

THE CHAINS OF THE LAW HAVE BEEN
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Secrets of the Assassins

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Islämic Heresy'

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Secrets of the Assassins

1. A Fatimid Chrestomathy

On the seventeenth of Ramazan, Hasan II—upon whose mention be peace— caused his followers to come to Alamut. They raised four great banners—white red yellow & green—at the four corners of the minbar. At noon he came down from the fortress & in a most perfect manner mounted the pulpit. Baring his sword he cried: O inhabitants of the worlds, djinn, men & angels! Someone has come to me in secret from the Imam, who has lifted from you the burden of the Law & brought you to the Resurrection. Then he set up a table & seated the people to break the fast. On that day they showed their joy with wine & repose.

Rashid al-Din

He sacrifices a camel & raises a red standard, lays castles waste & lifts the curtain of Concealment which is the door of the Law. He ought to be called the Orphan Pearl, for he has produced bezels on the limitations of Reason.

Haft Bab-i Baba Sayyidna

The same power which appears in sun moon & stars, that power is in a black stone, & in darkness. Spirit & body are complete & perfect through each other. Separate from each other they do not exist.

Ibid.

2. The Chains of the Law

Metaphysics abandons the city: all the greystone angels which decorate the bridge come to life & flap heavily up into the low mist. Everything on either side of the skin falls subject to doubt. Quick! reconstruct something to outlive this betrayal. . .

is not a matter of belonging to a sect, but of having-knowledge (erfan); not a matter of history, but of the personal cycle which brings the soul to the land of Hyperborea, ruled by Khezr; or the island of emerald where the Imam awaits his time; the personal moment of awakening into reality, of rebirth in the knowledge of self, of the Qiyamat.

(Penang)

7. Ghazal

The Old Man of the Mountain my child
has faithful servants fanatics of love
drugged with green shadows of paradise.

Climb that cliff he orders them
& at my command leap into the abyss
riding clouds on your rainbow drums

or else fall to your death.
The Old Man in his black silk robe
striding the top of his tower!

Child I will jump without hesitation
without choosing or not choosing. For you
are the Witness at the middle of my night.

Score this song for trebles & organs
like a Mass for the Lord of Earthquakes
& we'll smoke to commemorate my apotheosis.

(London)

the Law of the Ordinary. The shaman knows that freedom is upside-down and inside-out. To realize it, against the sluggish tide of the ordinary, necessitates a spiritual path of reversed polarities, outrageous trickery and unseemly behavior. Tribal society preserves a sense of the “sacredness” of such reversals. Civilization and outward religion gradually suppress them or evolve a theological mysticism which explains and allegorizes them away.

The final argument of religion, even and especially of religious mysticism, is to point out that most humans are in fact not “realized” beings and therefore must remain subject to Law. To proclaim a Qiyamat—so say the righthand mystics—violates the actual unspiritual nature of man’s lowly and somnolent existence. Finally, it seems, no one, not even the saints, is worthy of freedom. Real freedom, it seems, is found in submission, not to Reality, but to the Law which struggles against Nature for our souls.

For the adherents of the Qiyamat there is no need to engage in polemics, and in fact no vocabulary shared with , exotericism in which such an argument might be carried out. The only reply that can be made to orthodoxy and to orthodox mystics is that man is already free, whatever his brain may tell him, and no matter how many times he “forgets”. Indeed, the Qiyamat is no more than a reminder, stated by necessity in the baldest, most open and uncontentious manner possible in the vocabulary of the period: that realization is not a becoming but a being. If the soul continually falls back into the structures and traps of dogma and moralism, then it must be continually jolted loose again by “revolutionary” proposals such as the Qiyamat.

No one pins the label “heretic” on himself, for realization is not a matter of being “against” anything. But once it has been pinned, it may come to be worn with a certain pride, not unmixed with a sense of irony. If the heresy then becomes a religion in itself, this does not lessen the spontaneity or beauty or efficacy of the original moment of insight. It is always possible to be one of the people of the Qiyamat. It

The cupbearer—call him the Saki for the sake of style— remains when all else fails; and desire, the unhealed wound. Sometimes a crack opens between the two, like the rose I set between myself & the Saki. Everything else is losing its grip: a spectral flight of luminous gulls across the low grey sky, over the bridge.

And the Law abandons us, another ponderous escape of stone angels. I have no reason to love the Law—why should I? Must I refuse the wine in the cup & the shaman’s embroidered robe, all to pay a price? no realization without Law, sin & hell? the city’s redsmoke image!

Now darkness. . . in the darkness appears another angel—no way of knowing if it can be trusted—certainly not carved of stone—it looks like the Saki—it filters into the imagination like trembling smoke. It opens this book, A Fatimid Chrestomathy: on a certain day an angelic youth ascended a throne on a mountaintop in lost Persia, announcing that the chains of the Law have been broken.

I have no idea who is speaking, who is being spoken to. I swear by my pen I do not believe or disbelieve. The mist closes over the bridge like tuberculosis.

(London)

3. Eagle’s Nest

After the death of the Prophet Mohammad, the new Islamic community was ruled in succession by four of his close Companions, chosen by the people and called the Rightfully-guided Caliphs. The last of these was Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet’s son-in-law.

Ali had his own ardent followers among the faithful, who came to be called Shi’a or “adherents”. They believed that Ali should have succeeded Mohammad by right, and that after him his sons (the

Prophet's grandsons) Hasan and Husayn should have ruled; and after them, their sons, and so on in quasi-monarchical succession.

In fact except for Ali none of them ever ruled all Islamdom. Instead they became a line of pretenders, and in effect heads of a branch of Islam called Shiism. In opposition to the orthodox (Sunni) Caliphs in Baghdad these descendants of the Prophet came to be known as the Imams.

To the Shiites an Imam is far more, far higher in rank than a Caliph. Ali ruled by right because of his spiritual greatness, which the Prophet recognized by appointing him his successor (in fact Ali is also revered by the sufis as “founder” and prototype of the Moslem saint). Shiites differ from orthodox or Sunni Moslems in believing that this spiritual pre-eminence was transferred to Ali's descendants through Fatima, the Prophet's daughter.

