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Semiotics and Magick

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ABSTRACT: In this essay Maurice Blanchot's structuralist concept of symbolic transcendence is hermeneutically deployed to reexamine Aleister Crowley's Thelemic theory of Magick through a semiotic and materialist lens.

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In this paper I will advance a theory of Magick as a semiotic structure, or system of linguistic signs or signifiers, in and through which the magical practitioner self-consciously manipulates their phenomenal experience. The choice of a semiotic methodology to develop the implications of a theory of magical practice points beyond the horizon of traditional pre-modern Platonism, which understands the intelligibility of language as derived from the participation of its *eidōs* or form in a sacred, spiritual reality transcending the physical cosmos. Modern philosophical semiotics, at least since the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand Saussure, resists the recourse to supernatural dualism as an explanatory mechanism for the phenomenon of human linguistic discourse, focusing instead on the function of the sign as a social performative that derives its intelligibility from its contextualization within historical human social activity. By applying the methodology of modern semiotics to the practice of ceremonial Magick in the context of late capitalism, I aim to elucidate a theologically clarified and thoroughly radicalized theory of Magick.

I write as an emic participant in the practice of ceremonial Magick in accord with Aleister Crowley's philosophy of Thelema, while

simultaneously making full use of the resources of contemporary critical theory, thereby actualizing my own valency of Crowley's distinctive method of "Skeptical Theurgy." My use of the term *emic* requires further comment, because the currently prevailing academic usage of the emic/etic distinction presupposes a whole set of Protestant norms regarding the status of religion and the faith or belief that is assumed to constitute emic participation in religion in contrast to etic disbelief and non-participation in the same. However, participation in the magical "current" of the Thelemic tradition is not reducible to these terms.

Aleister Crowley's philo-Judaic deployment of a Jewish Qabalistic enframing of his system of Magick permits him to reject the Pauline criterion of *pistis* as faithful allegiance to the status of the messiah in favor of the *gnosis*, or specially obtained knowledge, of what he calls the True Will as the goal of ritual *praxis*. Ritual practice, in a mode not unlike the Jewish concept of Torah observance, or *mitzvot*, is the locus of participation in Thelema. Furthermore, just as Jewish observance stands in an active interpretive relationship to the text of the Torah and its literature of commentaries, the practice of Thelemic ritual Magick is oriented in terms of the ongoing hermeneutical exegesis of the various historical traditions—Qabalistic, Hermetic, alchemical, etc.—that it synthesizes.

Therefore, when I assert that I am an emic participant in the Thelemic current, a "Thelemite" in other words, what I mean is that I am situated in critical engagement with a set of hermeneutical priorities that I derive from the textual literature of Thelema, as well as from the context of a long standing personal practice of ceremonial Magick, both privately and in a group setting. Additionally, part of the procedure of that practice involves an element of methodological skepticism towards Magick, where the element of belief in its efficacy is bracketed in favor of a pragmatic openness towards the phenomenon of magical experience.

This procedure resembles Edmund Husserl's phenomenological *epoche*, in which, as he explains:

We put out of action the general thesis which belongs to the essence of the natural standpoint, we place in brackets whatever it includes respecting the nature of Being: this entire natural world therefore which is continually "there for us,"

“present to our hand,” and will ever remain there, is a “fact-world” of which we continue to be conscious, even though it pleases us to put it in brackets.

If I do this, as I am fully free to do, I do not then deny this “world,” as though I were a sceptic; but I use the “phenomenological” ἐποχή, which completely bars me from using any judgement that concerns spatio-temporal existence.¹

The phenomenological bracketing of magical skepticism includes belief in the objectively human independent reality of the angels, gods, and spirits evoked in the ritual. At the same time, should some phenomenon meeting the description of any such alleged entities disclose itself within the context of the experiential space of the ritual, it would be addressed and interacted with just as if it were real, even while the operators simultaneously maintained their skepticism towards the objective reality of the entities concerned.

Only after the ritual are the phenomenon encountered within it evaluated, and it is at this juncture that my theory of Magick differs Crowley’s, whose writings leave the ontological status of the magical hierarchy suspended in modernist ambiguity, like the fate of one of Henry James’ heroines. On the question never conclusively answered by Crowley of whether the author of *The Book of the Law* is a disembodied “praeterhuman” intelligence or the deepest and most authentic voice of Crowley’s own poetic imagination, I choose the latter interpretive option, due to my hermeneutical commitment to physicalism as an explanatory method. Furthermore, my theory of Magick is materialist in a specifically Marxist-dialectical sense of insisting on the human production of magical phenomenon and, therefore, in the ultimately anthropocentric horizon of their significance.

