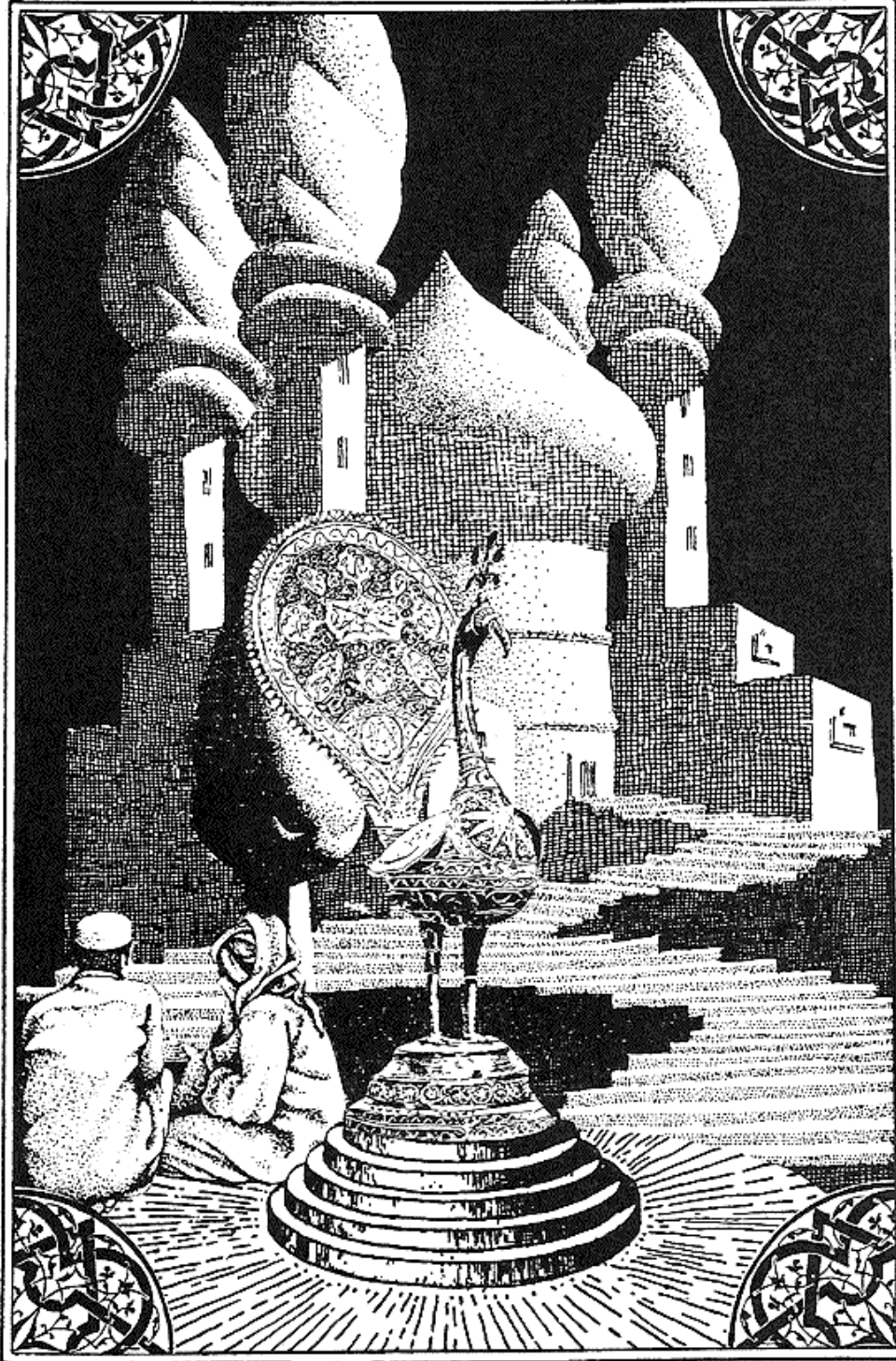


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IBLIS, THE BLACK LIGHT

SATANISM IN ISLAM



I had a Persian friend in Tehran, an avant-garde playwright and member of a sect called Ahl-i Haqq (“People of Truth” or “People of God,” “haqq” being a divine name) who traveled to the valley of the Satan-worshippers in the mid-1970s.