The sixth Shiite Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq, had two sons. The elder, Ismail, was chosen as successor. But he died before his father. Jafar then declared his own younger son Musa the new successor instead.

But Ismail had already given birth to a son—Mohammad ibn Ismail—and proclaimed him the next Imam. Ismail's followers split with Jafar over this question and followed Ismail's son instead of Musa. Thus they came to be known as Ismailis.

Musa's descendants ruled “orthodox” Shiism. A few generations later, the Twelfth Imam of this line vanished without trace from the material world. He still lives on the spiritual plane, whence he will return at the end of this cycle of time. He is the “Hidden Imam”, the Mahdi foretold by the Prophet. “Twelver” Shiism is the religion of Iran today.

The Ismaili Imams languished in concealment, heads of an underground movement which attracted the extreme mystics and revolutionaries of Shiism. Eventually they emerged as a powerful force at the head of an army, conquered Egypt and established the

realized self is twice-born. In the Abrahamic tradition, the doctrine of bodily resurrection is necessary in order to bring theology into line with the absolute demands of Unity. For any non-dualistic metaphysics, even the body must eventually be seen as “real”; even the rankest neo-platonist would have to agree. The myth of the afterlife, therefore, cannot be allowed to “spiritualize” the body into insignificance. Hence the idea of the resurrection of the body. “Even” the body will be reborn into the One.

The Alamut Qiyamat however sets aside all vexed and vexing problems of metaphysics (such as the immortality of the soul and/or body) by declaring that metaphysics and physics are indistinguishable: this body, this soul, here and now, is free. The idea of reward and punishment after death is meaningless in this context, except as a symbol for immediate psychological reality. One is “reborn” into the present, into presence.

Hasan-i Sabbah's famous saying, “Nothing is true, everything is permitted,” is on one level an esoteric restatement of Islam's basic assertion, “No god but God”™—or rather, “No reality but the Real.” If all that exists is “God”, the absolute being, the Void, then all that exists is “no-thing” (or mu in the Taoist/Zen tradition)—and if all that exists is God, how could anything be other than permissible (halal)? This is the realization behind Hasan II's saying that “The chains of the Law have been broken”, for on another level Sabbah's dictum explains the reason for the interiorization of the Law through ta'wil and its consequent abrogation on the material plane. The Qiyamat is quite openly antinomian—or rather a-nomian in essence and scandalous from the point of view of outward Islam. The celebrants drank wine because they were reborn in “paradise”, but also to demonstrate that in order to interiorize the Law it is necessary to reverse its symbolism (all symbols are reversible) and actually abrogate it, “break” it. This is the “benign inversion” rather than the “malign inversion” of symbolism, not a demonization but an angelification.

The Law in question is not only religious Law but what might be called

that there is no paradox—like the Zen koan of the goose in the bottle — and this announcement becomes in historical terms the bootstrap by which every succeeding soul desirous of liberation can hoist itself beyond the reach of its own failures of consciousness. Thus the myriad betrayals of the Qiyamat cannot touch it or endanger it; in a sense, they do not exist. Only “salvation” exists—except that there is nothing to be saved from.

The moment of Qiyamat for the individual—or rather the moments of unceasing unveiling—constitute his “visitations” from the Hidden Imam, or Khezr, or Ovays al-Qarani, or the personal guardian angel. Human awareness is structured symbolically and perceives through form. “This,” as Ibn Arabi says, “is the vision of God in things, which some say is greater than the vision of things in God.” This vision can either be imaginal (such as a vision of Khezr, or of the Qiyamat at Alamut, or of an angel) or it can be actual (as in the “zen” perception of the immediacy of a cup of tea or a flower or whatnot). It can also be both simultaneously, as in the love of the Witness, who is both beloved and angel; or in the recognition of the Perfect Man, the historical “Imam of the Time”. In no case, however, is there any question of faith or belief or dogma—only of knowledge (erfan), of which the highest form, according to Ibn Arabi, is love.

The historical Qiyamat, then, is a symbol—an imaginal fact—to be contemplated and subjected to ta’wil, used as a focus for perception, a mode of understanding, a means to consciousness. To consider it a religious dogma is simply inappropriate. Rather, it is a gate of perception, permanently open. To walk through it one simply walks through it—and discovers that there was never a step to be taken. The Qiyamat is an affiliation without an organization, a sign for expressing a state of awareness.

There is no question here of the “bondage of form” but rather of liberation through forms; not a “saving illusion” but a reality which is already “saved”, from “pre- to posteternity” as the sufis say. On the psychological level the symbolism of resurrection is obvious: the

Fatimid dynasty, the so-called anti-Caliphate of Cairo.

The early Fatimids ruled in an enlightened manner, and Cairo became the most cultured and open city of Islam. They never succeeded in converting the rest of the Islamic world however; in fact, even most Egyptians failed to embrace Ismailism. The highly evolved mysticism of the sect was at once its special attraction and its major limitation.

In 1074 a brilliant young Persian convert arrived in Cairo to be inducted into the higher initiatic (and political) ranks of Ismailism. But Hasan-i Sabbah soon found himself embroiled in a struggle for power. The Caliph Mustansir had appointed his eldest son Nizar as successor. But a younger son, al-Mustali, was intriguing to supplant him. When Mustansir died, Nizar—the rightful heir—was imprisoned and murdered.

Hasan-i Sabbah had intrigued for Nizar, and now was forced to flee Egypt. He eventually turned up in Persia again, head of a revolutionary Nizari movement. By some clever ruse he acquired command of the impregnable mountain fortress of Alamut (“Eagle’s Nest”) near Qazvin in Northwest Iran.

Hasan-i Sabbah’s daring vision, ruthless and romantic, has become a legend in the Islamic world. With his followers he set out to recreate in miniature the glories of Cairo in this barren multichrome forsaken rock landscape.

In order to protect Alamut and its tiny but intense civilization Hasan-i Sabbah relied on assassination. Any ruler or politician or religious leader who threatened the Nizaris went in danger of a fanatic’s dagger. In fact Hasan’s first major publicity coup was the murder of the Prime Minister of Persia, perhaps the most powerful man of the era (and according to legend, a childhood friend of Sabbah’s).