I therefore advocate a magical reading of Ludwig Feurbach’s theology, which is that divine beings are imaginative projections of human existence, and therefore that what humans call God or gods is really themselves. Feuerbach writes:

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 99-100.

The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective—*i.e.*, contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine are, therefore, attributes of the human nature.²

From this perspective, I understand the Thelemic philosophy of Magick as re-interpreting the *telos* of late classical theurgy, which is to so energize the soul through the pious performance of temple rites so as to become a god, thereby bringing ancient theurgy, and with it the western ceremonial magical tradition, into alignment with the context of modern experience in the wake of the death of God. In modern existentialist language, in Thelema one becomes a divinely human self by practicing Magick, understood as the imaginative and practical process of creative self-making.

According to Aleister Crowley,

There is a single main definition of the object of all magical Ritual. It is the uniting of the Microcosm with the Macrocosm. The Supreme and Complete Ritual is therefore the Invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel; or, in the language of Mysticism, Union with God.³

The use of theistic language in Crowley's writings always serves as a metaphor for an ultimately atheistic spirituality. A few pages earlier Crowley writes, "By 'God' I here mean the Ideal Identity of a man's inmost nature."⁴ Self-divinization through the practice of Magick is therefore the fulfillment, or at least the striving after the actualization, of the individual person's optimal potential identity. The "Holy Guardian Angel" referred to by Crowley in the passage cited above is the magical symbol that unifies and totalizes the semiotic domain of the ritual context in terms of the magician's deepest authentic potentiality for existence.

² Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 14.

³ *Magick: Book 4*, 144.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

In the opening chapter of *Magick in Theory and Practice*, entitled “The Magical Theory of the Universe” Crowley gives a sketch of the Qabalistic system of number symbolism, concerning which he writes, “it cannot be too clearly understood that this is a *classification* of the Universe, that there is nothing which is not comprehended therein.”⁵

As with the lists of emblematic images that form the furniture of the elaborate memory palaces of the Renaissance art of memory taught by Giordano Bruno, and his contemporaries, when the mind has imprinted itself with a simulacra signifying the cosmos in its wholeness, then the mind will become whole like the wholeness that is the object of its contemplation. Frances Yates describes the magical function of the art of memory as,

[...] a method of printing basic or archetypal images on the memory, with the cosmic order itself as the “place” system, a kind of inner way of knowing the universe. [...] By using magical or talismanic images as memory-images, the Magus hoped to acquire universal knowledge, and also powers, obtaining through the magical organization of the imagination a magically powerful personality, tuned in, as it were, to the powers of the cosmos.⁶

Or as Crowley writes:

All these numbers are of course parts of the magician himself considered as the microcosm. The microcosm is an exact image of the Macrocosm; the Great Work is the rising of the whole man in perfect balance to the power of Infinity.⁷

From a social-material perspective, the magician functions as an ideological technician manipulating the components of ideological belief like any other ritual implement, and in accord with deeper plans and purposes than are apparent in the alienated play of immediate social appearances upon the

⁵ Ibid., 139.

⁶ Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 191-2.

⁷ *Magick, Book 4*, 139.

walls of the cave of consumer consensus reality. For if, as semiotic theory insists, language serves as the primary medium for the social construction of the world of phenomenal experience, then it follows that the self-conscious re-appropriation of our linguistic enframing through dramatic ritual and creative visualization can lead to the production of a different kind of world experience than that offered by the reified forms of mass media culture. The diverse ceremonial practices of Magick thereby offer a potential site of resistance to the alienated society of globalized capitalism.

“Ideological interpellation” is a useful semiotic concept to thematize the potential of magical practice to resist social alienation due to its congruence with the magical process of invocation, the calling forth of a spirit such that phenomenal appearances are manifested. The concept of “ideological interpellation,” is developed in Louis Althusser’s essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” published in 1970 in dialog with the events in France during the Left uprising in May of 1968, he writes:

All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects [...] [and] it “recruits” subjects [...] by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was really addressed to him.⁸

In other words, persons are made into and sustained as psychologically developed subjects through the historical process of their materially intersubjective social recognition in terms of linguistically posited roles. A subject is constructed through its inscription as a character into the text of the ongoing social narrative that surrounds and interpenetrates it. On this basis the subject is a virtual appearance, not a metaphysical substance, and its identity is therefore indefinitely malleable

⁸ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” in *On Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008), 47-8.

through the manipulation of language. For example, the state can claim or dismiss subjects as its citizens through the publication of laws to this effect, just as a warranted police officer can make one of these citizens into a criminal simply by hailing them as such on the street.

