

Hidden Intercourse

Eros and Sexuality
in the History of Western Esotericism

Edited by
Wouter J. Hanegraaff
& **Jeffrey J. Kripal**



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Hidden Intercourse

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CONTENTS

Introduction: Things We Do Not Talk About	ix
JEFFREY J. KRIPAL AND WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF	
Sexuality and Sexual Symbolism in Hermetic and Gnostic Thought and Practice (Second–Fourth Centuries)	1
ROELOF VAN DEN BROEK	
Conceiving Spirits: The Mystery of Valentinian Sex	23
APRIL D. DECONICK	
Sexual Intercourse Between Humans and Demons in the Islamic Tradition	49
PIERRE LORY	
Murmuring Secrets: Eroticism and Esotericism in Medieval Kabbalah	65
ELLIOT R. WOLFSON	
<i>Ta’anug</i> : Erotic Delights from Kabbalah to Hasidism	111
MOSHE IDEL	
Complications of Eros: The Song of Songs in John of Morigny’s <i>Liber florum celestis</i> Doctrine	153
CLAIRE FANGER	
Under the Mantle of Love: The Mystical Eroticism of Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno	175
WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF	
Revealing Analogies: The Descriptive and Deceptive Roles of Sexuality and Gender in Latin Alchemy	209
LAWRENCE M. PRINCIPE	
Probing Women and Penetrating Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe	231
ALLISON P. COUDERT	

Sensuous Relation with Sophia in Christian Theosophy	281
ANTOINE FAIVRE	
Deadly Dates: Bodies and Sex in Spiritualist Heavens	309
CATHY GUTIERREZ	
Sexual Mysticisms in Nineteenth Century America: John Humphrey Noyes, Thomas Lake Harris, and Alice Bunker Stockham	333
ARTHUR VERSLUIS	
Paschal Beverly Randolph and Sexual Magic	355
JOHN PATRICK DEVENEY	
The Knight of Spermatophagy: Penetrating the Mysteries of Georges Le Clément de Saint-Marcq	369
MARCO PASI	
The Yoga of Sex: Tantra, Orientalism, and Sex Magic in the Ordo Templi Orientis	401
HUGH URBAN	
The Theory and Practice of Sexual Magic, Exemplified by Four Magical Groups in the Early Twentieth Century	445
HANS THOMAS HAKL	
The Roar of Awakening: The Eros of Esalen and the Western Transmission of Tantra	479
JEFFREY J. KRIPAL	
List of Contributors	521
Index of Persons	529
Index of Subjects	540

INTRODUCTION: THINGS WE DO NOT TALK ABOUT

JEFFREY J. KRIPAL AND WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

In recent years, the academic study of Western esotericism has been developing rapidly from a somewhat obscure specialty pursued by a few dedicated researchers into a burgeoning professional field of scholarly activity and international organization. Once a domain restricted to the relatively secluded circles of specialists and hence hidden from the sight of most academic and non-academic readers, it is now becoming an increasingly popular topic of public and critical discussion in the context of journals, monographs, conferences, and scholarly organizations.¹ The book you now hold in your hands is the fruit, one of many, of this growing branch of knowledge.

That there are connections between Western esotericism and the domains of eros and sexuality (which extend far beyond what we normally mean by “sex”) has, of course, been recognized before, not least by practitioners, and the various contributions to this volume provide abundant illustration of that fundamental and indubitable fact. But

¹ For an overview of the field and its recent development, see Hanegraaff, “The Study of Western Esotericism: New Approaches to Christian and Secular Culture,” in Antes, Geertz & Warne, eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*. There are two international academic organizations: the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (<http://www.esswe.org>), with an associated journal *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* (see http://www.brill.nl/m_catalogue_sub6_id9470.htm) and an associated monograph series, the “*Aries* Book Series” (see <http://www.brill.nl/default.aspx?partid=18&pid=24740>); and the USA-based Association for the Study of Esotericism (<http://www.aseweb.org>), which publishes an electronic journal *Esoterica* (<http://www.esoteric.msu.edu>). Conferences on Western esotericism are organized each year, alternately by the ASE in the USA and the ESSWE in Europe; permanent sessions on Western esotericism have been organized at the quinquennial conferences of the International Association for the History of Religion since 1995, and at the annual conferences of the American Academy of Religion since 2005. The present volume is based upon papers presented at a conference that is part of an annual series organized at Esalen Institute, San Francisco. Further conferences in the domain of Western esotericism, with names of participants and titles of papers, are listed in each issue of *Aries*. Chairs and teaching programs on Western esotericism currently exist at the Ecole Pratiques des Hautes Etudes (Sorbonne) in Paris, at the University of Amsterdam, and the University of Exeter.

scholarly analyses of how and why the two domains of esotericism and eroticism are so intimately interwoven are difficult to find. Moreover, the closely related problem (or is it a promise?) of how the history of sexuality in the West might be related to the history of Western esotericism implies a range of further questions that still remains virtually untouched. In the absence of any such developed analysis, only a few tentative suggestions will be made here. In a historical field this new, this rich, and this provocative, all we can reasonably do is point to the heavy fruit hanging low on the branches, and then hope a sufficient number of readers will choose to begin plucking it. Our own general sense is that such fruit contains its own important truths, but these are, at best, difficult to grasp for a whole host of intellectual, linguistic, political, historical, and social reasons.

In different ways and for different reasons, or so we would suggest, the domains of Western esotericism, on the one hand, and that of eros and sexuality, on the other, have both tended to become the object of censorship, suppression, concealment, and a certain polite public silence. Both the esoteric and the erotic have, in effect, been repressed, made to hide, “made occult,” as it were. Rather like the Greek god of fertility, Pan, whose iconography was transformed into the cloven-footed and horned “Devil” within the repressions of the Christian imagination, that which is repressed always returns, but as something else, as something “dark” and “dirty,” even “demonic,” that is, as something we should not talk about. And so we don’t. It was one thing to speak of Pan. It is quite another to speak of the Devil.

If we ask ourselves how and why this has happened, it may be useful to distinguish between five categories of “things we do not talk about”: those that are concerned, respectively, with *secrecy*, *taboo*, *concealment*, *intimacy*, and *ineffability*. As each of these terms carries a different, if also related, semiotic range and its own set of connotations, it seems wise to discuss each in turn before we proceed to the essays. In the process, we hope to give some sense of the essays themselves—their content, their excitement, their own spoken secrets.

Secrets and Rumors

To begin, we might note that the term *esotericism* has often been understood as referring to “secrets reserved for an elite,” and hence to the concept of initiation into hidden wisdom in contexts such as mystery

cults or secret societies.² The basic idea here is that certain kinds of knowledge should not be divulged to the multitude, because they would inevitably be misunderstood, misused, or profaned. Certain truths are considered too profound, too complex, too unconventional, perhaps even too shocking to be understood by the common man or woman. Therefore they should be revealed only to those who have gone through a process of careful selection, training, and preparation and have thereby shown themselves capable of a correct understanding. Other truths may be considered too dangerous to be made public. For example, such truths might involve knowledge about techniques and procedures for gaining superior occult powers that should not fall into the wrong hands. Or they may be concerned with secrets about “what is really going on” in history or society: here the assumption is that if the general public would discover the truth, revolts and other threats to social stability and the status quo could be the result.³ And finally, the supreme divine truth may simply be considered too sacred to be made available to the profane public: the pearls of spiritual wisdom should not be thrown before the swine, but should remain rather the preserve of a dedicated and pure elite.

It is only to be expected, of course, that the need for secrecy will be emphasized even more strongly if such esoteric truths are somehow associated with sexual matters and mysteries. In such cases, after all, the risk of misunderstanding and profanation is particularly strong.⁴ In some real sense, sex is the secret *par excellence*. Perhaps this is why the two

² The term “esotericism” as a substantive was first used by the French scholar Jacques Matter in 1828, but the adjective “esoteric” goes back to the second century (Lucian of Samosata). The first author who used it to refer to secret teachings seems to have been Clement of Alexandria (see Hanegraaff, “Esotericism,” 336; Riffard, *L'ésotérisme*, 70–73). On esotericism in the sense of “secret teachings” and its relation to Western esotericism, see Faivre, “The Notions of Concealment and Secrecy in Modern Esoteric Currents since the Renaissance”; Hanegraaff, “Esotericism”; de Jong, “Secrecy I: Antiquity”; Fanger, “Secrecy II: Middle Ages”; and Faivre, “Secrecy III: Modernity.”

³ When the secret is considered somehow dangerous, discourses on secrecy tend to take the shape of conspiracy theories. For an excellent discussion of this topic, see Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*.

⁴ But even in cases belonging to the second subcategory just mentioned—secrets concerning “what is really going on”—one very often finds that they include a sexual dimension. A convenient example is the notorious case of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*: the basic idea is that the Roman Catholic Church has suppressed the truth about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, but, of course, that truth becomes much more titillating by the very concept that Jesus had sex and by the motif of an underground tradition of sexual rites that have continued to the present day.

domains have historically been linked in the social imagination, even when they have not been necessarily linked in historical fact. Indeed, the fact that numerous groups and organizations have had a practice of secrecy has often caused suspicions about sexual goings-on: things that are so carefully kept hidden from the light of day must surely be somehow scandalous and obscene, that is, the secret must be about sex. Examples of both cases—sexual teachings and practices that are kept secret, and secret teachings and practices believed to be sexual—are discussed by various authors in this volume: from the Borborites and the Valentinians discussed by Roelof van den Broek and April DeConick to the Utopian communities treated by Arthur Versluis, and from the sexual techniques and rituals described by John Patrick Deveney and Marco Pasi to the sex-magical orders central to the chapters by Hugh Urban and Hans Thomas Hakl. As such essays reveal, many times the suspicions of sex, though exaggerated for polemical purposes, were in fact more or less accurate.

Taboo and Transgression

Whereas the category of esotericism, then, has often been understood as referring to secrecy, the terminology of *Western* esotericism that is basic to the present volume has a very different meaning. Since the 1990s (but building on older traditions, particularly in the French academic context), it has come to be understood by scholars as an umbrella concept that covers a complex domain of interrelated historical currents and ideas that have existed in Western culture from late antiquity to the present and which may or may not (that is to say, which do not necessarily) include a dimension of secrecy.⁵

The current debate about precise definitions and demarcations of the professional field of Western esotericism is complex and technical and need not detain us here. What can be said, however, and with some certainty, is that, until very recently, most of the currents that fall under the rubric of Western esotericism ended up in the category of “things we do not talk about.” Note that in this case we are not dealing with secrecy per se, but with the power of taboos in academic discourse itself. Scholars were aware that by including the various manifestations

⁵ For an overview of the field as a whole, see Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*.

of Western esotericism within the domain of “legitimate” academic research they ran a serious risk of finding themselves excluded: topics associated with “the occult” have tended to be perceived by most academics as a “no go area” unworthy of serious study, and hence scholars who published studies of them easily evoked suspicions of being inspired by other than scholarly agendas. In all fairness, it must be said that often enough, rather like the traditional suspicions of secrecy meaning sex, such occult suspicions were in fact more or less correct.⁶ But, inevitably, the sum effect of the taboo on studying esotericism was that neutral, critical, and historical research was strongly discouraged along with the crypto-esoteric scholarship. This has resulted in a very serious lack of expertise among academics about what are in fact large and important dimensions of the Western heritage. It is this defect of knowledge that the modern study of Western esotericism seeks to correct. It is time to talk about the things we do not talk about.

Needless to say, open and critical discussion of eroticism and sexuality and their relevance to broader issues in the history of religion and culture was likewise taboo in academic research, at least up to the twentieth century. This censoring situation changed dramatically after the definitive emergence of psychoanalysis before World War II, the sexual revolution of the shared European and American counterculture of the 1960s (catalyzed by such radical psychoanalytic figures as Wilhelm Reich, who actually coined the term “sexual revolution”), and, about the same time, the birth of the women’s movement and its subsequent waves of feminist criticism and critical gender analysis. Finally, the gay rights movement of the late 60’s and 70s was followed by academic research and writing on the intimate ways that sexual orientation figures into religious discourses and practices. Because of these central psychological, intellectual, and social revolutions, scholarly attention to the importance of eros and sexuality in religion and culture is by now quite normal and uncontroversial, at least within Western academic culture and open liberal societies. The situation is quite different in many other parts of the world, where such open discussions are still taboo and more or less impossible.