Once their fearful reputation was secure, the mere threat of being on the eso-terrorist hit-list was enough to deter most people from acting

against the hated heretics. One theologian was first threatened with a knife (left by his pillow as he slept), then bribed with gold. When his disciples asked him why he had ceased to fulminate against Alamut from his pulpit he answered that Ismail arguments were “both pointed and weighty”.

Since the great library of Alamut was eventually burned, little is known of Hasan-i Sabbah’s actual teachings. Apparently he formed an initiatic hierarchy of seven circles based on that in Cairo, with assassins at the bottom and learned mystics at the top.

Ismaili mysticism is based on the concept of ta’wil, or “spiritual hermeneutics”. Ta’wil actually means “to take something back to its source or deepest significance”. The Shiites had always practised this exegesis on the Koran itself, reading certain verses as veiled or symbolic allusions to Ali and the Imams. The Ismailis extended ta’wil much more radically. The whole structure of Islam appeared to them as a shell; to get at its kernel of meaning the shell must be penetrated by ta’wil, and in fact broke open completely.

The structure of Islam, even more than most religions, is based on a dichotomy between exoteric and esoteric. On the one hand there is Divine Law (shariah), on the other hand the Spiritual Path (tarigah). Usually the Path is seen as the esoteric kernel and the Law as the exoteric shell. But to Ismailism the two together present a totality which in its turn becomes a symbol to be penetrated by ta’wil. Behind Law and Path is ultimate Reality (hagigah God Himself in theological terms—Absolute Being in metaphysical terms).

This Reality is not something outside human scope: in fact if it exists at all then it must manifest itself completely on the level of consciousness. Thus it must appear as a man, the Perfect Man—the Imam. Knowledge of the Imam is direct perception of Reality itself. For Shiites the Family of Ali is the same as perfect consciousness.

Once the Imam is realized, the levels of Law and Path fall away

and the identity of the secluded Imam.

Hasan II must have realized that such an occultist policy only deepens the dichotomy rather than reconciles it toward Unity, and for this reason he “opened” Ismailism all the way to the baten (the interior, the esoteric) and dispensed with Concealment. What more he planned at Alamut will never be known, since in true Shiite fashion he was martyred within a few years.

By proclaiming the Qiyamat, Hasan II “became” the Imam—which is no more than to say that he recognized the Imam-of-his-own-being. Whether or not he was also the secluded great-grandson of Nizar is without significance in the real context of the Qiyamat. As Corbin pointed out, it is ironic that this ultimate esotericism should in turn become yet another of the seventy-two sects, with its own dogmas and legitimacies, in a sense betraying within so few years the meaning of Hasan II’s insight. In the Islamic context, there is always room for yet another heresy—which is not inappropriate, since within the human heart there is always time for yet another unveiling. The historical fate of the Qiyamat is bound to be ironic, even at times tragic. Its inward significance however escapes all such duality, since it points directly to inwardness itself, the oneness of being, and is thus always new and always renewable.

Again, it accomplishes this ironically by the very act of penetrating history—time and space—in the proclamation at Alamut. Something of the same sort happened when Shinran told his followers that the gates of hell were closed not only for those who invoke the Name, but for good and all. Similar teachings were transmitted by the Prophet to his close Companions—but in neither case was the proclamation understood to have abrogated religious Law. Hasan II in effect tells his celebrants at their wine that his word in itself is liberation, for in fact each of them is the Imam. Being is already and in itself perfectly realized. There is

no path and no goal for those who adhere to this moment, but only haqq, reality itself. The only way out of the paradox is to announce

From the moment of the Qiyamat, which by definition stands at a slant to time, “outside” all moments, Ismaili history and hierarchy themselves fall under the gaze of ta’wil. Yet another esotericization takes place, and the whole question of “recognition of the Imam” is transposed to another plane of reference. In the cyclic imagination of Ismailism the absolute and in a sense unmanifest and unmoving aspect of being is always complemented by the awareness that being expresses or realizes itself through change; and that this movement involves, on both the micro- and macrocosmic levels, a process of uncovering. In practical terms the process is never-ending—behind the 70,000 veils is no-thing—time and space describe an arc through curtain after curtain—consciousness filling itself toward its infinite borders in the dance of Shiva, Ibn Arabi’s “continual creation”. To ride this wave consciously is to possess the prophetic light—and it is precisely into cycles of prophecy that Ismaili history divides itself.

The Qiyamat reconciles the basic dichotomy of Islam, the eso/exoteric, not so much in the sense of a dialectic, but as the mystically “logical” result of the idea of Unity (tawhid). After Ibn Arabi, there is nowhere else to go. The ta’wil demands finally that the “secrets” be openly stated, and since philosophy and outward religion alike lack the terms of reference to do this, a “new cycle” must be established.

That the Qiyamat occurred when and where it did historically is of only relative importance, since by definition the “moment” of Qiyamat is outside history, blossoming like a flower from the “nowever”, wherever consciousness apprehends it. But in the Islamic context the institution of a new cycle was of considerable importance. Men like Hallaj (whom the Ismailis claim for themselves) had been martyred for their own individual Qiyamats. The reaction of Hasan-i Sabbah was to withdraw from the Islamic world both physically in Alamut and spiritually through taqqiya or Concealment. A pyramid of initiation insured that only the higher adepts knew the “secret”, which involved the dangerous teaching of the abrogation or interiorization of the Law,

naturally like split husks. Knowledge of inne meaning frees one from adherence to outer form: the ultimate victory of the esoteric over the exoteric.

The “abrogation of the Law” however was considered open heresy in Islam. For their own protection Shiites always been allowed to practise taqqiya, “permission: dissimulation” or Concealment, and pretend to beodox to escape death or punishment. Ismailis could tend to be Shiite or Sunni, whichever was most advantageous

For the Nizaris, to practise Concealment practise the Law; in other words, pretending to beodox meant obeying the Islamic Law. Hasan-i imposed Concealment on all but the highest at Alamut, because in the absence of the Imam the illusion must naturally conceal the esoteric truth fact freedom.