Ritual Magick hails and addresses the magician as a divine being, rather than as the hapless indentured victim of economic alienation. The function of Magick is to re-interpellate oneself through the mediation of the symbol of the Holy Guardian Angel, generating the *gnosis* of what Aleister Crowley calls the “True Will.”

What is the True Will? Crowley writes:

The theory [of the True Will] is that every man and every woman has each definite attributes whose tendency, considered in due relation to environment, indicates a proper course of action in each case. To pursue this course of action is to do one’s True Will.⁹

As an example of how this might work in ritual Crowley writes regarding the “Formula of the Neophyte” that underlies the ritual initiation of candidates joining a magical temple that, “the effect of this whole ceremony is to endow a thing inert and impotent with balanced motion in a given direction,” such that the initiate’s “aspiration” is successfully “formulated as Will.”¹⁰ Typically, Crowley defers from directly defining a causal explanation for the ritual procedure’s observed effects, in accordance with his generally pragmatic approach to magical practice. The empirical datum that the performance of a certain ritual procedure is, at least sometimes, temporally succeeded by experiences significant to the participants of the earlier ritual, provides, for Crowley, a sufficient basis for the elaboration of a “scientific” (in the deliberately minimal sense of being skeptical and empirical in method) theory of Magick.

Crowley’s student and fellow writer on magical subjects, Israel Regardie, further develops the psychological aspect of the ceremonial efficacy of the Neophyte formula, writing:

⁹ *Magick: Book 4*, 706.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

From one point of view the officers employed in these Rituals represent just such psychic projections. They represent, even as figures in dream do, different aspects of man himself, personifications of abstract psychological principles inhering within the human spirit. Through the admittedly artificial or conventional means of a dramatic projection of these spiritual principles in a well-ordered ceremony a reaction is induced in consciousness. This reaction is calculated to arouse from their dormant condition those hitherto latent faculties represented objectively by the officers. Without the least conscious effort on the part of the aspirant, an involuntary current of sympathy is produced by this external delineation of spiritual parts which may be sufficient to accomplish the purpose of the ceremony. The aesthetic appeal to the imagination [...] stirs to renewed activity the life of the inner domain. And the entire action of this type of dramatic initiatory ritual is that the soul may discover itself whirled in exaltation to the heights, and during that mystical elevation receive the rushing forth of the Light.¹¹

Regardie's discussion of the symbolism of ritual, what he calls the "external delineation of spiritual parts," "which may be sufficient to accomplish the purpose of the ceremony," invites comparison to remarks made by the late antique philosopher Iamblichus in his *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians* concerning the efficacy of the *synthemata*, or ritual objects used in the performance of the pagan rites of the civic temples of the Roman Empire, in externally energizing the soul of the theurgist to achieve noetic unification with the divine.

Iamblichus writes:

For a conception of the mind does not conjoin theurgists with the Gods; since, if this were the case, what would hinder those who philosophize theoretically, from having a theurgic union with the Gods? Now, however, in reality, this is not the case. For the perfect efficacy of ineffable works, which are divinely performed in a way surpassing all intelligence, and the power of inexplicable symbols, which are known only to the Gods,

¹¹ Israel Regardie, *What You Should Know About the Golden Dawn* (Phoenix, AZ: Falcon Press, 1987), 67-8.

impart theurgic union. Hence, we do not perform these things through intellectual perception; since, if this were the case, the intellectual energy of them would be imparted by us; neither of which is true. For when we do not energize intellectually, the *synthemata* themselves perform by themselves their proper work, and the ineffable power of the Gods itself knows, by itself, its own images. [...] And thus, things pertaining to the Gods, are moved by themselves, and do not receive from any inferior nature a certain principle in themselves of their own proper energy.¹²