⁶ For more on the crypto-esoteric agendas in the context of “religionist” contexts, especially in a countercultural context since the 1960s, and their negative effect on the academic acceptance of the field, see Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity.”

That sexual and erotic dimensions are present in Western esotericism is hardly surprising, as such dimensions are omnipresent throughout the history of religion. Every human being, after all, has had a gendered body with sexual characteristics, regardless of time and clime. In some basic sense, then, sexuality transcends time, at least that brief micro-fraction of it we can access through historical-critical methods. But there is reason to assume that, in addition to these obvious biological universals (themselves always informed by relative cultural practices, that is, by history), we are also dealing with an *elective affinity* of some kind between the two domains of esotericism and eroticism. That is, we have reason to suspect that “something else” is going on here.

Some clues in that direction can be found, for instance, in Elliot Wolfson’s essay on discourse and intercourse as reflective of divine being in kabbalistic contemplation, and of what he dialectically names “the erotic nature of secrecy and the secret nature of eros.” In the rhetorical revealing and concealing structures of secrecy itself, Wolfson notes, “one can discern something resonant with the nature of eros.” Other hints can be had in Lawrence Principe’s discussion of how the use of sexual symbolism in alchemy results quite logically from the nature of pre-modern science and its conflicting needs to explain and to conceal; and in Allison Coudert’s analysis of the gendered demonological discourse in early modern Europe through which firm gender polarities were protected and preserved through, for example, female curiosity being symbolically linked with sexual promiscuity. The linking of forbidden knowledge, women, and sex extend well beyond the primordial garden, it turns out.

And there is still more. Indeed, what is so striking about so many of the figures treated in these essays is their conviction that in the depths of human sexuality lies hidden *the* secret of religion, occultism, magical power, spirituality, transcendence, life, God, Being itself. This astonishing connection, such figures would insist, is not metaphorical, or rhetorical, or symbolic, as some would prefer to have it. It is fundamental, cosmic, ontological, religious. We are not dealing here, then, with a politics or sociology or anthropology of sex. We are dealing with a metaphysics of sex, itself intimately entwined with the destiny of the soul. The historian of Western esotericism, of course, must remain agnostic about such final matters, but the historical data are quite clear about what our sources thought and wrote. Hans Thomas Hakl’s comments on the sex-magical instructions of Giuliano Kremmerz seem particularly appropriate here:

What is the aim of all these instructions? Certainly not a refinement of sexual pleasures, a subjugation of women, kinky sex games, or sexual liberation. By means of a prolonged regimen of fasting, breathing exercises, prolonged chastity, meditation, and years of general magical preparation, a superior magical force is to be developed: a force so strong that it should be capable of conquering everything, even physical death.

Concealing and Revealing

A third category of “things we do not talk about” concerns things we might actually like to talk about but which are hidden and therefore need to be discovered or unveiled first. It is not that they are necessarily kept secret or considered taboo: they are just difficult to find, understand, or interpret. They are, in a word, *concealed*. The history of Western esotericism is full of references to hidden wisdom, hidden messages, hidden powers, and hidden realities. Helena P. Blavatsky’s famous *Isis Unveiled* (1877) is only one among many texts that claim to lift the veil hanging over the true nature of reality. According to the sixteenth-century physician and alchemist Paracelsus, nature could be read as a book: it was full of hidden messages from God that could only be perceived and understood if one learned how to recognize and read the “signatures of things.” Hence the term *occult* means “hidden” (Latin *occultus*) and was originally a technical term in natural philosophy pertaining to those qualities or forces in nature that were not directly observable by the senses but could not be theoretically accounted for in terms of the reigning natural philosophy either; in other words, the kinds of invisible forces and influences that were particularly important to the so-called “occult sciences” of astrology, alchemy, and natural magic.⁷ In a similar spirit, Islamic esotericism, as explained by Pierre Lory in this volume, treats the normally invisible or “inward” side of reality, as opposed to the outward or apparent reality accessible to the normal senses, as something fundamentally real but also as something somehow dangerous, sometimes demonic, and, potentially at least, something erotic.

The very language of “veiling and unveiling” (“lifting the veils,” catching a glimpse of what is “under the veil,” revealing as un-veiling) has obvious masculine, voyeuristic, and hence erotic connotations. This

⁷ See Hanegraaff, “Occult/Occultism.”

provides us with another explanation for how eroticism comes to play a role in esoteric contexts. Again, the subtle erotic interplay of veiling and unveiling, concealing and revealing, is evident in Elliot Wolfson's reading of kabbalistic texts. Another clear case is Wouter J. Hanegraaff's discussion of Giordano Bruno and the myth of the hunter Actaeon who, spurred on by eros—the desire for eternal beauty—finally glimpses the nude goddess Diana (Nature unveiled) while she is taking her bath. The result? He is both killed and transfigured within this very act of mystical/erotic transgression.

Reversely, however, it must also be noted that a trend towards the “disoccultation of the occult” has become prominent in Western esoteric contexts, at least since the nineteenth century, particularly in the type of Spiritualist discourse discussed by Cathy Gutierrez in this volume, but also in its later esoteric developments, up to and including contemporary spiritual trends such as those discussed by Jeffrey Kripal with reference to Esalen and what we might call a democratization of Western esotericism. The erotic secret is out. We know now. And we can talk about what we know.

Intimacy and Poignancy

The “things we do not talk about” may be secret, taboo, or concealed; but they can also be considered too intimate to be easily shared. Withholding them from public discussion and scrutiny may be considered a simple matter of discretion rather than a cause for putting up barriers of formal initiation. In the context of the history of Western esotericism, this brings us to the domain of personal religious experience and its subjective psychological description. We possess numerous texts that make discrete allusions to (rather than spell out) certain events that occurred in the author's personal spiritual life, or that refer to subtle feelings and emotional nuances which resist straightforward verbalization or logical analysis. We also know of cases of specific communities devoted to a spiritual way of life whose members shared a common experience of divine presence that they preferred to keep among themselves, and which indeed might not have been accessible to anyone except through active daily participation.

The erotic dimension comes into play almost inevitably whenever such personal or communal experiences concern intimate contact with personified spiritual entities. There is something deeply personal, and

deeply poignant, here. A particularly clear example is Antoine Faivre's discussion of how Christian theosophers during the seventeenth century experienced their relations with the virgin Sophia as one of erotic play and actual sexual/spiritual intercourse (even leading to pregnancy on the part of the male theosopher!). Here too we might mention how members of a theosophical community—perhaps not unlike the Valentinians described by April DeConick—tried to “rush into the bedroom” of the bride in order to join in the communal love-feast. A comparable dimension of erotic intimacy is likewise prominent in Moshe Idel's subtle discussions of the phenomenology of erotic delight in theosophical Kabbalah and Hasidic literature; the murmured secrets of Elliot Wolfson's chapter; the Latin commentaries on the Song of Songs, with all their kisses, analyzed by Claire Fanger; Marsilio Ficino's homo-erotic desires diagnosed in Wouter J. Hanegraaff's contribution; and Arthur Versluis's elaborate discussion of the erotic mysticisms of nineteenth-century American visionaries. As we approach the present, such intimacies, we might notice, become more and more descriptive, self-confessed, autobiographical, that is, they become less private and more textualized. Hence whereas it is exceedingly difficult (though not impossible) to find explicit autobiographical descriptions of esoteric experience in a medieval Latin or Hebrew text, it is not at all uncommon in a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century German or Dutch milieu, and it is exceptionally easy to find such things in a nineteenth- or twentieth-century English document. Intimacy is intimacy, but the secret is becoming less of a secret as the centuries tick by. We might also wonder here about European and American cultural differences and their respective effects on esoteric discourse, that is, on what can and cannot be said.

Ineffability and Proximity

Finally, there are “things we do not talk about” not because we do not want to, but simply because we are not able to. References to the *ineffable* are more prominent in Western esotericism than one might perhaps think. They are typically associated with a superior knowledge or “gnosis” that cannot be transmitted by words or even symbols, but must be directly experienced. The question of how such gnosis relates to mystical experience (which, at least according to William James, contains a “noetic” dimension) cannot fail to impose itself on the

reader of many chapters in this volume. In the present context, it is important to note that the theme of a “higher,” “superior,” or “absolute” knowledge, the contents of which resist verbalization or rational understanding, has often been considered central to Western esotericism as a field of study.⁸ Indeed, Kocku von Stuckrad has recently argued that it is precisely this strong noetic quality that finally sets apart the field of Western esotericism from the related semiotic field of “mysticism.” Such a noetic wisdom or gnosis, however, is seldom of a linear or rational quality. It is typically more immediate, direct, intuitive—it thus displays a certain “all at once” quality that is claimed to be complete or perfect in itself but will take years, maybe an entire life, to explicate and unfold into a textual corpus (often of literally thousands of pages). It is a paradox often noted: the ineffable tends to produce an almost unbelievable prolixity. That which cannot be said gets said, and said, and said.

Here too we are reminded of the erotic, which is always overdetermined as something saturated with meaning, as something that can never be fully articulated. One perhaps does not need to be reminded of the etymological connections and mythological associations between knowing and sexual intercourse (although they certainly help),⁹ or of such obvious facts as that sexual pleasure can never be adequately described but only finally experienced (rather like the sacred in some theories), to make the point that Western esoteric sources often describe the attainment of an ineffable mystical gnosis in erotic and sexual terms, that is, as a “consummation,” “embrace,” “unitive bliss,” “rapture,” “kiss,” “cleaving,” “marriage,” and so on.

All languages of sexual union, however, imply a polarity, that is, two figures that embrace, that unite, that become one. This is the most basic sexual polarity that structures, universally, the innumerable erotic languages, mythologies, and symbolisms of the history of religion. Enter the modern categories of *gender* and *sexual orientation*. The history of erotic mystical literature, after all, is *filled* with biological males uniting with male deities. Indeed, as one of the two editors (Jeffrey Kripal)

⁸ See, for example, Neugebauer-Wölk, “‘Höhere Vernunft’ und ‘höheres Wissen’ als Leitbegriffe in der esoterischen Gesellschaftsbewegung”; von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation”; and Kilcher, ed., *Die Enzyklopädie der Esoterik: Allwissenheitsmythen und universalwissenschaftliche Modelle in der Esoterik der Neuzeit*.

⁹ See, for example, Doniger, *Carnal Knowledge*.

has argued elsewhere, in the history of Western religion (and indeed, of much of Asian religion as well), male mystical systems that employ sexual symbolism inevitably tend toward an orthodox sublimated homoerotic structure.¹⁰ *Precisely* to the extent that a heteroerotic structure is set up for males—that is, to the extent that the divine is imagined as a female with whom the male aspirant enjoys hidden intercourse—the system tends to become heterodox, if not actually heretical.

Such a comparative thesis is certainly borne out in the present collection of essays, so many of which treat male heteroerotic traditions that were suppressed, persecuted, or simply forgotten by their surrounding orthodox religious cultures. Thus whereas those traditions that featured an active or explicit heterosexual symbolism—like the bridal chamber of the early Valentinian Christians studied by April DeConick, or the modern sexual magical traditions studied by Patrick John Deveney, Thomas Hans Hakl, and Hugh Urban—became heterodox or heretical, those traditions that were successfully incorporated by their surrounding religious cultures, like Latin bridal mysticism, Kabbalah, and Sufism, tended strongly toward a male same-sex structure, with male mystics loving and enjoying “hidden intercourse” with a male God. This is not to say, of course, that we do not find homosexual practices within heteroerotic systems (Theodore Reuss’s phallus cult or some of Aleister Crowley’s more transgressive rituals come to mind here), or that we do not find heteroerotic features in the orthodox mystical systems (Mary as the bride of Christ, or the Sufi *jinniya* or female spiritual consorts), only that it is virtually impossible to win orthodox approval for any explicit heterosexual mystical or magical system.