In fact, who was the Imam? As far as history concerned, Nizar and his son died imprisoned and executed. Hasan-i Sabbah was therefore a legitimist stilling a non-existent pretender! He never claimed to be Imam himself, nor did his successor as “Old Man Mountain,” nor did his successor. And yet they all proclaimed “in the name of Nizar”. Presumably the answer mystery was revealed in the seventh circle of initiation

Now the third Old Man of the Mountain had named Hasan, a youth who was learned, generous and loveable. Moreover he was a mystic, an initiate for the deepest teachings of Ismailism and Even during his father’s lifetime some Alamutis had whispered that young Hasan was the true Imam; he had heard of these rumors and denied them. I am the 1st Imam, he said, so how could my son be the Imam?

In 1162 the father died and Hasan (call him H to distinguish him from Hasan-i Sabbah) became Imam at Alamut. Two years later, on the seventeenth of Re (August 8) in 1164, he proclaimed the Qiyamat, or Resurrection. In the middle of the month of F at Alamut broke its fast forever and proclaimed the holiday.

The resurrection of the dead in their bodies at the “end of Time” is one of the most difficult doctrines of Islam (and Christianity as well). Taken literally it is absurd. Taken symbolically however it encapsulates the experience of the mystic. He “dies before death” when he comes to realize the separative and alienated aspects of the self, the ego-as—programmed—illusion. He is “reborn” in consciousness but he is reborn in the body, as an individual, the “soul-at-peace”.

When Hasan II proclaimed the Great Resurrection, which marks the end of Time, he lifted the veil of Concealment and abrogated the religious Law. He offered communal as well as individual participation in the mystic’s great adventure, perfect freedom.

As will be seen in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, he acted on behalf of the Imam, and did not claim to be the Imam himself. (In fact he took the title of Caliph or “representative”.) But if the family of Ali is the same as perfect consciousness, then perfect consciousness is the same as the family of Ali. The realized mystic “becomes” a descendant of Ali (like the Persian Salman, whom Ali adopted by covering him with his cloak, and who is much revered by sufis, Shiites and Ismailis alike). In Reality, in hagigah, Hasan II was the Imam because, in the Ismaili phrase, he had realized the “Imam-of-hisown-being.” The Qiyamat was thus an invitation to each of his followers to do the same, or at least to participate in the pleasures of paradise on earth.

The legend of the paradisaal garden at Alamut where the houris, cupbearers, wine and hashish of paradise were enjoyed by the Assassins in the flesh, may stem from a folk memory of the Qiyamat. Or it may even be literally true. For the realized consciousness this world is no other than paradise, and its bliss and pleasures are all permitted. The Koran describes paradise as a garden. How logical then for wealthy Alamut to become outwardly the reflection of the spiritual state of the Qiyamat.

But no path remains at all.

Or rather, by the logic of the Resurrection all paths are permitted, valid. Hasan is one symbol of the Imam of one’s own being, but other symbols exist, an infinite number of beloveds, of faces reflected in the cup. To penetrate any one of these symbols by taking it back to its source is to realize the Imam. The symbols one penetrates are the path one follows.

In this dark garden, the flowers I choose mark out for me a pathway yet each of these white roses itself is the object of desire. My wanderings are guided by you alone in whatever costume you appear; desire will discover the face behind the veil, the mask of saki, flower, cup or wine.

(London)

6. Assassinations

The houris of paradise are the ideas which at once appear in one’s essence when one feels desire. Whatever one wishes—with regard to the perception of the intelligibles—will appear in one’s soul, one’s essence. Thus shall one be forever in bliss; for the beginning of knowledge, & its ultimate aim, will have become joined together. This is the achievement of the idea of an angel.

Nasiroddin Tusi The Rosegarden of Submission

He makes one faithful, another an infidel, he fills the world with tumult & wrong. Taverns have been edified by his lips. . . All my desire has been accomplished

through him.

—Mahmud Shabestari
Rosegarden of the Secret

transcended: A shaykh was once dancing in ecstasy and was repeatedly called to perform the ritual prayer. "I am praying!" he replied.

'Some will say that only in the state of Union can the seal

be broken. Only when no two survive can I say, "I am the One." Did not Hallaj die on the gibbet?

Hasan answers that "no reality but the Real" negates all states and stations, by relating all separated souls to the one Subject, the Self. Objectively no fragmented self exists to experience or not experience the state of Union. "I" is always in that state. That state is no thing, and that state is true.

Whether the brain knows or not is irrelevant. If one knows, one is a gnostic; but who is this gnostic? No body.

And who is this Nemo who knows? The Imam. Outside yourself you call him Hasan, and mention "peace" upon his name. Inside yourself you call him "the-Imam-of-mybeing."

Inside, he abrogates all prescription: "Everything is permitted."
Outside, he proclaims the Resurrection, so that the Chains of the Law are broken.

To realize the Imam of one's own being one must begin by acknowledging him. To acknowledge him is to submit to his rule. And his rule—his reality—is "No thing is true; every thing is permitted.'

For the world to continue in manifestation there must exist a living embodiment of this Rule: the Imam seen in the world: Hasan. In relation to you Hasan is the "Beloved", and his Rule brings with it the dispensation of an absolute esotericism: the ways of Law and Path become the way of Reality.

In 1166 Hasan II was murdered after only four years of rule. His enemies were perhaps in league with conservative elements at Alamut who resented the Qiyamat, the dissolving of the old secret hierarchy (and thus their own power as hierarchs) and who feared to live thus openly as heretics. Hasan II's son however succeeded him and established the Qiyamat firmly as Nizari doctrine.

If the Qiyamat were accepted in its full implications however it would probably have brought about the dissolution and end of Nizari Ismailism as a separate sect. Hasan II as Qa'im or "Lord of the Resurrection" had released the Alamutis from all struggle and all sense of legitimist urgency. Pure esotericism, after all, cannot be bound by any form.

