (Selections).”

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- [1.](#) Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*, 44.
- [2.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 227.
- [3.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 368–69, 370.
- [4.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 373.
- [5.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 173–75.
- [6.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 123.

- [7.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 99, n. 204.
- [8.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 43, n. 89.
- [9.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 57.
- [10.](#) Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 245, n. 706.
- [11.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 93.
- [12.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 168.
- [13.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 386–88.
- [14.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 391.
- [15.](#) Stavenhagen, *Testament of Alchemy*, 27.
- [16.](#) Stavenhagen, *Testament of Alchemy*, 76.
- [17.](#) Stavenhagen, *Testament of Alchemy*, 65.
- [18.](#) Stavenhagen, *Testament of Alchemy*, 75–76.
- [19.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 27.
- [20.](#) Joseph, *Devil Worship*, 40.
- [21.](#) Joseph, *Devil Worship*, 181.
- [22.](#) Joseph, *Devil Worship*, 31.
- [23.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 247; Asatrian and Arakelova, *Religion of the Peacock Angel*, 17.
- [24.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 34–5.
- [25.](#) Davis, “Cult of the Peacock Angel,” 197.
- [26.](#) Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 350, n. 13.
- [27.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 274–81.
- [28.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 279, n. 2.
- [29.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 275.
- [30.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 279, n. 5.

- [31.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 277.
- [32.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 279, n. 10.
- [33.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 154.
- [34.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 155-6.

CHAPTER 11. LEGEND AND LIFE OF THE CALIPH YAZID IBN MU‘AWIYA

- [1.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 131–38 and 157–72.
- [2.](#) Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 117.
- [3.](#) Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 117–18.
- [4.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 143.
- [5.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 149.
- [6.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 150.
- [7.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 151.
- [8.](#) Joseph, *Devil Worship*, 67–68.
- [9.](#) Joseph, *Devil Worship*, 56.
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- [11.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 80–81.
- [12.](#) Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 337–38.
- [13.](#) Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 172, n. 37; 289.
- [14.](#) Joseph, *Devil Worship*, 67; and see Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 43 n. 83. 15. Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 261.
- [15.](#) Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 172–73.
- [16.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 491.
- [17.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 493.

- [18.](#) G. R. Hawting, “Yazid,” 309–10.
- [19.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 468–69.
- [20.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 212.
- [21.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 36–37.
- [22.](#) Hawting, “Yazid,” 310.
- [23.](#) Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*, 11.
- [24.](#) Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*, 12.
- [25.](#) Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*, 12.
- [26.](#) al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 19, 198–99.
- [27.](#) al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 19, 202.
- [28.](#) Hawting, “Yazid,” 310.
- [29.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 33.
- [30.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 29.
- [31.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 212.
- [32.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 452.
- [33.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 465.
- [34.](#) al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 19, 169.
- [35.](#) al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 19, 175.
- [36.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 80.
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- [38.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 171–72.
- [39.](#) al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 19, 190.
- [40.](#) Hawting, “Yazid,” 310.
- [41.](#) 244 Notes

- [42.](#) al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 19, 225–26.
- [43.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 475–76.
- [44.](#) Wellhausen, *The Arab Kingdom and Its Fall*, 168–69.
- [45.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 455.
- [46.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 466.
- [47.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 467.
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- [49.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 476.
- [50.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 479–80.
- [51.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 479–80.
- [52.](#) Field and Glubb, “The Yedizis, Sulubba, and Other Tribes,” 5.
- [53.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 452.
- [54.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 478.
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- [56.](#) Stavenhagen, *Testament of Alchemy*, 61–64.
- [57.](#) Lammens, *Le Califat de Yazid*, 18–20.
- [58.](#) Asatrian and Arakelova, *Religion of the Peacock Angel*, 47.
- [59.](#) Kreyenbroek, “Yazīdī,” 313; and in Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 16.
- [60.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 27–28.
- [61.](#) Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 28.

CHAPTER 12. POEMS OF THE CALIPH YAZID

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- [2.](#) al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 19, 184–88.
- [3.](#) al-Tabari, *The History*, vol. 19, 204–5; *Shi‘r Yazid*, 39.

- [4.](#) Escorial MS arabe 391; see Paul Schwarz, *Escorial-Studien zur arabischen Literatur und Sprachkunde*, 56–59.

APPENDIX. INDIA

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- [2.](#) Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 33–34.
- [3.](#) Joseph, *Devil Worship*, 192.
- [4.](#) Kreyenbroek and Allison, *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, 86–87.
- [5.](#) Collins, *From the Ashes of Angels*, 182.
- [6.](#) Drower, *Peacock Angel*, 99–100.
- [7.](#) Asatrian and Arakelova, *Religion of the Peacock Angel*, 118–20, n. 41.
- [8.](#) Kreyenbroek and Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect*, 256–61.
- [9.](#) Ahmed, *The Yezidis*, 384.
- [10.](#) Spät, *Late Antique Motifs*, 430.
- [11.](#) Harrigan, “Yezidis and Hindus.”
- [12.](#) Pinkham, *Truth Behind the Christ Myth*, 20–21.

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