Intriguingly, Wouter Hanegraaff’s essay on the two Renaissance figures of Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno demonstrates both sides of this same thesis. Hence Ficino, whose “Platonic” desires Hanegraaff analyzes as distinctly homoerotic, turned to a translation project involving Plato’s *Symposium* and a sublimated celibate life. He was thus embraced by his own Roman Catholic tradition. Bruno, on the other hand, whose desires appear to be anything but homoerotic, was burned at a stake. It is important to admit, of course, that Bruno was not burned for his heteroerotic desires per se, but these, we might speculate, hardly helped him to fit into the reigning homoerotic religious system of his time and played, in turn, into his elaborate language of

¹⁰ See Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom*; and *The Serpent’s Gift*.

“fire” and “passion,” a fiery passion that could not be fitted into the male homoerotic structures of Italian Catholicism. For such a prominent male to think heterosexually about divine things in the West is to think heretically.

Such thoughts raise fascinating questions about the linking of eros, (hetero)sexuality, heresy, and secrecy in the history of Western esotericism. Is not the presence of a male heterosexual system an almost certain sign that the symbolic system will be ignored, denied, repressed, in the end made “occult”?

* * *

This is one, and only one, question. The essayists ask and advance their own specific questions and proffer their own answers. Among their numerous illuminations, we might briefly mention the following figures and themes, not to summarize the content of *Hidden Intercourse*, much less to offer any premature closure, but simply in a spirit of temptation:

- A common esoteric reading of the fruit of the garden of Eden as a patent sexual metaphor, with sexual differentiation understood either as a sign of the “Fall” and a subsequent mortality (hence the ascetic components of these traditions), or as the bipolar basis for a sexual technique of reunion and restoration of the primordial Adamic androgyne (hence the erotic practices of these traditions);
- An ancient Christian mystery involving sacramental sexual union in the “bridal chamber”;
- The Levites of ancient Christian heresiology as a homosexual “priestly” trope;
- Hermeneutical techniques that out-Freud Freud through readings like that of Psalm 1 and its flowing water as symbolic of seminal emission, or the Christian eucharist as a kind of secret spermatophagy or sperm-eating (with examples from the fourth century to the twentieth);
- Sufi saints coupled spiritually with *jinniya* or feminine spiritual beings in order to increase and transmit their *baraka* or supernatural power;
- The erotic nature of secrecy itself as a simultaneous revealing and concealing, that is, as a kind of linguistic strip-tease;
- God as the delight of all delights, erotic and otherwise;
- Mary as both the virgin mother and bride-lover of Christ;
- Marsilio Ficino as a conflicted homoerotic scholar who turned to an interpretation of Plato’s *Symposium* at the instigation of his younger male friend in order to work through his sexual melancholy;
- Sulphur as paternal seed, mercury as menstrual blood;

- Two-headed hermaphrodites;
- Male sex with a (male) bull hide;
- A popular sixteenth-century artist who drew things like women rubbing (psychotropic?) ointment on their genitals in order to “fly” to the Witches’ Sabbath, a naked witch looking backwards through her vagina to see the Devil (on a Christmas card no less), and a dragon performing cunnilingus on a witch;
- The Platonic model of the brain as producer of semen, with the spinal cord as the transmitter of this cerebral substance to the penis;
- A Christian, goddess-like Sophia, who marries herself to a German theosopher on Christmas day, sensually “plays” with him for years, finds an appropriate house for him in Amsterdam, and then helps edit her departed lover’s letters through a disciple;
- The forward-looking social liberalism of the nineteenth-century American Spiritualists, which included such marvels as Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for president of the United States, who also happened to be a famous spokesperson for free love, which she believed would help implement a kind of millennial utopia in which young women would date the dead;
- Thomas Lake Harris married to his divine faerie, the Lily Queen, and living in celibate chastity with his second wife;
- The “internal respiration” of Harris and his community, experienced as a kind of bodily electricity flowing from the reproductive organs, particularly the vagina;
- Hashish, magic mirrors, and a cosmic domain of scintilla-like souls or monads, each a reflection of God as Light accessible through the secrets of sexual magic;
- The father of psychoanalysis in Italy involved in occult traditions;
- The “practice of separation” of the solar Self and the alchemical creation, through sexual magic, of a second subtle “glorious body” to survive the physical death of the mortal frame;
- A fictional Tantric town in the American Midwest called “Paradox,” where the Wizard of Oz meets the human potential movement, Asian Tantra meets Western sexual magic, and the counterculture comes to the heartland.

Admittedly, this is a dizzying and still entirely unexplained list. Explanations will come in due time. We will leave it now to our readers to discover all these things in the pages that follow and, most importantly, to begin talking about those things we do not talk about.

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SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL SYMBOLISM IN
HERMETIC AND Gnostic THOUGHT AND PRACTICE
(SECOND–FOURTH CENTURIES)

ROELOF VAN DEN BROEK

In this first chapter we will be dealing with two broad, variegated, and partly interconnected religious currents that both flourished in Late Antiquity and emphasized the importance of spiritual knowledge (*gnōsis*). One of them is known as Hermetism, and the other is usually called Gnosticism.

The hermetic current claimed to transmit the teachings of the ancient Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus.¹ The magical, astrological, and alchemical hermetic writings attributed to Hermes, and usually referred to as the “technical hermetica,” fall beyond the scope of the present chapter, which concentrates on what is known as “philosophical Hermetism.” Its most characteristic feature is the idea of an indissoluble interrelationship between God, the cosmos, and man, which implies the unity of the universe. The final aim of the hermetic teaching was to lead its adepts to the worship of the supreme God as the source of being, and eventually to union with him through initiation. Although it is common usage to speak of “Hermetism” in the singular, we should realize that its doctrines showed a great variety and never developed into one coherent system.² The hermetic writings are strongly influenced by various Greek philosophical ideas, some of them quite incompatible, but also by Jewish and Egyptian mythological and theological speculations.

The gnostic current was characterized by a strong emphasis on the esoteric and salvific character of the spiritual knowledge it claimed to possess. In the second and third centuries A.D., this general current led to a number of elaborate mythological gnostic systems, which are known from original documents and from the refutations by opponents (both Christian theologians and Greek philosophers). In his brilliant book of

¹ On Hermes Trismegistus and ancient Hermetism in general, see Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, and van den Broek, “Hermes Trismegistus I: Antiquity,” “Hermetism,” and “Hermetic Literature I: Antiquity.”

² On this variety, see van den Broek, “Hermetism.”

1996, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* Michael Williams has convincingly shown that the popular view of Gnosticism as a monolithic religious movement is untenable. He concluded that it would be better to dismantle the whole category of "Gnosticism" altogether, and that terms such as "gnosis" or "Gnosticism," "gnostic," and "gnostic religion" are so vague that they have lost any specific meaning and should be avoided as well.³ Elsewhere I have argued that while Williams' analysis is convincing, his solution is too radical. The terms "gnosis" and "gnostic" are perfectly applicable to all ideas and currents, from Antiquity to the present day, that emphasize the idea of a revealed secret gnosis (spiritual knowledge) as a gift that illuminates and liberates man's inner self. The term "Gnosticism," however, should better be restricted to the mythological gnostic systems of the first centuries.⁴

Under the influence of Platonism, the philosophical and religious thought of late antiquity was pervaded by an ascetic tendency, which often led to a negative view of the body and sexuality and, for that reason, to the propagation of sexual asceticism. These views exerted a strong influence on early Christianity (especially in Egypt and Syria) and on Gnosticism, but to a much lesser extent on Hermetism, as will be seen. Although the hermetists generally considered the body a danger for the soul, there is only one hermetic text, the *Poimandres* (*Corpus Hermeticum* I), that sees sexual desire as the cause of death and of all evil. Most of the gnostic writings, on the other hand, both Christian and non-Christian, interpret sexuality as the bad demiurge's principal instrument for enslaving the human being. The fifty-two gnostic writings found at Nag Hammadi in 1945⁵ contain not a single passage that could give support to the common anti-gnostic allegation that sexual libertinism and promiscuity were practiced among the gnostics. It is therefore all the more interesting that certain hermetic and gnostic texts, as well as ancient reports on specific gnostic views, testify to a positive view of sexuality and even see it as indispensable for salvation. Most notable in this regard are the hermetic *Asclepius* (chapter 21) and, on the gnostic side, the alleged views of the Valentinians and Borborites. Since the Valentinian speculations on marriage and sexuality are dis-

³ Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism."*

⁴ Van den Brock, "Gnosticism I: Gnostic Religion"; see also Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 8–12.

⁵ On the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library and its later vicissitudes, see Robinson, "Nag Hammadi: The First Fifty Years."

cussed by April DeConick elsewhere in this volume, this chapter will concentrate on the hermetic views of sexuality, as expressed in the *Poimandres* and the *Asclepius*, and on the sexual practices of the gnostic sect of the Borborites.⁶

Hermetic Ideas about Sex and Sexuality

According to hermetic anthropology, the human being has two natures: he participates in the divine world by means of his immortal soul (or his mind), but he is part of the material world by means of his mortal body.⁷ The material world, and the body in particular, poses a constant threat to the soul, because it tends to absorb it and make it forget its heavenly origin. This could lead to a gloomy view of the human condition, as for instance in CH VI, entitled *The Good is in God alone and nowhere else*:

There is no room for it [the good] in the material body, which is squeezed on all sides by vice, sufferings, pains, desires, angry feelings, delusions and mindless opinions. And the worst of all, Asclepius, is that here below they believe that each of the things I have just mentioned is the greatest good while actually it is insuperable evil.⁸

Accordingly, the hermetic writings admonish their readers to despise and hate the material body. A few examples:

Who behaves well towards his body, behaves badly towards himself.⁹

If you do not first hate your body, my child, you cannot love yourself, but when you love yourself, you will have mind, and if you have mind, you will also partake of knowledge.¹⁰

People who love the body will never be able to see the vision of the beautiful and the good.¹¹

⁶ The editions used in this chapter are the ones mentioned in the bibliography. The quotations are directly based on the original texts; in translating them I gratefully made use of the translations that are listed in the bibliography.

⁷ See for instance CH I, 15: "Because of this, unlike any other living thing on earth, mankind is twofold—in the body mortal but immortal in the essential man"; *Definitions* VI, 1 (preserved in Greek and Armenian): "Man has at once the two natures, the mortal and the immortal one."

⁸ CH VI, 3.

⁹ *Definitions* IX, 5, both in Greek and Armenian.

¹⁰ CH IV, 6.

¹¹ Stobaeus, *Fragm.* VI, 19.

Against the background of such views of the body, it becomes understandable that a text like the *Poimandres* voices a very negative view on sexuality and intercourse as well: after all, these involve one of the most powerful human passions. And yet, the *Asclepius* contains a very positive evaluation of the sexual union of man and woman. In order to explain this seeming paradox, we have to look at the notion of androgyny as the perfect form of sexuality.

An important aspect of the hermetic ideas about God was the concept of his androgyny. An explicit statement is found in the *Poimandres*:

The Mind (*nous*) who is God, being androgynous and existing as life and light, by speaking gave birth to another mind (*nous*), a craftsman...¹²

Likewise we read in the *Asclepius*:

God, the only and the All, completely full of the fertility of both sexes and ever pregnant with his own will, always begets whatever he wishes to procreate.¹³

Although the mention of the divine will gives a philosophical twist to this remark, the original idea was that the androgynous God is pregnant (*praegnans*) of everything and produces everything out of himself. He is not only his own father (*autopatōr*) and his own mother (*automētōr*),¹⁴ but also the father and the mother of the universe, as in CH V:

If you force me to say something still more daring, it is his essence to be pregnant (*kuēin*) with all things and to make them.¹⁵

The verb that is used here, *kuēin*, can only be used with reference to a woman; it means to “become or be pregnant.” God is male and female at the same time: he begets everything and is pregnant of everything. In the final hymn of the *Asclepius*, in its original version as preserved in the Coptic *Prayer of Thanksgiving*¹⁶ and in the fragmentary Greek Papyrus Mimaout, the bisexual language of procreation comes to the surface in plain terms:

We know you, O intellectual Light, O Life of life,
We know you, O Womb of every creature,

¹² CH I, 9.