Hasan II's son, therefore, compromised. Apparently he decided to "reveal" that his father was in fact and in blood a direct descendant of Nizar. The story runs that after Hasan-i Sabbah had established Alamut, a mysterious emissary delivered to him the infant grandson of Imam Nizar. The child was raised secretly at Alamut. He grew up, had a son, died. The son had a son. This baby was born on the same day as the son of the Old Man of the Mountain, the outward ruler. The infants were surreptitiously exchanged in their cradles. Not even the Old Man knew of the ruse. Another version has the hidden Imam committing adultery with the Old Man's wife, and producing as love-child the infant Hasan II.

The Ismailis accepted these claims. Even after the fall of Alamut to the Mongol hordes the line survived, and the present leader of the sect, the Aga Khan, is known as the forty-ninth in descent from Ali (and pretender to the throne of Egypt!). The emphasis on Alid legitimacy has preserved the sect as a sect. Whether it is literally true or not, however, matters little to an understanding of the Qiyamat.

With the proclamation of the Resurrection, the teachings of Ismailism were forever expanded beyond the borders imposed on them by any historical event. The Qiyamat remains as a state of consciousness

which anyone can adhere to or enter, a garden without walls, a sect without a church, a lost moment of Islamic history that refuses to be forgotten, standing outside time, a reproach or challenge to all legalism and moralism, to all the cruelty of the exoteric. An invitation to paradise.

(New York)

4. The Great Resurrection

It is too easy to write “representationally”—to write sequential and reasonable prose. Finally very little of any importance can be said in that medium since it comes from and directs itself to one section of consciousness to the exclusion of all others. Only poetry (including texts to be read as well as texts to be sung) and story can address consciousness as a whole—which means that poetry and story are both impenetrably difficult and ridiculously simple at the same time—but never “easy” in the sense of “cheaply acquired”.

As soon as an idea or image requires expression in the dry form of prose one can be sure it wants to polemicize, to dualize and to offer discrete definitions rather than a field of perception. The intellect, proverbial one-winged bird, deals from a position of weakness because it demands dogma, and dogma demands defense; and as the samurai know, there exists no such thing as an adequate defense. Slash! and that’s the beginning and end of it.

: When intellect becomes intuition it sheds prose like a snakeskin. In this sense, art is necessary because it constitutes the only possible language of such a re-birth. As a Javanese pamong once told me, “We must all be great artists.” The problem with the doctrine of Qiyamat is precisely that it is a doctrine—a means of representing a reality which by definition (or rather by transcending definition) cannot be represented but only present. Poetry and story can possess such presence—or at least point directly to it—while the work of prosaic Reason cannot.

social freedom of an Alamut cannot be attained, this in no way lessens the importance of the personal freedom granted by the interiorization of the Alamut-story, and of the Qiyamat.

Ultimately society and Law can do nothing to impinge on this freedom—except to hang the free man from gibbet in Baghdad. You are already free, says the Lord of the Resurrection. So there exists no other story worth living, whatever the risk.

(Suryakarta)

5. Sijil

So he might have said, the Imam Hasan II, Upon Whose Mention Be Peace: “Nothing is true; everything is permitted.” This was the teaching of Hasan-i Sabbah, the first Grand Master of Alamut, called the Old Man of the Mountain.

To begin, remember the Testimony of Faith: “There is no god but God.” There is no reality but the Real.

“There is no reality. . .”: the Negation: all manifestation is unreal. . .

“..but the Real”: the Affirmation through paradox. If only the Real exists then all things partake of this Reality, are this Reality. As Hallaj declared, “I am the Truth.”

All things are but reflections, images of the saki’s face in the winecup on the mirror of the wine. Knowing this, how can one refuse a thing?

But in the way of the Law it is said, “Some of His manifestations are above others: the talisman of prohibition seals up the cask of wine.” In the way of the Path it is said, “One accepts what the Beloved commands, be it Union or Separation.”

But for the heart in a state of Union the level of the Law is

Ismaili story can be trusted whether it is literally true or not, because the very nature of what is taught or told ensures and necessitates a transmutation into “myth”. Marco Polo’s tall-tale of the drugged devotees is certainly not meaningless, even though told by an outsider. The fable of the childhood pact made by Omar Khayyam, Hasan-i Sabbah and the Nizam al-Mulk is also an outsider’s romance, but not without significance. The story that the last Old Man of the Mountain became the wandering dervish Shams of Tabriz (Rumi’s spiritual companion) is historically impossible but resonant with hints and clues.

Finally, the most trustworthy stories are those tracable to the Assassins themselves. The story of the Qiyamat revolves around its central image, the mandala marked out by four cosmic banners surrounding a pulpit. . .the blackrobed figure with raised sword. . .the mountain fortress in the background, umber and ochre and grey. . .the circle of warrior-scholars with their wine-cups, breaking the sacred fast of Ramazan. . .the cobalt-blue desert sky. . .

This mandala breaks loose from the moorings of its historical setting, and even from the text in which it is embedded. It becomes a complex of images, an Emblem, which can be located in the consciousness and expanded, brought to life as an integral element in one’s own individual story—the personal myth which always comprises a movement from unawareness toward realization.

Meditation thus becomes narration. The symbols one penetrates make up the path one follows, as with the - Grail knights, whose adventures were subjected to the ta’wil of the forest hermits.

The outward physical-historical Alamut, the “hidden garden” where devotees were freed of State and Church, tax, dogma and Law—this image perhaps cannot be imposed on the “real world”, was perhaps but a fleeting vision, even in Alamut itself. It is amusing to speculate about the possibility of experimenting with some of the practical teachings of Alamut in the context of today’s world. But even if the

So the rational doctrine of the Qiyamat must contain within itself the intuitional key to its own dissolution— like a tapestry which can be unravelled from one loose hanging thread. The tapestry itself is “unreal”, a weaving (baftan) as opposed to a certainty (yaftan)— whereas the absence of the tapestry is real and “solid” since it unveils reality itself.