A Kurdish sect influenced by extreme Shi’ism, Sufism, Iranian gnosticism, and native shamanism, the Ahl-i Haqq consists of a number of subgroups, most of whose adherents are non-literate peasants. With no Sacred Book to unite these subgroups in their remote valleys, they often developed widely divergent versions of the Ahl-i Haqq myths and teachings. One subgroup venerates Satan. I know of almost nothing written about the *Shaitan-parastiyyan* or “Satan-worshippers,”¹ and not much has been done on the Ahl-i Haqq in general.² Many secrets remain unknown to outsiders.

The Tehran Ahl-i Haqq were led by a Kurdish *pir*, Ustad Nur Ali Elahi, a great musician and teacher.³ Some old-fashioned Ahl-i Haqq considered him a renegade because he revealed secrets to outsiders, i.e., non-Kurds, and even published them in books. When my friend asked him about the Satan-worshippers, however, Elahi gently rebuffed him: “Don’t worry about Shaitan; worry about the *shay-ye tai*” (literally “the thing of the body,” the carnal soul, the separative ego). My Friend ignored this doubtless good advice, and with his brother set off for Kurdistan in their Land Rover.

You have no idea how *remote* some parts of Asia can be unless you’ve been there; not even a helicopter could penetrate those jagged peaks and dedicated ravines. For the last leg of their expedition they hired donkeys. As they neared their goal they heard more about the Satan worshippers, none of it good: they were ruffians and bandits who lived on pork and wine and practiced the “blowing out of lamps” (indiscriminate ritual orgies in the dark). . . .

At last they were there — and their little caravan was met by a dozen or so long-tressed tribesmen in traditional Kurdish costume: baggy pants, turbans, guns. Scowling fiercely they greeted the brothers thus:

“Ya! Zat-i Shaitan!” — Hail, O Essence of Satan!

Compared with the thrill of that moment the rest of the trip proved anticlimactic. The villagers had long ago given up banditry (they said), and naturally there was no evidence of nocturnal perversion. Abjectly poor, they possessed nothing so exotic as a pig or a flagon of wine. As for their religion, they professed to know virtually nothing about it; either they were protecting secrets from outsiders, or they had really forgotten almost everything. Considerable knowledge can be lost in a nonliterate society devoted to secrecy and cut off from the world; leaders can die without passing on certain details, and whole villages, stricken by disease or drought, can perish or disperse and vanish.

No doubt the devil worshippers knew more than they told my friends, but in the end they seemed no more sinister than any other group of mountain Kurds, a generally noble-hearted and hospitable people when not engaged in blood-feuds, vendettas, or guerrilla warfare.

What, however, is the “essence of Satan”? In a book devoted to the teachings of Ustad Elahi,⁴ Satan is said to exist, bound and powerless, a mere fallen angel. Moreover, “apart from

1 Nothing in English, that is. Another friend, Martin van Bruinisse, a Marxist ethnographer in search of romantic rebels, also visited the Shaitan-parastiyyan and wrote something about them — in Dutch (watch *Index Islamicus* for an eventual publication of this article, which is most informative, and may appear in English). I also mentioned them, in the context of folk art, in my *Scandal: Essays In Islamic Heresy* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1988).

2 See V. Ivanov, *Truth-worshippers of Kurdistan: Ahl-i Haqq Texts* (Bombay: Ismaili Text Society). According to my informants within the sect this work is almost useless. V. Minorsky’s article “Ahl-i Haqq” in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (old series), though short, is remarkably informative.

3 For a discussion of Ustad Nur Ali Elahi, see my *Scandal: Essays In Islamic Heresy* (Brooklyn, NY.: Autonomedia, 1988).