¹³ *Asclepius* 20.

¹⁴ Thus a hermetic source in Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones*, I, 8, 5 (Nock & Festugière IV, 112–113, nr. 13).

¹⁵ CH V, 9.

¹⁶ Nag Hammadi Codex VI, 7 (henceforth NHC).

We know you, O Womb pregnant by the member [*physis* = phallus] of the Father.

We know you, O eternal permanence of the pregnant Father.¹⁷

The Greek words used here are *patros kuēphorountos*. The verb *kuēphorein* means to “bear in the womb, be pregnant,” and, accordingly, can only be used with reference to a woman. The Coptic translation has the word *ēpo*, which means to “beget, bring forth,” which can be used with reference to both male and female beings. Dirkse and Brashler correctly translate the Coptic as: “O eternal permanence of the begetting Father.” The Coptic translator apparently found the original Greek expression, “the pregnant Father,” so alarming that he thought it wise to use a word that better fitted the procreative activity of a father.

The view of the highest God as bisexual implies that androgyny is the most perfect form of sexuality.¹⁸ This led to two different evaluations of human sexuality: on the one hand, the sexual desire that resulted from the separation of originally androgynous mankind into males and females could be interpreted negatively as the cause of death; but, on the other hand, the sexual union of man and woman could also be praised as the mystical representation of the divine androgynous fertility. The first interpretation is found in the *Poimandres*, the second in the *Asclepius*.

The Poimandres

According to the myth of the *Poimandres*, after the second Mind, the Craftsman, the supreme Mind created a third divine being called Man (*Anthrōpos*), to whom he gave authority over the whole cosmos. The heavenly Man looked through the cosmic framework, saw his image reflected in the waters of Nature below, and wanted to inhabit it. Nature, from her side, smiled with love at the sight of the beautiful form of Man, and they became lovers.¹⁹ Then the text continues:

When Nature had intercourse with Man, she bore a wonder most wondrous....and without delay Nature gave birth to seven men whose natures corresponded to those of the seven (planetary) governors and

¹⁷ NHC VI, 64, 25–29.

¹⁸ The idea of divine androgyny derives from Egyptian mythological theology, as has been convincingly argued by Daumas, “Le fonds égyptienne de l’Hermétisme,” and Zandee, “Der Hermetismus und das alte Ägypten,” 120–125.

¹⁹ CH I, 12–15.

who were androgynous and walked upright. . . . From life and light man became soul and mind; from life soul, from light mind, and all things of the perceptible world remained in that state until the end of a cycle and the beginning of the species. . . . When the cycle was completed, the bond of all things was loosed by the will of God. All living beings, which had been androgynous, were parted asunder together with the human being and part of them became male, part likewise female.²⁰

The author apparently made use of a Jewish source, which has also left its traces in the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, I, 29. This text says that the first seven generations of the human race lived the sinless life of the angels and knew no sexual desire, but that the eighth generation, seduced by the beauty of the women, began to practice illicit intercourse, which led to the birth of giants and, finally, to the Flood (cf. Genesis 6). According to this source, the Fall did not occur in Paradise but at the end of the first period of the world, which ended with the Flood. There is little doubt that the *Recognitions*' seven angelic generations until the Flood and the seven androgynous human beings of the first world period in the *Poimandres* represent the same mythological tradition. In the biblical account of the Fall, there is only a faint hint that the Fall has anything to do with sexuality, viz. when we read that after eating the forbidden fruit Adam's and Eve's eyes "were opened and they discovered that they were naked."²¹ But in the Jewish myth behind the *Recognitions* and the *Poimandres* the connection is quite clear.

As a matter of fact, the *Poimandres* does not say that the splitting up of the original androgynous beings into males and females was the result of sinful sexual desire or a divine punishment. After the quotation given above, the text continues:

But God immediately spoke a holy word: "Increase in number and multiply in multitude, all you creatures and craftworks. And let him who has mind recognize that he is immortal and that desire is the cause of death, and let him so know all that exists."²²

With an obvious reference to Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth," the *Poimandres* admits that sexuality and procreation are necessary for the continuation of the human race. But at the same time it points out that they are dangerous, because they can make one forget one's immortality; sexual desire, moreover, is seen as the ultimate cause

²⁰ CH I, 16–18.

²¹ Genesis 3:7.

²² CH I, 18.

of death. The person who is in the possession of mind (*nous*) should not forget his divine descent and realize that sexual desire is the ultimate cause of death: children are born to die. If he does so, he will know the All. Scholars agree that this is a clear echo of the hermetic saying in *Definitions IX*:

Who thinks of himself in Nous knows himself and who knows himself knows everything.²³

That the corporeal component of man can be a danger to its spiritual counterpart, and that it is therefore wrong to love the body, is explicitly stated in the *Poimandres*:

The one who recognizes himself has attained the overwhelming good, but the one who loved the body that came from the error of desire remains wandering in the dark and sensibly suffers the effects of death.²⁴

The author does not explicitly state that sexual desire (which he calls an error!) and death are the result of the splitting of humankind into males and females, but he apparently knew and probably favoured this idea. Perhaps we are justified to quote here the Valentinian *Gospel of Philip*, at least if we follow the usual interpretation:

When Eve was still in Adam death did not exist. When she was separated from him death came into being. When he enters [Paradise] again and attains his former self, death will be no more.²⁵

The same idea is expressed in the *Gospel of Thomas*:

On the day that you were one [sc. in Paradise] you became two.²⁶

This implies that when the two become one again, that is to say, when the original androgyny is restored, Paradise is regained, as we read further on:

²³ *Definitions IX*, 4.

²⁴ CH I, 19.

²⁵ NHC II, 68, 22–26. I follow here the edition and translation by Isenberg, 178–179. H.-M. Schenke, *Das Philippos-Evangelium*, 47, presented a new interpretation and translation: “Als Eva mit Adam zusammen war, gab es keinen Tod. Als sie sich von ihm trennte, trat der Tod ins Dasein. Wenn er wieder hineingeht und er ihn bei sich aufnehmt, wird kein Tod mehr sein.” Because of the lacunal state of the manuscript, especially in the last sentence, and the possibility of textual corruption, the exact wording and meaning of this statement on the origin of death remains uncertain. Schenke’s argumentation in his commentary (391–393) does not convince me.

²⁶ *Gospel of Thomas*, log. 11.

When you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female, . . . then you will enter the Kingdom.²⁷

It seems that with respect to sexuality and procreation the author of the *Poimandres* took the same ambivalent stance as the Christian author Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 200): procreation is good, but sexual desire is bad. Clement wrote in his *Stromateis*:

Who has married to beget children should practise continence, so that he does not desire his own wife, whom he should love, begetting children with a chaste and virtuous will.²⁸

The Asclepius

In the *Poimandres*, the androgyny of God and of the first human beings entailed a negative view of sexual desire, which was seen as the cause of death. In the *Asclepius*, on the other hand, it led to a positive view of human intercourse, which was seen as an image of the divine androgyny. This does not mean, however, that the *Asclepius* was blind to the potential danger that the body poses for the soul. Two examples may suffice to show this:

He [the human being] despises the human part of his nature, having put his trust in the divinity of his other part.²⁹

[Asclepius:] “According to your teaching thus far, Trismegistus, souls run a great risk in this earthly life regarding their hope of eternal life to come.”

[Trismegistus:] “Of course, but some find this incredible, others fictitious, others laughable perhaps. For in this bodily life the pleasure one takes from possessions is a delight, but this delight grips the soul by the throat, as they say: it clings to the mortal part of the human being and the malice that begrudges immortality does not allow him to get knowledge of his divine part.”³⁰

Nevertheless, the *Asclepius* has a positive view of sexuality and intercourse. Hermes’ remark in chapter 20 (quoted above) that God “is completely full of the fertility of both sexes,” provokes a surprised question by Asclepius, in chapter 21: “Do you say that God is of both sexes,

²⁷ *Gospel of Thomas*, log. 22.

²⁸ Clement, *Stromateis* III, 58, 2.

²⁹ *Asclepius* 6.

³⁰ *Asclepius* 12.

Trismegistus?" Hermes' answer does not have to do with androgyny but with the fertility mentioned in his earlier remark:

Not only God, Asclepius, but all kinds of life, whether endowed with soul or soulless. For it is impossible that any of the beings would be infertile. . . . For each sex is full of fecundity, and the linking of the two or, more accurately, their union is incomprehensible. If you call it Cupid or Venus or both, you will be correct.³¹

He then proceeds to extol the incomprehensible mystery of sexual union. The mystery of procreation is accompanied by "the greatest affection, pleasure, gaiety, desire and love divine." From this point onward, we fortunately have not only the Latin text, but also a Coptic translation included in the Nag Hammadi Library.³² This translation mostly gives us a better idea of the Greek original. But in this case it is difficult to establish the original wording:

Coptic

Latin

And if you wish to see the reality of this mystery, then you should see the wonderful image of the intercourse that takes place between man and woman.³³

One should explain how great is the force and compulsion of this mystery, were it not that each individual, if he examines himself, already knows it from his inmost feelings.³⁴

The Coptic text says that sexual intercourse between humans is "a wonderful image" (it uses the Greek word *eikōn*) of the universal fecundity and productivity, which itself is a reflection of the nature of the androgynous supreme being.

After a graphic description of sexual intercourse, which is completely unique in classical literature, Hermes continues with an explanation of why this act of love is done in secret. In this case there are only minor differences between the Coptic and the Latin texts, in the latter of which we read:

³¹ *Asclepius* 21.

³² NHC VI, 65, 15–78, 43. The importance of the Coptic translation for our understanding of the whole passage on intercourse was first pointed out by Mahé, "Le sens des symboles sexuels," 126–133; see also his commentary in *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 209–214.

³³ NHC VI, 65, 15–19.

³⁴ *Asclepius* 21.

Therefore, the act of this mystery, so sweet and vital, is done in secret. If it were done openly, the divinity that manifests itself in both natures from the mingling of the sexes would be forced to feel ashamed by the laughter of the ignorant; the more so, if it were open to the sight of irreverent people.³⁵

In the Coptic version, this is followed by a remark that once again emphasizes the mysterious nature of the sexual union:

But they rather are holy mysteries of words and acts, because not only they are not heard but also not seen. Therefore, people of this kind [the ignorant and irreverent] are blasphemers, atheists and impious men.³⁶

It is of interest to note that the *Asclepius* here makes use of the language of the Greek mysteries: these consisted of sacred formulas (*legomena*) and sacred acts (*drōmena*) that had to be kept secret.³⁷ Likewise, the sexual union of two lovers is a divine mystery, with sacred and secret words of love and a sacred and secret act. It is a divine mystery because it is not only “a wonderful image” of the productivity and the androgynous unity of God, but it also leads man and woman to the experience of their original androgyny. At the same time, the sexual union may have been seen as a symbol of the union of man’s inner self with God. But its meaning can only be grasped by those who have knowledge; for ignorant and irreverent people it is a mere act of the flesh.

There must be a direct connection between these hermetic views and those of the Valentinian Gnostics about the “marriage in purity” and the mystery of the bridal chamber, which are discussed by April DeConick elsewhere in this volume. Moreover, because of some distinct parallels with the hermetic views just discussed, it may be of interest to quote a scornful remark by Clement of Alexandria about the ideas of unspecified Christian heretics concerning the mystical dimension of sexual intercourse:

There are also people who call the vulgar Aphrodite³⁸ a mystical union... For these thrice-unhappy³⁹ people expound like hierophants the union of sexual intercourse as a mystery, and they are of the opinion that it leads them upwards into the Kingdom of God.⁴⁰

³⁵ *Asclepius* 21.

³⁶ NHC VI, 65, 34–66, 2.

³⁷ This was pointed out by Dirkse and Parrott, *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI*, 402.

³⁸ The term “vulgar Aphrodite” (= sexual intercourse) derives from Plato’s *Symposium*, 180c–185c; comp. “Venus” in *Asclepius*, 21.

³⁹ This term (Greek: *trisathlioi*) might be a allusion to the epithet *trismegistos* of Hermes.