Poetry and story, which vanish like a cycle of cat’scradles into the zero of the circle of logos-thread, can present reality far more effectively than prose. The image, unlike the idea, cannot be defined but must be identified with. The poetic or narrative image is open, like the integrated consciousness. Closed dogmatic systems are composed of ideas, not images.

Since the doctrine of Qiyamat is precisely a doctrine of unveiling it must possess a key, in the form of an image, which opens it. Inasmuch as it consists of a polemic carried out by esotericism (maarifat) on behalf of reality (hagigat) as opposed to mysticism (tarigat) on behalf of religion (shariat), the doctrine of Qiyamat expresses itself representationally, sequentially and reasonably. Inasmuch however as it concerns only reality, transcending all dualism and abstraction, it must center around an image.

Precisely in the story of the Qiyamat such an image is found, and it is also, as it happens, a poetic image (perhaps the poetic image in Persian literature)}—the image of wine. Note that this is the image of real, actual wine, not the image of the image of wine, as with the orthodox sufis. Religious mysticism must guard the distinction between worldly wine and paradisal wine. For the sufis the power of the image arises from this dichotomy, even though strictly speaking it reduces wine from symbol to allegory. A symbol both is and represents the thing it is: symbol is jam today, allegory is always jam tomorrow.

The story of the Qiyamat however mentions actual wine (forbidden by

the Law)—drunk in violation of the Fast, in celebration of the interiorization and abrogation of both Fast and Law—a symbeol of the ultimate unity of being. For what could the wine of paradise be, if not this wine, here and now? as in the inscription on the gate of a Mughal garden: “If there is heaven on earth surely it is here, it is here!”

The image of real wine further implies the image of actual intoxication. Being-in-itself (and therefore realized consciousness) transcends sobriety and intoxication alike. But this scene of actual intoxication at Alamut offers the key to the Qiyamat doctrine because doctrine by itself is sober and thirsty and needs to be completed in madness—or perhaps “finished off” by madness.

The religious or right-hand mystic must allegorize insanity—by saying for example that the true sanity of the sage appears as lunacy to the ignorant—which is true enough from one point of view—but only from one point of view. Sanity is “Law”, and the Qiyamat is about breaking the chains of the Law; and so, from this point of view, it is about actual insanity.

“Actual insanity” of course does not mean clinical mental illness, madness as a disease, as a closing rather than an opening. To the Qiyamat-mystic it means rather the shedding of all received opinion, habit and definition, including that of order itself. From the point of view of order and Law therefore it means chaos, illegality and antinomianism. Reality itself is neither nomian nor antinomian. But esotericism, at a certain level, does imply the reversal of all symbols, the dissolution of all value systems. Here there is no appeal to a “higher order” or “purpose of existence”. Shiva dances because he dances. The dance is nature, the dance is destruction to all reason and intellect.

From the point of view of the Qiyamat, the spiritual “station” called Permanence (baga’) cannot be defined as sobriety-in-intoxication or even intoxication-in-sobriety. Permanence goes beyond all such dualistic terms. But what immediately precedes Permanence is

theology and morality is by definition delusion. Freedom of the soul, they say, lies in submission to these rules, in joyful acceptance of these strictures. Only the Absolute is free of rules, and the relative can never be the Absolute. “I am the Truth” is not to be taken literally. It is only a metaphor. And so. . . Junayd signed the death warrant for Hallaj.

Needless to say, the reconciliation of such an attitude with the pursuit of mysticism necessitates an intellectual project of immense subtlety, typified by the brilliant contortions of an al-Ghazzali or an Aquinas or a Rene Guénon—but however sophisticated the project the fact remains: you may not drink the wine of this world, and the reason why is a “mystery”. Islam is an extreme case,

*k * but in the end all religious mysticism comes to this. And in fact religions like Buddhism and Christianity, which begin with much less emphasis on “Law” than Islam or Judaism, nevertheless end with even harsher moral codes. Islam for instance knows nothing of the ideals of monasticism and chastity. Perhaps there is some sort of rule of psychic balance at play here.

Nomian and antinomian mystics agree that the mind needs to be tricked out of its illusory lack of realization. They agree that religious/mystical/ascetic activity provides a barrel of tricks. Wearing a hair shirt, like beating your head against a wall, feels so good when you stop! The sheer relief of it can catapult you into a mystical state. But why must we be so grateful to the hair shirt or to the wall that we carry them around with us for the rest of our lives, perpetuating the ritual of pain?

What the Qiyamat suggests, therefore, is not an adherence to a doctrine or dogma or Law, or even to a sect which promises liberation, but rather to the living of a story. Ismaili history is not to be trusted—a tangle of bloodlines and feuds, attacks by ignorant heresimachs. But

only possible because of Alamut's political and military security. The true esoteric teaching was still available, but once again only to high initiates, not to all who adhered to the Alamut experiment.

This historical scenario would explain the paradox first adumbrated by the late Henry Corbin, that of a sect which approaches true esotericism but then draws back and becomes simply another institution, another structure, another religion. In any case, whatever the "facts" may be, the psychological economy is quite clear: even a tiny elite finds it difficult to escape authority and discover true freedom. Over and over again, mystics who have experienced the oneness of being somehow end by offering schemata which in turn end by crystallizing into literal systems, which must then be re-submitted to ta'wil, penetrated, "bitten through".

Why do so many mystics continue to play the game of dogmatic structures, ideas and morals, when they have experienced the reality which transcends both structure and structurelessness alike? Why do they proclaim themselves gurus with utter authority over their followers' souls, and why do they themselves submit to religious codes with every evidence of sincerity? Why is a Hallaj or a Kabir so rare? Why must the Qiyamat always be betrayed—or ignored—or hidden away in the shadows of occultism? Is it simply a case of the ego re-asserting itself, or has the traditionalist orthodox mystic actually seen something beyond heretical ken, some ineffable vision of the cosmic police blotter, inscribed with absolutes and punishments and Laws which the more radical mystics have somehow simply missed?

Obviously the orthodox themselves believe this to be the case; and in the end their case boils down to this: After you die your soul is going either to heaven or hell, depend "ing on whether or not you obeyed certain rules in this life, rules which may well have made you miserable, rules which you must never question but only believe to be valid. Whatever visions you experience which may seem to offer freedom from these rules cannot possibly be real "revelations" but only tricks of the devil. Whatever inspiration fails to accord with

Annihilation (fana'), in other words intoxication.