The phrase “those who philosophize theoretically” refers to the school of Plotinus, Iamblichus’ predecessor in the historical genealogy of late classical Platonism. According to Plotinus the soul most closely approaches fusion with the divine through the practice of contemplation in the context of an ascetic lifestyle, whereby the soul withdraws itself from the material world and meditates on its own immaterial form. Iamblichus, in contrast, advocated the view that the closest participation of the soul with the divine is achieved through theurgy, which for Iamblichus primarily meant public rituals conducted at pagan temples and shrines. The *synthemata* are objects used in the rites that signify the mythological milieu of the divinities being worshipped. The thyrsus, for example, was a fennel wand associated with the Bacchic mysteries because the god was said to carry one. In Bacchic rites the worshippers would likewise bear a thyrsus. The wand served as an allegory of fertility, and the cycle of the seasons. Likewise, the sheaf of wheat allegedly displayed during the sacrificial rites at the climax of the celebration of the Eleusinian mysteries, is associated with the cult of Persephone and Demeter, and served as an allegory for the cycle of agrarian life, to which the worshipper is meaningfully brought into relationship. Iamblichus’ argument is that the use of the thyrsus, sheaf of wheat, or similar objects in these rituals exposes the souls of the ritual’s participants to an “image” of the divine such that their souls are energized into union with the divine.

¹² Iamblichus, (Thomas Taylor, trans.), *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans and Assyrians in Iamblichus: On the Mysteries and Life of Pythagoras* (Frome, Somerset, UK: The Prometheus Trust), 62-3.

My basic semiotic interpretation of this passage by Iamblichus is that the magical energy of the *synthemata*, its ability in Aristotelian terms to cause a transformation of the qualities of a substance, or more basically to make something happen, is possible due to the status of the *synthemata* as material signs or signifiers. It is due to the intra-social linguistic character of the semiotic tokens manipulated in theurgic ritual that the soul is energized into union with the gods, not the metaphysical participation of its signs in a supernatural and otherworldly reality, as Iamblichus holds.

I therefore claim that Iamblichus is wrong, from my own modern perspective, to deny that the efficacy of theurgy, in imparting the condition of divine union to the soul, is “imparted by us” through the “intellectual perception” of the magician. Given that reading always includes some aspect of representational thought through which the interpretation of signs occurs, the operation of the ritual *synthemata* in divinely energizing the theurgist’s soul necessarily involves an element of “intellectual perception.” Materially considered as semiotic signs, the operative power of the *synthemata* over the theurgist lies in their signification for the historical and culturally embedded psychology of their operators. Since the psyche is a linguistic construction, and language is a specifically human social activity, the implication is that the magical power of images is, contrary to Iamblichus, indeed “imparted by us” during magical ritual.

The theological implication follows that human beings are the source of magical energy, not the Gods, or in Ludwig Feuerbach’s terms, that the Gods are the projections and reflections of historical and material human existence. Gods, and mythology generally, are a fiction created by human beings to represent themselves in an idealized and exemplary form. However, is this not precisely the function of the godforms of the officers in the initiation ritual described in the earlier quotation from Israel Regardie, where they stand for aspects of the aspirant’s psyche?

The preceding argument can be summarized in the following thesis: the function of the magical symbol in modern Magick, such as the symbol of the Holy Guardian Angel, is to imagine aspects of one’s ideal form and thereby mediate oneself with one’s ultimate possibilities for being.

Not all signs are symbols, however, and more needs to be said concerning the historical horizon of the concept of the magical symbol used

by the kind of modern Magick practiced by Crowley and Regardie. The primary historical transition involved is that in modernity the allegory is displaced by the symbol as the basis for narrative construction.

According to Paul de Man:

In the history of Western literature, the importance of the image as a dimension of poetic language does not remain constant. One could conceive of an organization of this history in terms of the relative prominence and the changing structure of metaphor. [...] The most recent change remote enough to be part of history takes place toward the end of the eighteenth century and coincides with the advent of romanticism. In a statement of which equivalences can be found in all European literatures, Wordsworth reproaches Pope for having abandoned the imaginative use of figural diction in favor of a merely decorative allegorization. Meanwhile the term *imagination* steadily grows in importance and complexity in the critical as well as in the poetic texts of the period. This evolution in poetic terminology—of which parallel instances could easily be found in France and in Germany—corresponds to a profound change in the texture of poetic diction. The change often takes the form of a return to a greater concreteness, a proliferation of natural objects that restores to the language the material substantiality which had been partially lost. At the same time, in accordance with a dialectic that is more paradoxical than may appear at first site, the structure of the language becomes increasingly metaphorical and the image—be it under the name of symbol or even of myth—comes to be considered as the most prominent dimension of the style.¹³