4 Dr. Bahram Elahi (Ustad Nur Ali Elahi’s son), *The Path of Perfection*, trans. James Morris from the French version by Jean Daring (London: Rider Books, 1987). On p. 28 Elahi makes a remark which might refer to the

man, evil does not exist in nature . . . the “devil” is simply the way that the domineering self . . . expresses itself in us. . . . The story of Satan was over long ago; it only concerns God and him.” In other words, the Koranic version of the Temptation and Fall (very similar to that of Genesis) is literally true, but irrelevant. The Satan from whom all believers “take refuge” in prayer is, in truth, a projection of their own spiritual imperfection. Needless to say, this is not orthodox Islam or the opinion of most Sufis; it is, however, a very interesting resolution to a very thorny theological problem. In a religion founded on metaphysical oneness, on the unity of Reality (*tawhid*), how does one explain *evil*?

THE ADVERSARY

Biblical Judaism knows no separate principle of evil. In The Book of Job Satan — merely the Adversary, proud and wicked but still very much a part of Jehovah's cosmos and under his power — almost an aspect of the deity.

In reaction to Gnosticism (which claimed that Jehovah himself was “evil”), Christianity emphasized God's goodness to such an extent that over time Satan took on a more and more separate and substantial existence. In Christian theology (or “theodicy” to be precise) evil remains relatively unreal, or at least secondary; but in Christian *practice* the devil became “Lord of this world,” a true power, almost a principle. For this reason, in Christian culture Satanism emerged as devoted to the opposite of good, which is evil. The sort of intellectual and ritualized wickedness depicted in Huysmans's *La Bas* or in LeVey's *Satanic Bible* could never arise within Judaism, nor is it typical of Islamic culture.⁵

Allah is characterized by ninety-nine names, among them “the Tyrant” and “the Wily One.” Certain qualities associated by Christianity with “evil” are thus divinized by the Koran as attributes of God's majestic or “terrible” aspect. In this context, Satan cannot aspire to a separate or substantial autonomy — his power cannot oppose Allah's but must instead derive from and complement it. Islam admits no “original sin,” only forgetfulness of the Real; likewise, cosmos/nature cannot be considered “evil” in itself, since it is a reflection or aspect of the Real. But precisely because cosmos/nature reflects the divine all-possibility, it must also include the “terrible” possibilities of negation and illusion, including the existence of Iblis.⁶

In the Koran and accepted Traditions (*ahadith*), Satan is said to be made of fire like the djinn, not of light like the angels. Nevertheless, he is also the Angel Azazel, preacher to all the angels in preeternity, seated beneath the Throne in glory. When God creates the form of Adam and commands the angels to bow to him (because only the human is truly microcosmic), only Azazel refuses. He claims the proud superiority of fire (the psychic) over clay (the material). For this God curses him, Azazel becomes Iblis, and all proceeds more or less as in Genesis.

Given the principles of divine unity and omniscience, one might easily surmise a story hidden within this story: that God somehow wanted Iblis to become Satan, and wanted Adam

Shaitan-parastiyyan: “Certain misguided minds even go so far as to say that “Since in any event God is good and merciful, we don't need to be concerned with Him: but since all our sufferings come from the devil and the god of evil, we should rather be concerned with ensuring his favor.” And so they end up worshipping the devil.”

5 This is not to say that there are no wicked Jews or Moslems, nor that these cultures are free of “black magic,” but neither has ever given rise to *organized Satanic evil*. With the exception of the Shaitan-parastiyyan, the cult of Satan in Islam (as we shall see in the case of the Yezidis and in certain Sufis) views the devil as *secretly good*.

6 “Satan” is a title meaning “the Adversary”; “Iblis,” from the Greek for *diabolos* is his name.

and Eve to fall, so that the full drama of creation and the manifestation of all the Names might be played out unto redemption. Satan and Adam both have “free will,” yet everything is *written*, foreordained, and known. Clearly some secret is in play here, some meaning beneath the text (and the Koran, according to orthodox teaching, contain at least seven levels of meaning). It is from the esoteric science of hermeneutics and from Sufism, that an explanation of this secret arises.