Thus the Qiyamat definitely sides with Hallaj against the Junaydi "sober" school of sufism, and declares that intoxication is "higher" than sobriety. Even the sufis give an esoteric interpretation to the Tradition "Do not approach prayer when drunk"—but the Ismailis do not limit this to a passing "state" (hal) or even a "station" (magam). They drop the skin of Law entirely because for them intoxication is an attribute of being itself—perhaps one might say the Supreme Face of Being, since beyond the level of Annihilation there is only the faceless light of . absolute existence—which "gives back" to everything its solid reality and re-ifies the world. (Samsara is Nirvana.)

This re-ification is Permanence. . . and only the mad drunkard can know it. Of course even Permanence itself is not permanent—there is always yet another unfolding, unveiling, unflowering—but the Qiyamat goes so far as to teach that reality itself is intoxicated. (See also Mahmud Shabstari's *Gulshan-i raz*, a sufi text much read by Ismailis, which describes the drunkenness of the universe and of the angels.)

"Separation" and "Union" are attributes of the lover, not of Love. They are "real" enough, but only when temporally and psychologically defined. From the point of view of reality there is no difference between them.

We are subject as individuals to change, to periods of dryness and periods when no amount of wine will suffice; but this mutability provides no compulsion to adhere to a Law—or a Path—predicated on the supposed virtues of sobriety. In wine is remembrance. Therefore, says the Qiyamat, be drunk as much as you can, in whatever way you can. Needless to say it is not recommending alcoholism or paranoid schizophrenia. But it is also not denying that a good bottle of wine (or all sorts of other "sins" in the eyes of outward Islam) can be an adequate and even necessary support for contemplation.

Does this mean that mysticism of a purely quietistic nature, or indeed religious mysticism in general, somehow falls beneath some supreme level of realization attained by intoxication? “Higher” and “lower” are not the issue; the esotericist can have no quarrel and make no such value judgement about any Path, since all are assumed to lead to the same goal. Where a teaching such as that of the Qiyamat offends against quietism and religion in general is in maintaining that in fact there is no Path at all.

The Ismailis applied their spiritual hermeneutic (ta'wil) to scripture, but they took quite literally such lines of poetry as

Take one step outside yourself— The whole Path lasts no longer than a step.

(By Shah Nematollah Wali, another sufi much admired by Ismailis.)

Even that single step is strictly speaking non-existent, and there subsists nothing outside the self (or Self if you insist) because the self in and of itself is already the complete and total manifestation of being. On this perception depends the entire micro/macrocosmic esoteric cosmology of Ismailism, as well as the doctrine of the Perfect Man (or Imam-of-one's-own-being).

Of course for not-yet-realized consciousness, the Path does still exist; it can be spoken of as a psychological reality, but not in the strict sense as a spiritual reality. The Qiyamat simply states that one can behave as if reality were One because such in fact happens to be the case. .. so why behave as if it weren't?

Is there no such thing as an esoteric morality? The answer must be no. Pure scandal! Or at least that such a morality can only arise from consciousness and situation, not from diktat. Tantra visualizes this by making “sin” into “sacrament” and by abolishing caste. The Islamic spirit is aniconic and non-representationalist. It is not a sacramental religion. But for the Islamic esotericist a similar attitude, a tantrik style

freedom to live a spiritual and “examined” life rather than ~on ideals of social justice and “primitive communism” in the Qarmatian style. The result was that Alamut was to become a miniature renaissance, a haven for scientists and philosophers living a communal life based on meditation and pleasure, protected by a wall of daggers.

In order to establish this dream as reality, Hasan-i Sabbah found it necessary at first to disguise his goals, or rather to protect them by a series of circles of initiation within the circle of Alamut itself.

By the time of Hasan II the spiritual life within Alamut had ripened to the extent that this Concealment-within-Concealment was no longer necessary. Hasan II offered the gnosis to all his followers, proclaiming an end to the Law but also, by metaphysical necessity, to the doctrine of an exclusively external Imam. It is of no importance whether he was Nizar's great-grandson or not (and in fact the claims for his legitimacy seem to appear suddenly after, not during his lifetime). What is of importance is the realization of the Imam-of-one's-own-being, and the freedom this brings. In other words the Qiyamat was “anarchist” even from an Ismaili point of view, not to mention the orthodox Shiite or Sunni perspectives.

The reason for Hasan II's murder then becomes much more clear. The “realists” within Alamut had by this time become obsessed with the political success of the experiment, which had spread to a network of mountain fortresses and was growing wealthier than ever on tribute and assassination fees. They had no interest in the unfolding of Hasan-i Sabbah's original spiritual purpose, the creation of a context for the soul's freedom. They feared that their material success might not survive the disappearance of the hierarchy of initiation (in which the lowest rank performed as assassins), or the “democratization” of the Imamate. If everyone in Alamut were to be freed of “duty” how could they be sure anyone would still fight for its political and financial goals? Within a few years they managed to kill Hasan II, pin the blame on outsiders, and explain that the proclamation of the Qiyamat had actually been a revealing of the true (i.e. legitimate) Imam—which was

the Perfect Man “God” but equally impossible to call him “not-God”. In the perspective of the Qiyamat, or of a Hallaj, these distinctions cease to hold any true significance.)

These doctrinal and historical questions continue to concern the Nizaris, who explain that when Hasan-i Sabbah fled Egypt he also arranged for the escape of the infant grandson of the imprisoned Imam Nizar. This child grew up in seclusion at Alamut, which was apparently and openly ruled by the Grand Masters or Old Men of the Mountain. He married and fathered a child who in turn fathered a child who was at first passed off as the son of the current Grand Master, but eventually revealed himself as the true Imam: Hasan II, “upon whose mention be peace.”