In other words, the symbol replaces the allegory as the basic trope of modern Western European rhetoric. The *synthemata*, such as the Bacchic thyrsus, serve as an allegory of the theurgist's relationship to the divine milieu of the cosmic seasonal cycle, and implicitly derive their power to effect the soul from being signifiers of this organic relationship. In a similar,

¹³ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 1-2.

yet distinctly different manner, the Romantic poetry of William Blake directly identifies the human imagination with the divine, and the elaborate pantheons of divine figures that permeate his poetry are so many symbols of its creative energies in all their bodily and political expressions. Whereas the allegory stages an encounter with the sacred domain of the human independent reality of cosmic nature and the divine, the symbol derives its significance from being a self-referential creative event of human language, like the way a Wallace Stevens poem is about the event of poetry itself, to the point where descriptive narrative of the usual trappings of poetic imagery disappears and the beauty of language appears as its own event.

What kind of spiritual transcendence is offered by the magical symbol, epitomized by the symbolic invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel, if by “transcendence” is not meant a metaphysical elevation of the soul above and beyond the body, nor the access of the “soul” or inner mental sense of self to any supernatural dimension?

In his essay “The Secret of the Golem,”¹⁴ the French philosopher and literary critic Maurice Blanchot discusses the secret of the symbol, which he compares with the magical power of language to animate life—or, in other words, construct subjectivity—as narrated in the myth of the Golem, a magical automaton which is brought to life through writing. To magically animate a Golem, so the story goes, the qabalist writes the word *emet* (aleph-mem-tav), the word for “truth,” in Hebrew letters on the forehead of a specially prepared clay statue of a humanoid figure. The golem is deactivated by erasing the initial aleph to spell *met* (mem-tav), meaning “dead.”

According to the *Sepher Yetzirah*, or *Book of Formation*, God created the universe through the permutation of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. “These are the twenty-two letters [...] and with them He created His Universe, and He formed with them all that was ever formed, and all that ever will be formed.”¹⁵ (*Sepher Yetzirah*, chapter six, verse six.) The letters of the Hebrew alphabet, alone, or permuted according to

¹⁴ Maurice Blanchot, “The Secret of the Golem,” in *The Book to Come* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 86-92.

¹⁵ Aryeh Kaplan (trans.), *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1997), 254.

various procedures, possess the power to generate novel worlds of experience—to signify, in semiotic terms—like God is said to have done in Genesis when he created the universe by magically speaking it into being.

From the perspective of the ritual usages of modern Magick there is a degree of hermeneutical fit between Jewish Qabalah and Greco-Roman theurgy that makes both traditions viable as a source of inspiration and imitation for modern magical practitioners. Both systems of ritual practice operate through the deployment of signifiers, whose symbolic potency imparts sacredness—or significance, in secular terms—to the communal social life of their practitioners. The qabalist treats the very letters of the Hebrew alphabet as magical signs, while the theurgist deploys *synthemata* in their rites. The long, convoluted, sonorous, and howling formulae of the “barbarous names of evocation,” preserved in the Greek magical papyri, are not practically dissimilar to the recitations of letter combinations used by qabalistic practitioners to induce ecstatic trances whereby revelations might be vouchsafed to the meditator by God.

In “The Secret of the Golem” Blanchot draws a distinction between two different functions of the sign/signifier in relation to the allegorical and the symbolic, or the premodern form of narrative construction in contrast to modern literary convention. He writes:

Allegory develops the tangled vibration of its circles very far, but without changing its level, conformable to an abundance that could be called horizontal: it keeps itself inside the limits of measured expression, representing, through something that is expressed or represented, some other thing that could also be directly expressed.¹⁶

For Blanchot, the transcendent dimension of the symbol, in contrast to its allegorical significance, stands in a vertical relationship to the strictly horizontal dimension of the allegory. That this arrangement makes the sign of the cross indicative of Blanchot’s French Catholic context, and of the mediaeval Christian mysticism from which he derives his elliptical style of approaching the problematic of the symbol. Alternative spatial or temporal

¹⁶ “The Secret of the Golem,” 86-7.

metaphors could be substituted, e.g. finite versus infinite expansion, or history versus eternity, or three-dimensional space versus hyperspace.