⁴⁰ Clement, *Stromateis*, III, 27, 1.

Finally, it should be observed that these hermetic (and gnostic) views on the androgyny of God and on sexual intercourse as its image and earthly realization presuppose the fundamental equality of both sexes, of man and woman—something quite exceptional in the Graeco-Roman world.

*The Gnostic Borborites and
their Sexual Celebration of the Eucharist*

The Borborites, or Borborians, were a gnostic sect that flourished in the fourth century and reportedly survived at least up to the sixth century. Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. A.D. 380) has left us an extensive report on them in his *Panarion*, 26.⁴¹ They have attracted much scholarly attention because their exceptional sexual practices seemed a clear example of the unbridled licentiousness of which the gnostics were accused by their opponents.⁴² According to Epiphanius, they were influenced by the teachings of another sect, that of the Nicolaitans,⁴³ who are discussed in *Panarion*, 25, and whose founder Nicolaus is said to have taught: “Unless one copulates every day, one cannot have eternal life.”⁴⁴ The Borborites called themselves “Gnostics” and “Enlightened,”⁴⁵ but were also known as Phibionites, Stratiotics, Levitics, Secundians, Sokratites, Zachaeuses, Coddians and Barbelites.⁴⁶ Since we have only Epiphanius’ testimony, we do not know to what extent these gnostic groups were really identical. The name Borborites means “filthy people,” which suggests that it was not a self-designation but a term of abuse invented by their adversaries. The so-called *Anacephaleiosis*, a very short epitome of the *Panarion*, of which Epiphanius’ authorship is disputed, suggests what may have prompted the name to Epiphanius himself or to others: “Yet others call them Borborites. These people take pride in Barbelo,

⁴¹ Greek text in Holl (ed.), *Epiphanius, I*, 275–300; English translations with notes in Williams, *Panarion of Epiphanius*, 82–99, and Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 199–214. This section is an elaboration of the discussion in Van den Broek, “Borborites.”

⁴² Benko, “The Libertine Gnostic Sect of the Phibionites”; Van den Broek, “Der Bericht des koptischen Kyrillos von Jerusalem; idem, “Borborites”; Fendt, “Borborianer”; Gero, “With Walter Bauer on the Tigris”; Jacobsen Buckley, “Libertines or Not”; Tardieu, “Epiphane contre les gnostiques”; Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 179–184.

⁴³ Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 26, 1, 3.

⁴⁴ *Panarion*, 25, 1, 6. See Pearson, “Nicolaitans,” 867–869.

⁴⁵ *Panarion*, 25, 7, 2.

⁴⁶ *Panarion*, 25, 2, 1; 26, 3, 7.

who is also called Barbero.”⁴⁷ Therefore, another form of the name Barbelites (“Barbelo people”) may have been Barberites, and that may have led to the nickname Borborites. Epiphanius’ report makes it clear that the Borborites adhered to the specific form of Gnosticism that some scholars like to call “Sethian” and that is clearly related to that of the “Gnostics” in Irenaeus’ *Adversus haereses*,⁴⁸ and in the *Apocryphon of John* and related texts.⁴⁹

The Borborites made use of many books, which, except for a few quotations by Epiphanius himself, are completely unknown to us: *Noria*, about Noah’s wife (cf. NHC IX, 2: *The Thought of Norea*), the *Gospel of Perfection*, the *Gospel of Eve*, the *Greater and Lesser Questions of Mary*, books of Jaldabaoth, books in the name of Seth (cf. NHC VII, 2: *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*; NHC VII, 5: *The Three Steles of Seth*), *Apocalypses of Adam* (cf. NHC V, 5: *The Apocalypse of Adam*), the *Birth of Mary*, and the *Gospel of Philip* (a quotation, *Panarion*, 26, 13, 2–3, is not found in the *Gospel of Philip* of NHC II, 3).

According to Epiphanius, the Borborites practised a curious Eucharistic ritual, in which instead of bread and wine male semen and female menstrual blood were offered up and eaten by the participants. Epiphanius reports about the ritual of the male emission:

To extend their blasphemy to heaven after making love in a state of fornication, the woman and the man receive the male emission in their own hands. And they stand with their eyes raised heavenward but the filth in their hands, and of course they pray—the ones called Stratiotics and Gnostics—and offer that stuff in their hands to the actual Father of all, and say, “We offer unto you this gift, the body of Christ.” And then they eat it and partake of their own dirt, and they say: “This is the body of Christ; and this is the Passover, because of which our bodies suffer (*paskhei*) and are forced to confess the passion (*pathos*) of Christ.”⁵⁰

The last remark shows that the Borborites considered the sexual passion a form of suffering, which they compared to the passion of Christ. Following a common Christian interpretation, they connected the Hebrew word Pascha (Passover) with the Greek verb *paskhein*, “to suffer” and the substantive *pathos*, “passion.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Epiphanius, *Anacephaleiosis*, 26.

⁴⁸ Irenaeus, *Adv. Her.* I, 29.

⁴⁹ On the Sethian Gnostics, see Williams, *Sethianism*, 32–63.

⁵⁰ *Panarion*, 26, 4, 5–7.

⁵¹ Lampe, *Lexicon*, 1046–1049.

Epiphanius continues his report with the ritual of the menstrual blood, to which he adds an interesting exegesis:

And so with the woman's emission when she happens to be having her period. They likewise take the unclean menstrual blood they gather from her, and eat it in common. And "This", they say, "is the blood of Christ." And thus when they read in apocryphal writings: "I saw a tree bearing fruit twelve times a year, and he said to me, 'This is the tree of life,'" they interpret this allegorically of the woman's monthly emissions.⁵²

The rationale behind this ritual seems to be that the divine element in human beings is located in their procreative power and that, therefore, salvation is realized by the emission of the bodily fluids, which are then offered to God. Epiphanius comments: "The idea is that they can obtain ready access to God through such a practice."⁵³ In the section on the Nicolaitans, Epiphanius mentions a Gnostic myth about Barbelo, which according to him was popular among the Borborites. According to this myth, she keeps appearing to the archons in a beautiful form and "through their lust-caused ejaculation robs them of their seed—to recover...her power."⁵⁴ Epiphanius refers to the Borborites when he says that some of the followers of Nicolaus said: "We gather the power of Prunicus [i.e. Barbelo] from our bodies through their emissions."⁵⁵ In the book called *Noria*, Noah's wife Noria revealed both the powers on high and Barbelo: "and she intimated that what has been taken from the Mother on high by the archon who made the world... must be gathered from the power in bodies, through the male and female emissions."⁵⁶ Elsewhere, the divine element that has to be rescued from the flesh (which belongs to the bad ruler of this world and cannot be raised) is said to be the soul: "But the power in the menses and semen, they say, is soul 'which we gather and eat.'⁵⁷ According to the *Greater Questions of Mary*, it was Jesus himself who had introduced the Borborite ritual: in the presence of Mary (probably Mary Magdalen) he produced a woman from his side, began to have intercourse with her, and partook of his emission to show that "Thus we must do, that we may live."⁵⁸

⁵² *Panarion*, 26, 4, 8–5, 1.

⁵³ *Panarion*, 26, 5, 7.

⁵⁴ *Panarion*, 25, 2, 4.

⁵⁵ *Panarion*, 25, 3, 2.

⁵⁶ *Panarion*, 26, 1, 9.

⁵⁷ *Panarion*, 26, 9, 3–4.

⁵⁸ *Panarion*, 26, 8, 2–3.

It seems that the Borborites explained various texts which spoke about “gathering” the divine element in humanity as referring to their own practice. Epiphanius transmits an interesting passage from the *Gospel of Eve* that describes a revelation by a tall heavenly figure, who is accompanied by another person of small stature and says to the visionary, probably Eve:

I am you and you are me, and wherever you are, there I am. And I am sown in all things, and you gather me from wherever you wish. But when you gather me, you gather yourself.⁵⁹

This need not imply that the *Gospel of Eve* taught the strange eucharistic ritual of the Borborites. Most probably they simply interpreted the passage in this sense, just as they did with a whole set of biblical texts.⁶⁰ To give a sample of their biblical exegesis, it may suffice to quote what Epiphanius has to say about their interpretation of Psalm 1:

And when David says: “He shall be like a tree planted by the outlets of water that will bring forth its fruit in due season,” he speaks about the man’s dirty behaviour. “By the outgoings of water” and “that will bring forth its fruit,” means the emission at climax. And “Its leaf shall not fall off” means “We do not allow it to fall to the ground, but eat it ourselves.”⁶¹

In his description of the Borborites, Epiphanius puts all the emphasis on their unbridled licentiousness and promiscuity. Interestingly, he ascribes to them a secret sign of recognition:

And if a stranger who is of their persuasion arrives, they have a sign that men give women and women give men: when the hand is held out, in greeting of course, a tickling stroke is made in the palm of the hand, so as to indicate secretly that the visitor is of their religion.⁶²

According to Epiphanius, they rejected fasting⁶³ and asceticism,⁶⁴ but forbade procreation⁶⁵ and called the female members of the sect “Virgins.”⁶⁶ To leave their “virginity” intact, they practised coitus

⁵⁹ *Panarion*, 26, 3, 1.

⁶⁰ *Panarion*, 26, 6, 1–2; 8, 4–7; 11, 1–2.

⁶¹ *Panarion*, 26, 8, 7.

⁶² *Panarion*, 26, 4, 2.

⁶³ *Panarion*, 26, 5, 8.

⁶⁴ *Panarion*, 26, 13, 1.

⁶⁵ *Panarion*, 26, 5, 12.

⁶⁶ *Panarion*, 26, 11, 9.

interruptus,⁶⁷ and when a woman accidentally became pregnant they aborted the foetus, prepared it with honey, spices and aromatics, ate it, and prayed to God: “We have not been deceived by the archon of lust, but we have gathered the brother’s transgression.”⁶⁸ A special group, which they called “Levites,” and who may have been the same as the “Levitics,” practised homosexuality.⁶⁹

Epiphanius claims to have come across this sect when he lived in Egypt, about A.D. 330. He was instructed in their teachings, he says, by active members of the group, who in fact were beautiful young women who tried to seduce and convert him.⁷⁰ They were disappointed about his refusal and said to each other: “We have been unable to save the young man, but we have left him in the hands of the archon to perish!”⁷¹ After reading their books and understanding their true intent, Epiphanius reported them to “the bishops in that place,”⁷² and did his best “to find out the names of those who were hidden in the church. And so they were expelled from the city, about eighty persons.”⁷³ He obviously did not participate in the sexual orgies of which he gives such a detailed description. Note that the instruction by the beautiful female adherents of the sect was apparently not very specific, since he understood their true intent only after reading their books.

For a correct assessment of the evidence presented above, the all-important question is: how trustworthy is our source? Epiphanius was famous for his learning and his zeal for ecclesiastical orthodoxy. He intended his *Panarion*, or *Medicine Chest*, as an antidote for those who had been bitten by the serpent of heresy. The *Panarion* is indispensable because of the many and sometimes excellent sources Epiphanius quotes or makes use of, but at the same time its value is very much restricted by the fact that he is obviously incapable of handling his sources. His

⁶⁷ *Panarion*, 26, 11, 9–11.

⁶⁸ *Panarion*, 26, 5, 4–6.

⁶⁹ *Panarion*, 26, 13, 1.

⁷⁰ *Panarion*, 26, 17, 4; 18, 2.

⁷¹ *Panarion*, 26, 17, 6.

⁷² This might be an indication that the incident did not occur in Alexandria but elsewhere in Egypt. In Alexandria, there was only one bishop at that time (Athanasius, 328–373, with interruptions). The “bishops” (*episkopoi*, literally “overseers,” “supervisors”) are probably the local college of presbyters and teachers, which in the second century played an important part in the church of Alexandria itself and afterwards continued to exist in the Egyptian Chora for a long time; see for this my study “Juden und Christen in Alexandria im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert,” 188–191.