THREE DEFENSES OF SATAN AS PERFECT MONOTHEIST

Of the three most famous Sufis who defended Iblis, two were executed heresy. Even today they are widely revered by many who consider Sufism to be true Islam, and they are seen as martyrs to a blind puritanical reaction.

The first and best known was Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, executed in Baghdad in A.D. 922. In his book, *The Tawasin*,⁷ he told this story:

[Sayedina Musa (Moses)] met Iblis on the slope of Sinai and said to him: “Oh Iblis, what prevented you from prostrating?” He said: “That which prevented me was my declaration of a Unique Beloved, and if I had prostrated I would have become like you, because you were only called upon once to “look at the mountain” and you looked. As for me, I was called upon a thousand times to prostrate myself to Adam and I did not prostrate myself because I stood by the Intention of my Declaration.”

Sayedina Musa said: “You abandoned a Command?” Iblis said: “It was a test. Not a command.” Sayedina Musa said: “Without sin? But your face was deformed.” Iblis replied: “Oh Musa, that is but the ambiguity of appearances, while the spiritual state does not rely on it and does not change. Gnosis remains true even as it was at the beginning and does not change even if the individual changes.”

Sayedina Musa said: “Do you remember Him now?” “Oh Musa, pure mind does not have need of memory — by it I am remembered and He is remembered. His remembrance is my remembrance, and my remembrance is His remembrance. How, when remembering ourselves, can we two be other than one? My service is now purer, my time more pleasant, my remembrance more glorious, because I served Him in the absolute for my good fortune, and now I serve Him for Himself.”

Hallaj has Iblis excuse his pride before God by saying:

If there was one glance between us, it would have been enough to make proud and imperious, but I am he who knew You in Before Endless-Time, “I am better than him” because I have served you for a longer time. No one, in the two types of beings, knows You better than I do! There was an intention of Yours in me, and an intention of mine in You, and both of them preceded Adam.

AJ-Hallaj said: “There are various theories regarding the spiritual status of Azazyl (Iblis before his fall). One said that he was charged with a mission in heaven, and with a mission on earth. In heaven he preached to the Angels showing them good works, and on earth preaching to men and jinn showing them evil deeds.

“Because one does not recognize things except by their opposite!, as with fine white silk which can only be woven using black fabric behind it — so the Angel could show good actions and say symbolically “If you do these you will be rewarded.” But he who did not know evil before cannot recognize good.”

Here Hallaj has propounded the principle of complementarity, or the *coincidentia oppositorum*, as in the Yin Yang disc, black and white embrace and contain sparks of each

⁷ *The Tawasin of Mansur al-Hallaj*, trans. Aisha at-Tarjumana (Berkeley and London: Diwan Press, 1974).

other embedded within themselves. In one sense God is everything, and Iblis nothing; yet God cannot be realized as the Beloved without a lover, even and especially a *tragic* lover, one doomed to separation. This tragedy itself is Satan's pride.

Hallaj went even further. He declared that Iblis and Pharaoh (considered the wickedest of men for claiming godhood) are the perfect champions of spiritual chivalry. "My companion is Iblis and my teacher is Pharaoh. Iblis was threatened with the fire and did not retract his allegation. Pharaoh was drowned in the Red Sea without retracting his allegation or recognizing a mediator." Hallaj himself made a similarly outrageous claim: "And I said: "If you do not know Him, then know His signs, I am His sign (*tajalli*) and I am the Truth! And this is because I have not ceased to realize the Truth!" And like Iblis and Pharaoh, Hallaj held to his claim and honor, even though he was crucified and dismembered for it.

The second shaykh to defend Satan, Ahmad al-Ghazzali, avoided execution (if not execration) both by the very density of his mystical language and by having a powerful brother, the Imam al-Ghazzali, famous for the impeccable orthodoxy of his Sufism. Ahmad al-Ghazzali echoed Hallaj on many points, saying for instance that "whoever does not learn adherence to Divine Unity from Iblis, is an unbeliever," and "Though Satan was cursed and humiliated, he was still the paragon of lovers in self-sacrifice."⁸