The symbol does more than facilitate the perpetuation of the social significance of the already established intra-linguistic usages of a given historical period. The symbol also points beyond itself to an ultimately human potential in excess of any given ideological order. It signifies a surplus dimension of signification, beyond the allegorical space of already understood intra-linguistic social practices. Jacques Lacan designates such a register of negative signification “the Real,” insisting that the psychological domain of the absence of signification nevertheless powerfully signifies through the presence of its absence. Blanchot writes:

[The symbol] wants to jump outside of the sphere of language, of language in all its forms. [...] Through symbol, then, there is a leap, a change of level, sudden and violent change, there is exaltation, there is falling, a passage not from one meaning to another, from a modest meaning to a vaster richness of significations, but to that which is other, to that which seems other than all possible meanings. [...] Symbol does not mean anything, expresses nothing. It only makes present—by making us present to it—a reality that escapes all other capture and seems to rise up, there, prodigiously close and prodigiously far away, like a foreign presence. [...] If symbol is a wall, then it is like a wall that, far from opening wide, not only becomes more opaque, but with a density, a thickness, and a reality so powerful and so exorbitant that it transforms us, changes instantly the sphere of our ways and habits, takes us away from all actual and latent knowledge, makes us more malleable, moves us, turns us around, and exposes us, by this new freedom, to the approach of another space.¹⁷

The interpretation of the transcendence of the symbol in terms of a religious spiritualism, of whatever stripe, theosophical or evangelical, remains at the level of the allegorical—where, for example, the signifier “God” is read as standing for an actually existing supernatural person—thereby bypassing an encounter with the properly symbolic dimension of

¹⁷ Ibid., 87.

signification entirely, where God-talk about the “divine” stands for the psychological dynamic of the presence-absence of the unconscious Real, whose pursuit drives the magician towards the realization of their deepest and most authentic human potential.

The problem of symbolic transcendence is also different from the philosophical problem of the existence of the external world, or the problem of the correspondence of words to objects, or any number of concerns regarding the functioning of intra-linguistic reference. The “Real,” with a capital “R,” that is the object of symbolic transcendence is therefore not correlative with the objectivity of the “real,” with a lowercase “r,” that refers to the physical world extending outside of private subjectivity.

The domain of the Real, with a capital “R,” the dimension of symbolic transcendence, designates the formally absent center of the psyche, its missing point of unity or totality. To say that the Real names an absence means that there is no essence, unity, or totality underlying the psyche’s functioning. The psyche’s experience of itself as self-consciousness is a virtual activity of self-positing. There is nothing beyond or behind the psyche’s self-positing of itself that metaphysically grounds or founds its experience of itself. By acting as if we are a self, we make ourselves into one, and this process of self-making—or magical initiation—through symbolic self-interpellation is effected in, through, and by language. The transcendence of the symbol is ultimately a self-relation, it returns the reader to themselves and their inmost potentiality for being.

What are the ontological implications of the formal limits of language, such that it manifests a dimension of symbolic transcendence? The formal limitation of any possible language is that, as a historically finite system of signs, it cannot totalize or complete its potential for signification. Dialectically, language’s finitude is also its infinitude, because its ontological incompleteness is simultaneously an openness to the historical creation of new forms of expression and novel modes of interpretation. Language is always incomplete because there can always be more of it. This means that when Blanchot negatively insists that symbolic transcendence does not stand for an object of actual experience, he simultaneously positively means that it stands for the formal openness of our human frame of experience to the manifestation, in social activities such as

reading and ritual, of new creative significations unanticipated by pre-existing tradition.

The material finitude of human existence is the key to unlocking the understanding of our ontological freedom. As Slavoj Žižek explains, “The frustrating nature of our human existence, the very fact that our lives are forever out of joint, marked by a traumatic imbalance, is what propels us towards permanent creativity.”¹⁸ The self-propulsion of the psyche towards its potential for creative self-realization is pre-eminently described by the Freudian-Lacanian theory of the drive. Drive names the psyche’s self-relational rotation about the absent center of the “text” of its experience, such that it “traverses the fantasy,” as Lacan puts it, of its field of experience, actualizing the otherwise dormant possibilities of its existence.