⁷³ *Panarion*, 26, 17, 9.

reports about the various heresies are confused and confusing; he often misunderstands what he has read or heard; he sees connections between persons and currents that certainly did not exist; he often contradicts himself; and his explanations are seldom to the point. It is no wonder that scholars have reached sometimes completely divergent opinions about the gnostic and other sects that are dealt with in the *Panarion*. In short, reading Epiphanius' work is mostly frustrating and often unrewarding, and yet it cannot be ignored.

As for the reliability of his report about the Borborites, scholarly opinion is divided and ranges from almost complete trust in its reliability⁷⁴ to almost complete rejection.⁷⁵ Of course, Epiphanius' anti-heretical zeal may have induced him to give free play to his imagination, but there are reasons to assume that his report is not completely unreliable. Two Gnostic texts, both earlier than Epiphanius' *Panarion*, explicitly condemn similar practices.⁷⁶ In the *Pistis Sophia*, Thomas says to Jesus:

We have heard that there are some upon the earth who take male semen and female menstrual blood and make a dish of lentils and eat it, saying: "We believe in Esau and Jacob." Is this then a seemly thing or not?

At that moment, Jesus was angry with the world and he said to Thomas: "Truly I say that this sin surpasses every sin and every iniquity. Men of this kind will be taken immediately to the outer darkness, and will not be returned again into the sphere."⁷⁷

And in the *Second Book of Jeu*, Jesus forbids his disciples to reveal the mysteries to, *inter alios*, those who serve the 72 evil archons:

neither give them to those who serve the eighth power of the great Archon, i.e. those who eat the menstrual blood of their impurity and the semen of men, saying: "We have come to true knowledge and pray to the true God." Their God, however, is bad.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Thus Benko, "Libertine Gnostic Sect", and Gero, "With Walter Bauer on the Tigris."

⁷⁵ Thus Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 179–184; cf. 181–182: "what we are left with are people who are members of the Christian community (they were 'hidden within the church'); who may also have had additional, secret worship services that were more or less cloaked from the eyes of the uninitiated; who turn out to possess secret books with suspicious theological language; and who want to be known as 'virgins'" According to Williams, all the rest was made up by Epiphanius himself.

⁷⁶ According to Tardieu, *Introduction à la littérature gnostique*, 80 and 90, the *Pistis Sophia* and the *Books of Jeu* were composed around A.D. 330. In my view, there are good reasons to suppose that they were written in the second half of the third century; see van den Broek, "Gnosticism II: Gnostic literature," 418.

⁷⁷ *Pistis Sophia*, 147.

⁷⁸ *Second Book of Jeu*, 43.

It has been objected that these texts are “once again polemical accusations, not advocacy by practitioners,”⁷⁹ but that does not exclude the possibility that there may have been some truth in these allegations. Religiously-inspired sexual rituals, which to outsiders look like sheer obscenities, are not uncommon in the history of religions.⁸⁰ Admittedly, there are no independent testimonies from adherents of the cult itself, but the esoteric and secret character of its rituals makes it very unlikely that such testimonies ever existed. Moreover, it may be doubted whether any practitioner of such rituals would be willing to reveal their exact nature to non-initiated outsiders. In fact, the scholars who completely reject Epiphanius’ report seem to be unable to imagine that such rituals can be practiced in reality. In my view, there is no reason to push Epiphanius’ testimony completely aside and to deny that the “gathering” of the divine seed by means of sexual rituals was possibly an important element in the Borborite cult. Its starting-point may have been the fact, as attested by many Gnostic texts, that the divine element in human beings that has to be gathered during the process of salvation was often metaphorically called semen.⁸¹ It seems quite plausible that some gnostics may have taken the term literally and hence developed practices as described by Epiphanius. Of course, this does not mean that we need to take Epiphanius’ report at face value; on the contrary, we may assume that in this case as well we are dealing with the same mixture of truth, hearsay, misunderstanding and sheer slander that so often characterizes his anti-heretical polemics. What seems certain is that the Borborites, who called themselves “Gnostics,” were an offshoot of the “Gnostics” who adhered to the system described in Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, I, 29 and the *Apocryphon of John*. They most probably distinguished themselves from other gnostic sects by a literal interpretation of the metaphor “semen” as an indication of the divine element in humankind, which led them to the idea that salvation is realized when the bodily fluids of man and woman are “saved” and offered to God.

About the later vicissitudes of the Borborites our sources are not much more helpful than the report by Epiphanius. According to a number of Syriac, Armenian, Coptic and Arabic texts, the Borborites survived

⁷⁹ Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 184.

⁸⁰ See e.g. White, *Kiss of the Yogini*; Urban, *Tantra*. For more recent western examples, see the chapters by Marco Pasi and Hans Thomas Hakl in this volume.

⁸¹ For a discussion of the pneumatic seeds according to the Valentinians, see April DeConick’s chapter in this volume.

tenaciously in the Christian Near East.⁸² They are said to have lived in Southern Asia Minor, Armenia and Syria. In imperial legislation they are mentioned from the fifth century onward: they are forbidden to build churches and to hold religious services. Unfortunately, these sources provide little information on the ideas and practices of these later Borborites, and when they do become more specific the influence of Epiphanius' report is unmistakable. According to the sixth-century author Barḥadbešabba, the Borborites believed that angels had created the world, and he writes that their central rite consisted of the ritual defilement of ten virgins by the priests of the sect. If one of these got pregnant, she was worshipped "in the place of Mary" and her fetus was sacramentally consumed:⁸³ the child was apparently identified with the body of Christ and the woman with the Virgin Mary. In fact there are other testimonies that some groups that are called Borborites by their opponents held the Virgin Mary in high esteem and even attributed divine status to her. According to some sources, she had a heavenly body, but according to others she was a heavenly power or even a goddess, so that she and her Son were two divinities next to God—a view already refuted in the Koran, *Sura* 5, 116. These views, which can be traced back to the fourth and the fifth centuries, eventually influenced the Bogomile and Cathar doctrine of Mary as a heavenly power. The strong emphasis that Epiphanius put on the sexual rituals of the Borborites has obviously obscured other aspects of their belief system, one of which may have been the exaltation of the Virgin Mary to a divine status.⁸⁴

Conclusion

An analysis of the hermetic views on sexuality and sex demonstrates, once again, the great variety of opinions and practices that went under the umbrella of ancient Hermetism. There was a general consensus about the passions of the body being a great danger to the soul; and in this respect the hermetists agreed with the Gnostics and many Greek philosophers, especially those of the platonic type. But with respect

⁸² See Gero, "With Walter Bauer on the Tigris", 292–303 for much information on this point.

⁸³ Nau (ed.), *La première partie de l'Histoire de Barḥadbešabba 'Arbaia*, 190–191.

⁸⁴ See van den Broek, "Der Bericht des koptische Kyrillos von Jerusalem."

to the *sexual* passion specifically, the hermetic ideas show considerable variation. The *Poimandres* states explicitly that androgyny is the ideal sexual state, as exemplified by the supreme God and the first human beings. The splitting up of humanity into males and females led to sexual desire and intercourse, which was necessary for the propagation of the human race but also became the cause of death. The author speaks of the “error of desire” due to which the body came into existence. Only the one who has recognized his own immortality, that is to say, who knows his divine descent, will be able to return to his origin; otherwise, he remains “wandering in the dark and sensibly suffers the effects of death.” The *Asclepius*, however, wholeheartedly admits that the act of love is accompanied by “the greatest affection, pleasure, gaiety, desire and love divine,” and that it is “sweet and vital.” But the union of the sexes is a divine mystery, which must be enacted in secret, so that it will not be exposed to ridicule by ignorant (*inperiti*) and irreverent (*inreligiosi*) people. The man and woman who have sexual intercourse perform “holy mysteries of words and acts,” which are neither heard nor seen. People who ridicule this hermetic mystery of the sexual union are “blasphemers, atheists and impious men.” These expressions show that the author of the *Asclepius* assigned a religious and even esoteric meaning to the act of love-making. He speaks of the “divinity of both natures” (*divinitas utriusque naturae*) that is manifested from the mingling of the sexes. It is a “wonderful image” of God’s androgynous fertility and productivity. This means that in their sexual union a man and a woman come as close to their original androgynous unity as is possible under earthly conditions.

Within the gnostic current, there was likewise a variety of opinions about sexuality and sexual intercourse, as is the case for so many other points of doctrine and practice within this movement. According to the sources, many Gnostics condemned the sexual drive as one of the bad demiurge’s most effective means of making the soul a slave to the body. But there were Gnostics who had a more positive view of sexual intercourse, as exemplified by the Borborites discussed above and the Valentinians studied by April DeConick elsewhere in this volume. Starting from the same concept of a pneumatic seed present in human beings, the Borborites developed views and practices that are completely different from those of the Valentinians. The latter condoned and even propagated sex and procreation within a “pure marriage” in order to ensure the implantation of the pneumatic seed in the souls of children that would be superior both spiritually and morally and so could be

saved more easily than others. The Borborites rejected the begetting of children, but they believed that the male and female sexual emissions contained what the Valentinians called the “pneumatic seed,” and that this seed had to be offered to God. That, they believed, was the esoteric meaning of the Eucharist, as taught by Jesus himself.

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CONCEIVING SPIRITS:
THE MYSTERY OF VALENTINIAN SEX

APRIL D. DECONICK

Valentinian thought and practices have been the subject of countless academic studies even prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi collection in 1945. In this literature, the Valentinians were characterized as elitist Gnostics who believed in the certainty of their salvation due to the existence of a particle of spirit within them, a “seed” which guaranteed the acquisition of *gnosis*. Due in part to their characterization as spiritual snobs and intellectual egotists, they have been portrayed either as libertines who believed that they could claim a certain sexual freedom denied to other Christians, or as conservatives who embraced celibacy for fear that they might be tainted by sexual pollution.

These understandings of Valentinianism were developed largely on the basis of the accounts penned by the heresiologists. However, they have persisted even after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi materials, although the latter provide us with a rich mine of information that calls these opinions into question. Actually Valentinian gnostic Christians had a highly-developed consciousness of the sacred when it came to sexual practices: one which revered the marital bed but reserved it for the advanced Christian, the gnostic Christian, and maintained that all others, Christians and non-Christians, should forsake it. This belief developed out of a certain anthropology and understanding of conception which saw the sexual act as the sacred life-giving moment at which time the Spirit of God joined with the souls of the parents and produced a child. Through contemplative sexual practices, the Valentinians hoped to conceive children whose souls would contain an elect or morally-inclined “seed” of the Spirit. Sacred marriage was essential for giving birth to such children, who in turn would bring about the redemption of the fallen Sophia and the psyche.

Initial Considerations

In order to understand Valentinian theology and sociology, we first have to get rid of a number of outdated definitions and assumptions which lead to distortions of the historical evidence. A perfect example is the

widespread opinion that Valentinianism is a Christianized version of Gnosticism. In fact, it has become increasingly clear that “Gnosticism” is a modern typological construct based upon heresiological stereotypes and is misleading as a descriptor of historical reality.¹ Scholars have come to realize that traditional concepts of Gnosticism and its corollaries (as summed up in 1966 at the first colloquium on Gnosticism, in Messina)² were built on circular assumptions, leading to the erroneous idea of a kind of umbrella religion covering a variety of “deviant” groups in antiquity. The term “Gnosticism” came to stand for a form of religiosity characterized by a negative view of the cosmos and human existence, reflecting a feeling of nihilism contrasted with the yearning for a spiritual reality. On those premises, a variety of Hermetic, apocalyptic, mystical, and encratic traditions lost their distinctiveness and were subsumed under one and the same gnostic umbrella.

In fact, the Valentinians defined themselves as Christians, as active members of the Christian Church.³ This was their self-consciousness and self-identification. How can one ignore the fact that Valentinus himself was only narrowly defeated in his bid to become Bishop of Rome in the mid-second century, and that he was considered a leading theologian and brilliant exegete at the time?⁴ In fact, Tertul-

¹ Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*; Markschie, *Gnosis*; King, *What is Gnosticism?*

² Bianchi, *Origini dello Gnosticismo*, XXVI–XXIX.

³ Cf. *Gos. Phil.* 52.25; 62.31.