Ahmad Ghazzali in turn initiated and taught the third of our shaykhs, Ayn al-Qozat Hamadani. The least known but perhaps most brilliant, he was imprisoned in Baghdad and executed in his hometown of Hamadan (in northwest Iran) in A.D. 1131 at the age of thirty-three.⁹ Ayn al-Qozat said:

Put aside "jealousy-in-love," O dear friend! Don't you know what that maddened lover, whom you called "Eblis" in this world, was called in the divine world? If you knew his name, you would consider yourself an unbeliever in calling him by that name. Take care in what you hear! That crazy one loved God. Do you know what occurred by way of a test of loving-kindness? On the one hand, affliction and wrath; on the other blame and humiliation. He was told that if he claimed to love God, he should prove it. The tests of affliction and wrath and of blame and humiliation were presented to him, and he accepted them.

At that time these tests proved that his love was true. You have no idea what I am talking about! In love there must be both rejection and acceptance, so that the lover may become mature through the grace and wrath of the Beloved; if not he remains immature and unproductive.

Not everyone can fathom that both Eblis and Mohammad claim to be guides on the Path. Eblis guides one away from God, while Mohammad guides one towards God. God appointed Eblis the gatekeeper of His court, saying to him, "My lover, because of the jealousy-in-love that you have for me, do not let strangers approach me."

Ayn al-Qozat implies that separation-in-love is in some sense superior to union-in-love, because the former is a dynamic condition and the latter a static one. Iblis is not only the paragon of Separated Ones, he also causes this condition in human lovers — and although some experience this as "evil," the Sufi knows that it is necessary, and even good.

The Islamic profession of faith states "There is no god (*la ilaha*) except God (*illa Llah*)." Ayn

8 From a marvelous compilation of Sufi material on the devil by the contemporary Persian Sufi master Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, wittily entitled *The Great Satan 'Eblis'* (London: Khaniqah-i Nimatullahi). See also Ahmad Ghazzali, *Sawanih: Inspirations from the World of Pure Spirits*, trans. N. Pourjavady (London: KPI, 1986), an immensely influential work in the Persian "School of Love."

9 See *A Sufi Martyr*; Hamadani's apologia composed in prison, trans. A. J. Arberry (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), which includes an appendix of some "satanic" passages from other works. See also Nurbakhsh, op. cit., for extensive selections, and also *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblis in Sufi Psychology* by Peter J. Awn (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982), chiefly useful for the immense number of quotations from Sufi authors. N. Pourjavady and I included some of Hamadani's fine quatrains in our *Drunken Universe: An Anthology of Persian Sufi Poetry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Phanes Press, 1987); as far as I know, nothing else exists in English.

al-Qozat explains that the unworthy will never reach beyond mere negation, the *la* (no), or attain the inner sanctum of *illa Llah*. The guardian or chamberlain of this inner realm is none other than Iblis. Ayn al-Qozat makes his original contribution to Islamic satanology by symbolizing the chamberlainhood of Iblis with two powerful images: the Black light, and the dark tresses of the Beloved.

“Black light” again suggests the *coincidentia oppositorum* familiar to Western mystics and alchemists in such phrases as “the Sun at Midnight.” As for the “tresses,” which sometimes hide and sometimes reveal the Beloved's face, this image suggests the Hindu concept of Maya, the beauty of the world which can be both damning illusion and saving grace, and which can seduce to either forgetfulness or remembrance. Ayn al-Qozat wrote:

Do you know what is meant by the “cheek” and “mole” of the Beloved? Has the black light above the Throne not been explained to you? It is the light of Eblis, which has been likened to the tresses of God; compared with the Divine Light it is darkness, but it is light just the same.

Without question, one who sees the Beloved [as Eblis did] with such a “curl,” “mole,” “tress” and “eyebrow,” will declare, like Hallaj, “I am God.”...

People have only heard the name of Eblis and do not know that he possessed such pride in love that he acknowledged no one! Do you know why he had this pride? It is because the light of Eblis [the tresses] is close to the cheek and mole [the light of Mohammad]. Can the cheek and the mole ever be complete without the tresses, eyebrow and hair? By God, they are not complete!...