This activity of restless, willful self-motivation stands in contrast to the distinctly different, although equally unconscious, instinctual and “daemonic,” psychological dynamic of what Freud calls the “pleasure principle,” namely the pre-conscious instinctual desire whereby “the mental apparatus endeavors to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant.”¹⁹ The dynamic of the drive stands “beyond the pleasure principle” in that it derives masochistic pleasure from the frustration of the pleasure principle resulting from the psychic tension and dis-equilibrium produced by socialization. As a result, the psyche is driven to develop its latent capacities, and is unable to maintain itself in a state of infantile narcissism.

Some practical examples may be useful to illustrate the contrast between desire and drive. When one wakes up in the morning, one’s immediate desire is to remain in bed and return to sleep. This desire is linked to the pleasure principle, and seeks the stable affective equilibrium offered by dozing off. It is the operation of the drive, however, that provides the motivation to get up anyway, despite one’s desire not to, in order to actively seek out the experiences of the day, in spite the fact that one knows these experiences will not be uniformly pleasurable. Nevertheless, one gets up and engages with the non-immediate, second

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 132.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *The Freud Reader* (New York: Norton, 1989), 595.

order enjoyment that becomes available precisely from encountering the obstacles and opportunities offered by the day's activities. Drug addiction operates according to a similar dynamic. Alcoholism, for example, involves submission to the desire for the stable, narcissistic self-absorption of continual drunkenness. However, it is the drive that constantly nags the alcoholic with the possibility of sobriety, and of the access that sobriety gives to additional social possibilities not limited by the constant desire to simply stay drunk.

The opposition between desire and drive in Freud's later theory is also not a restatement of the opposition between the super-ego and the id, as articulated in Freud's earlier Oedipal theory of the psyche. The function of the super-ego as the censor of the id's libidinal desires is arbitrary, based on the psyche's internalization of historically contingent social norms which may or may not have any relation to its creative potential for self-development. For example, queer folk, depending on the extent of their socialization against the background of hetero-normative expectations regarding permissible gender roles and relations, may experience significant anxiety regarding their homo-normative sexual desires. The anxiety is a function of their super-ego. It is the drive, however, operating independently of the functioning of the censor, which can motivate queer subjects to maintain fidelity to their desire despite the super-ego's restraint. The drive must, therefore, be conceived of as standing in an excessive, surplus relation to social-ideological norms, and cannot be immediately identified with the super-ego. The drive possesses the capacity to liberate ideology from reification by enabling novel strategies of being.

The relationship of desire to the drive is therefore analogous to Blanchot's opposition of allegory to the symbol. Just as symbolic transcendence does not actually provide access to the elision of language in an elevation beyond language, a domain which is in principle inaccessible to subjectivity, so also the drive, although it expresses a psychic dynamic distinct from desire, only expresses itself phenomenally in, through, and as desire. In other words, the psyche's openness to the dimension of the drive does not indicate the psyche's departure from the domain of desire, but

rather the second order, formal organization of desire, its transmutation, evolution, and elevation in terms of the creative drive.

One of my basic theses regarding the theory of Magick is to interpret the psychoanalytic theory of the drive as the source of personal creativity as equivalent with Aleister Crowley's concept of the True Will as the source and goal of magical *gnosis*. In working out the theory of the True Will in terms of the concept of the Freudian-Lacanian drive it is useful to proceed through the negative hermeneutical procedure of first defining what the True Will is not.

If there is a True Will, then it follows that there must also be willing that is false. Specifically, the True Will is not to be identified with immediate emotional intuition. Will is not desire; it is drive, expressive of "the dynamic aspect of [the] Creative Self."²⁰ Will must therefore be discriminated from desire in magical practice. Crowley writes:

How then is the Will to be trained? All these wishes, whims, caprices, inclinations, tendencies, appetites, must be detected, examined, judged by the standard of whether they help or hinder the main purpose, and treated accordingly.²¹

The True Will is furthermore not reducible to the self-conscious intentionality of bourgeois individuality. It is formally impersonal, in the sense that it expresses, not the correspondence of the phenomenal self with a trans-historical platonic essence, but rather a constantly evolving ideal practical relation between each person and their world, where both the self and its world are subject to dynamic change over time. Crowley insists in his seventh theorem of Magick, as laid out in the introduction to *Magick in Theory and Practice*, that "Every man and every woman has a course, depending partly on the self, and partly on the environment which is natural and necessary for each."²² In these terms the True Will is necessarily historical and contextual, subject to change, refinement, and reformulation over time, and entirely dependent on the unique

²⁰ *Magick: Book 4*, 525.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²² *Ibid.*, 127.

circumstances of each uniquely contextualized person. The concrete content of the True Will cannot be universalized.