⁴ Markschie’s attempt in his *Valentinus Gnosticus?* to distance Valentinus from Gnosticism would seem to be pointing in the right direction, if it weren’t for the fact that he does so by arguing that Valentinus’ fragments do not contain teaching about a Demiurge and other mythological elements commonly associated with Gnosticism. Thus, his studious book only serves to reinforce the problem of interpretation. Particularly problematic is Markschie’s exclusion of patristic comments on Valentinus’ opinions, which seems to be done only because it serves Markschie’s purpose, but at the price of founding his reconstruction of Valentinus’ ideas on only a few fragments that do not allow for a complete picture. In my opinion, since Gnosticism is a modern typological construct, it is inaccurate to characterize Valentinus as either a gnostic heretic or an orthodox theologian. If one takes into account patristic comments as well as Valentinus’ own fragments, it is more accurate to characterize him as an esoteric Christian who began welding a Jewish-Platonic mythology about the origins of the world that included a Demiurge, the concept of divine emanation, and angelic involvement in the creation of the human being. He believed that he and those who followed his teachings were privy to a *gnosis* of the heart, the experience of God indwelling their souls. This teaching was not considered heretical during his lifetime but fit in quite well with the teachings of other Alexandrians like Clement and Origen. This teaching continued to be developed by Valentinus’ students and eventually came to be considered heretical by the Church, although not during his lifetime. I would consider it impossible to think that Valentinus did not teach a Demiurgic myth, given the fact that his four

lian even uses the words “genius” and “eloquent” to describe him.⁵

Valentinus and his students did not create their own churches, like the Marcionites, but instead attended ordinary services along with other Christians. In addition to this, however, they also met as a type of “secret society” in a lodge or theological school.⁶ It appears that, along with many Alexandrian Christians, they were of the opinion that Christianity consisted of different degrees, ranging from the neophyte to the initiated. Those who studied the teachings of Valentinus considered themselves to be among the initiated, privy to the esoteric teachings of the Church. They appear to have been very successful not only as teachers, but also as ministers of the churches. One reflection of this is the homily known as the *Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI, 1), delivered by a follower of Valentinus to his church. In his address, this minister preaches to initiated and ordinary Christian alike, since both are part of his flock. Furthermore, Irenaeus tells us that a certain Marcus was a very popular minister in town, and that this made Irenaeus very upset since Marcus was gaining members at his expense, in particular one of his own deacon’s wives!⁷

The Valentinians distinguished themselves from the ordinary Christian by their claim to a certain *gnosis*, which could only be gained through esoteric study and practices. Thus, it is more accurate to call the Valentinians “gnostic Christians” than “Christian Gnostics”. For some strange reason, most scholars have misunderstood the Valentinian call for *gnosis* as a call for pursuing intellectual and philosophical knowledge when, in fact, this could not be any further from the crux of the matter. What is the *gnosis* that they seek? In the *Gospel of Truth*, Jesus, who is called “knowledge and perfection,” proclaims “the things that are in the heart” (*het*),⁸ which he has received from the Father, as “the fruit [of] his heart (*het*) and an impression of his will.”⁹ Jesus speaks “what is in the heart (*het*) of the Father,”¹⁰

students (Theodotus, Heracleon, Ptolemy, and Marcus), who were all from different geographical locations, taught striking similar versions of a Demiurgic myth. These cannot represent independent developments.

⁵ Tertullian, *Adv. Val.* 4.

⁶ Tertullian, *Adv. Val.* 1.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 13.1–5.

⁸ Gospel of Truth 20.38–39.

⁹ Gospel of Truth 23.35–24.1.

¹⁰ Gospel of Truth 31.10–12.

and his followers are admonished to understand “from the heart (*het*)” that the light dwells within them.¹¹ This opinion is even expressed in words attributed to Valentinus himself. In his book, *The Intercourse of Friends*, he writes, “The law written in the heart (*kardia*) is the people of the Beloved—loved and loving him.”¹² The *gnosis* they seek is “knowledge-how.” It is experiential, and concerns mystical union with the divine, based on the love between their souls and God.

This is not to say that the pursuit of epistemological knowledge or “knowledge-that” was not vital to salvation. The Valentinians considered it important enough to write volumes of exegetical treatises and theological books exploring the nature of God and the human being, materials which they studied and discussed among themselves. In so doing, they incorporated and developed along Christian lines a Jewish-Platonic mythology about the origins of the world that included a Demiurge and the concept of divine emanation. But, like the Hermetists, the Valentinians thought that the pursuit of “knowledge-that” could only advance a person up to a certain point spiritually.¹³ The pinnacle of the spiritual journey was not “thinking about God,” but the direct experience or “*gnosis*” of the Ultimate Reality, a Reality beyond the concept or idea of that Reality.¹⁴

The Valentinians, however, differed from the Hermetists and Jewish mystics in their insistence that this direct experience of God was impossible to achieve during one’s lifetime as a human being. The best that one could hope for was a mediated experience of the Father through his Son, Jesus. In this, they were faithful exegetes of the Gospel of John. It was only on the eschatological plateau that direct vision and union with the Father was possible. And it was this final, ultimate experience that the Valentinians prepared for during their lifetimes.

The Psyche and the Dissemination of Pneumatic Seeds

There is no consensus among scholars about what is meant exactly by the dispersion of the pneumatic seeds, although when the subject is broached, it is usually connected to the Valentinian trifurcation of

¹¹ Gospel of Truth 32.32–35. For the previous quotations see Attridge, *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, 87, 92, 100, 102.

¹² Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.6, in Stählin, *Clemens*, 458.

¹³ See e.g. CH IX, 10; X, 5–6.

¹⁴ *Prayer of Thanksgiving* 64.8–65.2.

human beings into pneumatics, psychics, and hylics (standing for spirit, soul, and matter).¹⁵ Although academic discussions on this subject are confusing, they leave the impression that only the pneumatics are born with spiritual seeds and are completely redeemed in the End. This, however, seems to be based upon a misreading of Irenaeus' interpretation of the three natures of people. He writes:

They conceive then of three kinds of humans, pneumatic, and psychic, and material represented by Cain, Abel, and Seth. These three natures are no longer found in one person, but constitute various kinds. The material goes, as a matter of course, into corruption. The psychic, if it chooses the better part, will rest in the intermediate place. But if [it chooses] the worse, it too shall pass into destruction. But they assert that the pneumatic elements which have been sown by Achamoth, being disciplined and nourished here from that time until now in righteous souls (because when given forth by her they were yet but weak), at last attaining perfection, shall be given as brides to the angels of the Savior, while their souls of necessity, rest for ever with the Demiurge in the intermediate place. And again subdividing the souls themselves, they say that some are by nature good, and others by nature evil. The good are those who become capable of receiving the seed; the evil by nature are those who are never able to receive that seed. (*Adv. haer.* 1.7.5)¹⁶

Irenaeus tells us that the natures are represented by Cain, Abel, and Seth, respectively. He continues by saying that the material people fall into corruption. The psychic people, if they are morally good, will find rest in a place just outside the Pleroma, while those who are morally evil will be destroyed. Then he talks about the spiritual seeds sown in righteous souls, attaining to perfection as the brides of Jesus' angels.

He would therefore seem to equate this last category with the spiritual people. However, if one reads on, this picture becomes clouded since he states that *their* souls will rest outside the Pleroma and are subdivided into those who are by nature good and those who are evil. The good can receive a spiritual seed, while the evil cannot. These cannot be the pneumatics, as Irenaeus leads us to believe (see also 1.7.1).

¹⁵ For discussions of this topic, see Pagels, "Conflicting Version of Valentian Eschatology," 35–53; McCue, "Conflicting Version of Valentianism?" 404–416; Buckley, *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism*, 61–83. The publication of Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'*, came too late for me to incorporate in my discussion. But like other scholars, Thomassen identifies only the Valentinians as bearers of the spiritual seed.

¹⁶ Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon*, 110–112; Eng. trans. mine.

To explain this, we might assume that Irenaeus is conflating two separate traditions in this passage. He knows a tradition about the trifurcation of humanity, and he also knows a tradition about the duality of the psychics: those who live righteously, and those who do not, those who are saved through their works, and those who are not.¹⁷ If the passage is read in this light, it suggests that “righteous souls” sown with spiritual seeds refers to the psychics, and that the choice that a psychic makes determines whether such a person will become a bride of the angel or be doomed to destruction as a hylic. If this is the case, then the Valentinians were saying that *every* soul is born with a spiritual seed or the potential to receive one. Could this be the solution?

We might find the answer by investigating the function of the spiritual seed. According to the Valentinians, it is the spirit that animates or gives life to the human being.¹⁸ They speak of the inner core of the soul as the “spirit,” which exists as an embedded “seed.” These spiritual seeds are said to be the “marrow” of the soul.¹⁹ They are the factor in the human being that binds the soul to the body and makes possible a composite being. Thus the seeds are likened to “leaven,” since it is by them that two different substances are welded into one single being.²⁰ Now if this is indeed the function of the spiritual seed, then the Valentinians must have believed that everyone contained this element, or else some humans would not be able to function as a human being.

To make matters more complicated, the spiritual seed was also described as the “divine” dimension of the soul in contrast to the “material” or hylic dimension. The hylic dimension of the soul was considered a “tare” that corrupted the soul and eventually needed to be pulled out. It was also envisioned as a “seed of the devil,” since it was made of the same substance (*homoousios*) as the devil.²¹ The idea appears to have been that this demonic seed or spirit naturally corrupted every soul as it descended into the body, something hinted at in Valentinus’ letter preserved by Clement. In this letter, he discusses the descent of the soul and the appendages or spirits that have attached themselves to it. He worries that in the core of the soul, the “heart,” (*kardia*) certain evil spirits have come to dwell. This state he considers the *natural* state

¹⁷ For those two traditions, see *Adv. haer.* 1.7.5 and 1.6.4 respectively.

¹⁸ *Exegesis of the Soul* 133.31–134.5.

¹⁹ *Exc. Theo.* 52–53, in Sagnard, *Extraits de Théodote*, 74–76.

²⁰ *Exc. Theo.* 2.2, in Sagnard, *Extraits de Théodote*, 40.

²¹ *Exc. Theo.* 53.1, in Sagnard, *Extraits de Théodote*, 74.

of the soul, which can only be changed through the indwelling of the Son who sanctifies the heart with gleaming light.²² Since the soul languishes in this natural state of corruption, it is only by the grace of God that it can be rescued and restored.²³ This natural corruption of the soul is also mentioned in the *Valentinian Exposition*, which traces its origins to the worst of Sophia's passions: passions that the Aeon Jesus fashions into the carnal aspect of the spirit.²⁴ In the *Tripartite Tractate*, the human being is a "mixed creature" with a soul that is a composite of "those of the left and those of the right," its spirit divided between these two opposite propensities.²⁵

It appears to me that this description of the two seeds or spirits may have to do with the Jewish tradition according to which the soul is in internal conflict due to two opposite propensities, one to do good and one to sin. In rabbinic tradition, this is known as the doctrine of the two *yesserim*, or two inclinations.²⁶ The place of the *yesser* is in the heart, and it derives from the time of the first human being.²⁷ In the Qumran community, these "inclinations" were called "spirits,"²⁸ and it is likewise in the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Testament of Judah*.²⁹ The *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*³⁰ call these spirits "angels." All this, of course, echoes the ancient assumption that certain spirits or demons invade the soul and make it suffer with passions.³¹

Baptism was considered necessary in order to remove the demons, and unction to install the Holy Spirit—the most powerful divine spirit, which would help to guard the soul from future demonic invasion.³² In fact, Valentinus himself states that "so long as the soul remains impure, it serves as an abode for many demons."³³ Further on in the same fragment, he writes that only the indwelling of the Son and the

²² Clement, *Strom.* 2.20 in Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinu*, 175.

²³ *Exeg. Soul* 127.25–32; 128.26–129.5; 131.27–132.2; 135.26–30.

²⁴ *Valentinian Exposition* 35.30–37; 37.20–28.

²⁵ *Tripartite Tractate* 106.19–25, in Attridge, *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, 284.

²⁶ Moore, *Judaism*, volume 1, 479–492.