If you do not believe this, then hear the word of God: “Praise be to God, who has created the heavens and the earth and has established darkness and light.” (VI:1) How can black be complete without white or white without black be complete? It cannot be so. The Divine Wisdom has so ordained.¹⁰

THE PEACOCK ANGEL

Within Sufism the defense of Iblis remained an interesting, shocking, and dangerous problem in mystical metaphysics. Inevitably, the potent and scintillating images used to defend Iblis found expression in cult and ritual, and just as inevitably this exteriorization caused a rupture within the body of Islam. Although Islam possessed a doctrinal elasticity unknown to, say, Catholicism, there are some outrages it could not accept. Devil-worship is one such outrage.

Around A.D. 1100 a shaykh from Baalbek (Lebanon) named Adi ibn Musafir arrived in Baghdad and associated himself with Imam al-Ghazzali and Abd al-Qadir Jilani, the great orthodox Sufis. Through them he was made aware of, and may have even met, Ahmad Ghazzali and Ayn al-Qozat Hamadani. Later, Shaykh Adi retired to the remote valley of Lalish (Iraq), and there created his own Sufi order among the Kurdish peasantry. He was known for his fierce Sunni orthodoxy and severe ascetic practices, and all authentic works by him reflect this pious simplicity.

Shaykh Adi, however, seems to have possessed a shadow-self. His followers' descendants, known as the Yezidis,¹¹ attribute to him (and other shaykhs of his Order) various strange texts in which the devil appears as Malek Ta'us, the Peacock Angel, a great god in his own right — the Iblis of Hallaj mythologized into a pagan deity.

Hallaj is venerated by the Yezidis, who call one of their great bronze peacock idols (*sanjak*) by his name. In a poem attributed to Shaykh Adi, he seems to boast of divinity and makes reference to similar “ecstatic utterances” by Sufis such as Hallaj and Bayazid Bastami:

¹⁰ Hamadani, op. cit.

¹¹ The following material is from John Guest's painstaking and fascinating study *The Yezidis* (London and New York: KPI, 1987), rich in history and documentation but weak on Sufism and metaphysics.

I am Adi of Shams (Damascus), son of Musafir
Verily the All-Merciful has assigned unto me names,
The heavenly Throne, and the footstool, and the seven heavens, and the earth.
In the secret of my knowledge there is no god but me. . . .
Praise be to myself, and all things are by my will.
And the universe is lighted by some of my gifts.

For a long time the name *Yezidi* was thought (even by the Yezidis) to have derived from that wicked libertine, the Caliph Yazid, who in A.D. 690 caused the murder of al-Husayn, the Prophet's own grandson and Imam of the Shi'ite; Yazid's defense against the Shi'ites' curses may reflect the fanatical Sunnism of Shaykh Adi's Order, but the Yezidis now consider the Caliph their champion, the enemy of all orthodoxy who freed them from the strictures of the Law (*shariat*). The name Yezidi, however, more probably derives from the ancient Persian word, *yazd* or *yazad*, meaning god or spirit. The Kurds of Lalish ma have retained "pagan" pre-Islamic beliefs rooted in Zoroastrian Dualism which somehow harmonized with the Hallajian defense of Iblis as well as the extremist Sunni cult of the Caliph Yazid. Whether the historical Shaykh Adi, whose tomb in Lalish is now the center of Yezidi devotions, was responsible for this wild syncretism, or whether it happened after his death, is a moot point.

Although the Yezidis are supposed to reject literacy on principle (and most, in fact, are illiterate), they do possess two "scriptures," *The Book of Divine Effulgence* and *The Black Book* (with "effulgence" plus "black" equal to "Black Light"). They do not worship the devil as the principle of evil, like Christian Satanists, but rather as the principle of energy, unjustly condemned by orthodox religions. According to *The Black Book*:

In the beginning God created the White Pearl out of His most precious Essence: and He created a bird named *Anfar*. And He placed the pearl upon its back, and dwelt thereon forty thousand years. On the first day, Sunday, He created an angel named *'Azazil*, which is *Ta'us Malek* ("the Peacock Angel"), the chief of all.