Crowley writes:

In a galaxy each star has its own magnitude, characteristics, and direction, and the celestial harmony is best maintained by its attending to its own business. Nothing could be more subversive of that harmony than if a number of stars set up a uniform standard of conduct, insisted on every one aiming at the same goal, going at the same pace, and so on. Even a single star, by refusing to do its own Will, by restricting itself in any way, would immediately produce disorder.²³

This passage strikingly deploys a negative dialectic of whole and part, in sharp contrast to the traditional positive organic metaphor of society as the unity of opposites, where the church and the state function to harmonize the antagonistic classes of civil society through their larger purposes and projects. In contrast, the Thelemic “harmony” of the galactic system—an analogy for human society—is facilitated by the independent diversity of its parts, not by their “unity” in relation to any state or organization. This is an anti-totalitarian and anti-statist perspective which can justly be characterized as a kind of anarchism, and which Crowley in his own lifetime explicitly contrasted with both fascism and Stalinism.

In 1938, in the dark days immediately prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, he wrote:

Democracy dodders. Ferocious Fascism, cackling Communism, equally frauds, cavort crazily all over the globe. They are hemming us in. They are abortive births of the Child, the New Aeon of Horus. Liberty stirs once more in the womb of Time.²⁴

However, these remarks in no way imply that Crowley was a naïve liberal, simply positing bourgeois social norms as the answer to totalitarianism. Crowley’s writings are abundantly clear that he was a fierce

²³ Ibid., 706.

²⁴ A. Crowley, “Introduction,” in *The Book of the Law* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1990), 14.

critic of specifically liberal and bourgeois social values. Neither does his opposition to liberal norms make him a conservative in either his own era or in our own time, for the conservatism in question is just another restaging of the liberalism that Crowley rejects. Capitalist production is extraordinarily ineffective at providing a context for the free expression of creative individuality, as the liberal social relations of capitalist society have always already been alienated by the necessity that they be mediated by the exchange of money. The free market is, to put it bluntly, not free.

There is, however, a historical alternative to corporate bureaucracy to organize collective activity, namely the cooperative association, or voluntary society. The interpretation of Thelema I articulate in this paper actualizes this valency of anti-capitalist resistance. From this perspective, the magical working group operates as an anarchist syndicate whose agenda is the ideological liberation of its participants from consensus reality, and the maintenance of the group as a center of resistance against the larger horizon of globalized alienation in which it is embedded.

Spiritual transcendence, in a strictly semiotic-materialist sense, designates the dimension of the drive opened up by the semiotic manipulation of the hermeneutical horizon of human experience. The invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel produces a warping of psychic space that attracts the psyche's affective rotation of desire about the absent presence of the Real of the utopian horizon of the True Will, generating a striving after a formally unobtainable fulfilment, where the jouissance of the magician's existential striving is itself the magical attainment sought, even while the True Will is simultaneously realized as a concrete, practical engagement with specific goals and projects. Crowley likens this dynamic equilibrium to the beatific vision of divine glory, of which, "It need only be said in this place that its formula is 'Love is the law, love under will,' and that its nature is the Perpetual Sacrament of Energy in action."²⁵

In conclusion, it is important to stress the ambiguities incumbent upon a personal ethics based on the psychology of the drive, given the drive's antinomian dimension. Ambiguity is inherent to an existentialist ethics that abandons recourse to the authority of the "Big Other" as the

²⁵ Aleister Crowley, *Little Essays Toward Truth* (Scottsdale, AZ: New Falcon Publications, 1991), 33.

ground and source of social normativity, whether in the form of God, the state, or the “Perennial Tradition,” looking instead to the consequences of human freedom within human history. A Thelemic ethics, clarified through the interpretive lens provided by semiotic method, cannot be theologically systematic in a traditional sense. It cannot simply posit a new set of universal social norms to replace the ones exploded by industrialization. It can only (at least presently) restage the problem/deadlock of modern capitalist society—that of the concrete person and their creative projects versus the alienation of the commodified society of the national state—while positing the True Will as the impossible-Real solution to the deadlocked horizon of history. Under the horizon of capitalist alienation, Thelema is a call to self-responsibility, through coherently purposive activity “under will,” in the light of the ambiguous potential for magical transcendence through the dynamic potential of the creative drive, over and against the prevailing cultural horizon of alienated ideological mediocrity.

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