Destruction of the Alamut library by the Mongols makes it difficult to maintain any historical theories with certainty, but it is widely believed that Hasan-i Sabbah established a hierarchy of initiation of seven grades, the highest of which were freed of the outer Law and allowed to know the true Imam. The proclamation of the Qiyamat would have collapsed this structure—and it is known that by no means the entire community supported the move. Certain conservative dissidents murdered Hasan II. Under his son Ismailism accepted the Qiyamat as an integral part of its teaching, but continued to insist that the true Imam must have as a living “avatar” a Fatimid in the bloodline of Nizar. The doctrine of the Imam-of-one’s-own-being was reduced to an allegory, in keeping with Shiite demands and traditions.

Despite his political authoritarianism, perhaps it was Hasan-i Sabbah himself who first taught (to the seventh circle) the doctrine of the Imam-of-one’s-own-being. Perhaps to the highest initiates he taught not a legitimist cause but an ultimate spiritual revelation, that of the total inwardness of the Imamate. With this went a political teaching which emphasized the need for freedom from religious and political authority in order to place the teaching within the grasp of those prepared to receive it. Although these politics were “anarchist” from the orthodox point of view, the Nizaris placed an emphasis on the

must spread out and permeate all of life. One can speak of a tantrik “taste” within Islamic esotericism, found for example in Hallaj’s defense of Satan (in the Tawasin); or Ibn Arabi’s contention that sexual intercourse is the highest form of contemplation (in the last chapter of the Fusus al-hikam); or in the use of hemp by “Lawless” dervishes and the Assassins; or in the imaginal yoga of “sacred pedophilia” (shahedbazi, the “Witness game”) expounded by Ahmad Ghazzali - and Awhadoddin Kermani; or in the cult of sacred kingship in Java where the royalty of the Sunan of Solo (a Moslem ruler) depends on his intercourse with the Goddess of the South Sea. Even some sufis, not to mention the orthodox ulema, have labelled such ideas “innovation” or heresy.

The usual view of antinomian morality is that the realized person can commit no ill act, since illusory ego has given way to a will in harmony with being itself. If “I am the Truth” (ana’l-haqq), then what I do is true. Or rather, since there is no true or real thing except truth or reality itself, then all action, all things are one, all things are purified of duality, and hence all are “permitted” (halal, ritually pure).

Only fully realized consciousness will be permanently harmonized in this way, and thus safeguarded against any ill action. Those seekers still subject to Separation will of course make mistakes. But even realized consciousness must know pain and suffering. And as for Separation, it is “the will of the Beloved” no less than Union.

* * The Qiyamat argues that the soul is not liberated if it remains tied to a system which by definition implies lack of liberty, a system with an impossible “catch”, a Law. The solution to the paradox, as in the Chuang Tzu, amounts to what might be called autonomianism or even anarchism (which is in fact an opening-up of sacred kingship). On the psychological level, such a realization demands a praxis which takes the place of morality in any exoteric sense. Action flows from the still center (wu wet) and as such is without limitation or definition. On the separative level it appears to flow towards the center—and thus cannot be impeded or turned back. Mistakes and setbacks, emotions

and desires, even pain and suffering are part of this inexorable flow. And if they be experienced as such, all their strength turns to wine, all their bitterness to honey.

The soul can admit defeat—as indeed death defeats it—without losing this inherent realized-ness. Eschatological considerations are negated by Occam's Razor (in other words: there may be an «afterlife» and there may not be; neither case would affect the oneness of being, so the question need not be considered). What remains is the “fact” that, whatever conditions and changes consciousness may undergo, consciousness in itself is already free, inalterably perfect, absolutely “void”.

The Qiyamat demands that life be lived in this light, on pain of failing to achieve full humanity. This light is the intoxication which informs the very ground of being— and when the 70,000 veils of light and darkness begin to fall, only the drunkard will survive the glare. Does such an esotericism preclude the mystical virtues of serenity, centeredness, compassion, et al.? Not at all. But neither does it involve the kind of quietism which accompanies denial of the individuality and the suppression or extinction of desires and emotions. Nor does it call for the ascetic self-denial preached by Lawful mysticism.

If the wine of this world and that of paradise are one,

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it is clear that life without pleasure, without *rasa*, is a “taste”-less and non-human life, spiritual only in the sense that it denies carnality. “It's easy to be a sufi,” as one Persian master told me—“what's difficult is to be human.” “The sufi is always changing”—“child of the moment.” The Qiyamat-mystic opens and surrenders to that change, or rather becomes one with it (“who” is there to “surrender”?) and rides it like a leaf on the stream, or a shaman on a tiger.

If the self is serene and compassionate, so is he. If the self is in love, so is he. If the self is intoxicated, so is he. He can “be with” his emotions, even of anguish and pain, as well as with serenity, violence or compassion—but he will not become stuck in any state or impeded by any concept, structure or event which acquires a false identification with the ego.

He lives life free of false egotism, desiccating rationalism, amputating religiosity or crippling shame. Only forgetfulness or lack of spontaneous attentiveness can deflect him from this course or cause a momentary blockage. And even these lapses can come to serve as reminders-to-remember-the-self, since one cannot help being struck by the difference between “gross” and “subtle” (*latif*) consciousness.

When material rises from the unconscious or “storehouse” it can be dealt with, transmuted into spiritual energy rather than repressed or succumbed to. “He who knows his self knows his Lord” has a psychological as well as a metaphysical dimension. Desire is as much a part of the self as any “pure” awareness; the Qiyamat-mystic can turn the former as well as the latter towards liberation (*moksha*). In following his true nature he follows his divine nature, for to do otherwise would be for him the only possible blasphemy.

If there is no development or becoming in any absolute sense, nevertheless individuals and groups follow each their own subjective arc of spiritual progress. The Qiyamat was proclaimed in an historical context which equated certain political and social modes with the mystical development of the Alamut community. In the origins of that community lay a concern for Alid legitimacy and a doctrine of “divine kingship”.

(Note: This anthropological term ducks the question of Incarnationism (*hulul*) versus Manifestationism. The Nizari Ismaili Imams have never claimed either prophecy or divinity in theological terms—which is why Ismailis are still Moslems. Sufis would say that it is impossible to call