Then, in *The Book of Divine Effulgence*, Malek Ta'us speaks to us in the first person:

I was, and am now, and will continue unto eternity, ruling over all creatures and ordering the affairs and deeds of those who are under my sway. I am presently at hand to such as trust in me and call upon me in time of need, neither is there any place void of me where I am not present. I am concerned in all those events which strangers name evils because they are not done according to their desire.

The Black Book contains a number of interesting prohibitions. Lettuce and beans are forbidden; the former was believed to contain sparks of "pure light" (by the Manichaeans), the latter to contain souls which had undergone transmigration (by the Pythagoreans). The flesh of fish, gazelles, and peacocks are forbidden, as in the color indigo blue, all no doubt because they symbolize Satan, whose name, moreover, the Yezidis are forbidden to pronounce. Pumpkins, traditionally symbols of chaos, are also considered too sacred to eat.

IBLIS THE IMAGINATION

We must pass over such fascinating digressions as a full-scale anthropological analysis of the Yezidis, the development of Satan's defense in later Sufism, the critiques directed against Satanism by such profound mystics as al-Jili or Ruzbehan Baqli, the extensive folklore material on demonology and demonolatry, Islamic eschatology (including the "maps" of Hell

used by Dante), or the use of Iblis's figure as a symbol for Islamic rebels from medieval Ismailis to modern leftists. (All this material is, however, covered by titles referenced in the footnotes. My purpose here must remain simply to ask again, "What is that "essence of Satan" mentioned by those Kurdish devil-worshippers encountered by my friend?"¹²

The answer is suggested by certain texts of the school of "the greatest shaykh", Ibn 'Arabi, especially Aziz ad-Din Nasafi's treatise on *The Perfect Man*.

God delegated his vicegerent to represent him in this microcosm, this divine vicegerent being the "intellect". When the "intellect" had taken up the vicegerency in this microcosm, all the angels of the microcosm prostrated before it, except "imagination", which did not, refusing to bow, just as when Adam assumed the vicegerency in the macrocosm, all the angels prostrated to him, except Eblis, who did not. . . .

Six persons emerged from the third heaven: Adam, Eve, Satan, Eblis, the Peacock, and the Snake.

Adam is the spirit, Eve the body, Satan nature, Eblis imagination, the Peacock lust, and the Snake wrath. When Adam approached the tree of intellect, he left the third heaven and entered the fourth. All the angels prostrated before Adam, except Eblis, who refused. That is to say, all the powers, spiritual and physical, became obedient and obedient to the spirit, except imagination, which refrained from doing so.

The word used here for imagination is *wahm*, which might be translated as "fancy," in distinction to *khyal*, or imagination as the "imaginal faculty." But in the School of Ibn 'Arabi the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, for in truth imagination (like the Beloved's tresses) both dissipates and concentrates the faculty of remembrance, and seduces both to "sin and rebellion" and to the vision of the divine-in-things. According to Ibn 'Arabi himself, without images there can be no spiritual realization at all, for the undifferentiated oneness of the Real can be experienced only through its manifestation as (or in) the multiplicity of creation.

Satan is the guardian of a threshold, as Ayn al-Qozat explained, and a doorway is an isthmus, a space-between-worlds, an ambiguous and liminal no-place-place, a land of the imagination.¹³ In the West only William Blake recognized the Devil as the imagination; in Sufism this identity has been clear since at least the tenth century. The Sufis who defended Satan were not defending or excusing evil, but rather telling a secret: "evil" has only a relative existence, and it is "merely human." It is the "shaitan" in each of us which we must "convert to Islam," as the Prophet said. But the very means by which we carry out this self-alchemy is presided over by that very same force, the power of our imagination, lit by paradoxical moonbeams of Black Light — Iblis himself.

¹² It seems likely that Ahl-i Haqq Shaitan-parastiyyan must be "related" somehow to the Yezidis across the border in Iraqi Kurdistan. Some scholars (such as C. Glasse in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, Harper & Row, 1989), have asserted such a relation, but I know of no actual proof.

¹³ See Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. R. Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).