²⁷ Cf. 2 *Esdras* 4:30.

²⁸ *Rule of the Community* 4.2–10.

²⁹ *Epistle of Barnabas* 18.1–2; *Testament of Judah* 20.1.

³⁰ *Mand.* 6.2; *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* 20.2–3.

³¹ Cf. *Test. Dan.* 1.7–8; *Test. Sim.* 4.7; *Test. Jud.* 16.1; *Test. Reub.* 2.1–2, 3.3–6; Josephus, *Ant.* 6.8.2; *Hermas*, *Mand.* 2.3, 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 9.11, 10.1; *Sim.* 9.22, 11.15; *Ps.-Clem. Hom.* 9.9–12; *Clem. Alex.*, *Strom.* 2.20.

³² *Ep. Barn.* 16.7–8; *Hermas*, *Mand.* 5.2; *Ps.-Clem. Hom.* 9.19.

³³ Clement, *Strom.* 2.20; cf. Heracleon, *Frag.* [Brooke, 77]; Hipp., *Elench.* 6.34, in Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, 175.

sanctification of the heart with “gleaming light” can rectify the situation. Certainly this is a reference to unction. This is also the picture of the soul presented in *The Exegesis on the Soul*: “when she fell down into a body and came to this life, then she fell into the hands of many robbers, and wanton creatures passed her from one to another . . . they defiled her.”³⁴ When the Father sees her in this defiled condition, he has mercy on her³⁵ and saves her through baptism and anointing, the “light of salvation.”³⁶

Things become even more complicated because, as it appears to me, the Valentinians did not believe that all spiritual seeds were equal. Some were superior to others. When describing the various aspects of the human being, the *Tripartite Tractate* states that although the “spiritual substance is a single thing and a single representation,” it takes variable “forms” that are determined by its “weakness.”³⁷ The psychic or soul substance is said to have a “double” aspect, inclined toward the good but fighting with the material body, which is weakest of all substances, thwarting the soul and driving it toward evil with its “many types of inclination.”³⁸

In the *Extracts of Theodotus*, this variation among the spiritual seeds is explained metaphorically in terms of gender.³⁹ Clement tells us that the Valentinians considered the begetting of the spiritual seed to be Sophia’s “finest emanation:” an interpretation of Genesis 1:27, “He created them in the image of God, male and female he created them.”⁴⁰ This birthing of the “finest emanation” occurred at the moment when Sophia gazed with delight upon the tribe of dazzling angels who attended Jesus in his descent from the Pleroma.⁴¹ The males are destined to become the spirits of the “elect,” including the prophets,⁴² while the females are fated to become the spirits of the “called,” members of the Christian Church.⁴³

³⁴ *Exegesis of the soul* 127.25–32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.26–129.5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.27–132.2; 135.26–30, in Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7*, volume 2, 144, 146, 154, 162.

³⁷ *Tripartite Tractate* 106.6–10.

³⁸ *Tripartite Tractate* 106.10–18 in Attridge, *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, 284.

³⁹ Cf. *Val. Exp.* 39.25–27.

⁴⁰ Clement, *Extracts of Theodotus* 21.1–3, in Sagnard, *Extraits de Théodote*, 56.

⁴¹ *Ex. Theo.* 44.1; *Iren. Adv. haer.* 1.4.5; *Tri. Tract.* 90.24–91.10.

⁴² Cf. *Iren. Adv. haer.* 1.6.3; 1.7.2–3; *Tert. Adv. Val.* 29.

⁴³ *Ex. Theo.* 21.1, in Sagnard, *Extraits de Théodote*, 56.

The spiritual seeds mentioned by the Valentinians must be understood as “germs” of spirit. That is to say, they are not conscious or mature. The Savior has come to awaken and initiate their maturation process. Hence the type of spiritual seed a person possessed could be identified by his or her reaction to conversion to Christianity.⁴⁴ Souls with Elect or male seeds are said to be the souls of those Christians who immediately rush to embrace Jesus when they hear his voice. These are the “pneumatics.” Those who hesitate but eventually are converted to the Christian faith have Called or female seeds and are known as “psychics.” Baptism and unction are necessary for both groups since the demonic spirits that naturally corrupt the soul must be expelled, leaving a pure or clean heart for the Holy Spirit to indwell. In fact, the Valentinians thought that the Holy Spirit actually “mixed” with the spiritual seed, the heart of the soul, similar to what happens when a child is conceived from the mixture of two seeds in the womb.⁴⁵ In each soul, the Holy Spirit is on guard against future demonic invasion, and is “kindling” the seed, that is to say, giving it “life.”⁴⁶

The difference between the two gendered spiritual seeds is that the male seed is superior, containing within it already the “blueprint,” so to speak, of the Image of God. Hence it can naturally grow and transform the soul, from the heart outwards, into that glorious Image. This is what is meant when the Valentinians teach that the pneumatics are “saved” by their nature. The female seed, however, contains a less perfect “blueprint” of God’s Image, a “female” reflection of it. So more work is needed to bring it into the perfected transformed state, that is to say, to make the female into a male. In order for the soul to be thus transformed, it has to devote itself to righteous living in imitation of Jesus’ piety. This is what the Valentinians mean when they say that the psychics are saved through piety and good works. I might add here that both seeds were believed to benefit from the eucharist, which brought the soul into conformity with God’s Image, because the person was ingesting the divine man, in their words, the “Perfect Man” Jesus.

Sadly, however, if a seed was female, this meant that there was also the potential for continued tragedy. Because of its double inclination, it had the free choice to refuse God’s grace and damage itself with

⁴⁴ *Tri. Tract.* 118.15–119.16.

⁴⁵ *Exc. Theo.* 17.1–4, in Sagnard, *Extraits de Théodote*, 52–54.

⁴⁶ *Exc. Theo.* 3.2, in Sagnard, *Extraits de Théodote*, 40.

sinful living. In the case of the hylics, the third group of humans, these souls lost the battle against their demons. The Holy Spirit never infused them, and their spiritual seeds withered and died among the “tares.” Thus the Valentinians believed that these people would be destroyed at the Eschaton.

Contrary to what has long been thought, the Valentinians were not elitists concerned only about their own salvation. On the contrary, their concern was for the entire Christian Church, and this is what they were trying to explain by means of their mythology. They were brilliant exegetes, particularly of the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul.⁴⁷ They wished to explain Paul’s concept of universal salvation, while also taking into account his mention of those “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”⁴⁸ They believed wholeheartedly in the grace of God and his love, from which all believers, gnostic Christians and ordinary Christians alike, would never be separated.

The Valentinians were not focused on their own election as those who *uniquely* embodied spiritual seeds. Rather they worried over the integration of spirit and soul during the time that the soul or psyche suffered in an embodied state of exile, filth, and corruption. The systematic theology of the Valentinians seems to me to have been developed around this core belief. Its starting point is the human condition, the material body and soul. Even though the Valentinians were of the opinion that the soul had fallen into a corrupt state, they did not believe that it was completely lost or estranged from God. In fact, *the main point of their mythology appears to have been the teaching that some type of “seed” of the spirit dwells in every soul, and that the spirit is therefore integral to the human soul even in its corrupt state, because it enlivens the soul and integrates it with the body.*

They were teaching that the Real Self is not the physical body nor the rational soul, but a deeper aspect of the person, an aspect of the heart, an inner core of the soul. This Self was God in Exile. It needed to be awakened and cultivated. It needed to be transformed from its germinal state into a glorious being so that it could be united with its angelic twin. Finally it could become whole through marriage in the great eschatological Bridal Chamber, the Pleroma itself, on the Last Day. It is in these beautiful terms that its homecoming was imagined.

⁴⁷ Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis*; Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul*; Pagels, “The Mystery of the Resurrection,” 276–288; Pagels, “The Valentinian Claim to Esoteric Exegesis,” 241–258.

⁴⁸ Romans 8:29.

*Spiritual Intercourse*⁴⁹

As we have seen, the Valentinians taught that the soul's condition is pre-existent, and that from the time of its creation it already contains two seeds, one spiritual and one demonic. Thus Clement remarks that they believed that the human soul consists of three substances: a pneumatic seed (which in some writings was understood to be either "male" or "female") and a demonic seed that infused the psychic substance.⁵⁰ Over this human soul was laid the human body, the "garments of leather" mentioned in the Genesis story.

Explaining the creation of Adam, the first human, along these lines was of particular importance to the Valentinians. They taught that Sophia had planted the male spiritual seed in Adam and the female in Eve. But this spiritual seed laid dormant, sleeping: a reference to Adam's fall into a deep sleep before Eve (along with the female seed) was cut from his side.⁵¹ In fact, Valentinus himself explained in a letter that the angels were afraid of the first human being because of "the being in him who had invisibly communicated a germ of the supernal essence." This being was "the pre-existent man." So the angels "speedily marred the work," apparently by enfleshing it, a process which involved its further descent and degradation through the appropriation of demonic spirits.⁵²

This is the juncture in the story where the Valentinians saw tragedy, and this tragedy concerns the immediate subject of the present volume: sex. We are informed by the Church Fathers on several occasions that according to the Valentinians, three natures were produced by Adam: the irrational one represented by his offspring Cain (hylics), the rational one represented by his son Abel (psychics), and the spiritual one represented by Seth (pneumatics).⁵³ This trifurcation was tragic, we are told, due to the unfortunate fact that Adam acted sexually out of his material nature as well as out of his spiritual and psychic aspects.⁵⁴ Adam's sexual behavior determined the type of spiritual seed the soul received: an elect seed (Seth) or a less mature seed (Cain and Abel). It

⁴⁹ This section is dependent upon my previous publication, "The Great Mystery of Marriage," 311–312, 315–316.

⁵⁰ *Exc. Theo.* 55.1.

⁵¹ *Exc. Theo.* 22.2.

⁵² Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2.8 in Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, 132.

⁵³ Cf. *Exc. Theo.* 56.2; Iren. *Adv. haer.* 1.7.5; Tert. *Adv. haer.* 29.

⁵⁴ *Exc. Theo.* 56.2.

was this less mature seed which generated the tragic potential, since it had free choice to advance toward salvation (Abel) or doom (Cain).

So due to Adam's sexual behavior, the spiritual seeds began to be dispersed in such a way that there were generated the spiritual or elect, who are said to be saved by their nature, the rational or psychic, who must work for their salvation, and the irrational or hylic, who are doomed. What exactly did Adam do to cause that situation? The answer to this question depends upon our understanding of Valentinian attitudes toward marriage, sex, and procreation. In my previous publications on that subject, I was under the false impression that the Valentinians taught only the infusion of spiritual seeds in their own souls, rather than in those of all human beings.⁵⁵ In what follows I will present a revised interpretation that reflects the actual Valentinian teaching about gradations of spiritual seed that infused all humanity and led to three types of people.

Previous scholarship is divided on the subject of Valentinian marriage practices, with some scholars advocating that the Valentinians were engaged in "spiritual" or "celibate" marriages, while others argue that their marriages allowed for sexual activity.⁵⁶ Elaine Pagels is even of the opinion that the Valentinians did not have a consistent practice at all: "Some of them ate meat offered to idols; some attended pagan festivals and were sexually active (which Irenaeus took to mean promiscuous); others claimed to live as ascetics, either in celibate marriages or in solitude."⁵⁷

These differing opinions appear to result from the fact that the Valentinian texts were written for "insiders:" people who already understood the mythology and terminology. Modern interpreters, like

⁵⁵ DeConick, "The True Mysteries," 225–261; "The Great Mystery of Marriage," 307–342.

⁵⁶ Segelberg, "The Coptic-Gnostic Gospel according to Philip," 198; Janssens, "L'Évangile selon Philippe," 79–133; Tripp, "The 'Sacramental System' of the Gospel of Philip," 251–260; Williams, "Realized Eschatology in The Gospel of Philip," 1–17; Williams, "Uses of Gender Imagery in Ancient Coptic Gnostic Texts," 196–227; Williams, "'Gnosis' and 'Askesis,'" in *ANRW* 2, 22; Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 148, 295 n. 34; Grant, "The Mystery of Marriage in the Gospel of Philip," 136–137; Ménard, *L'Évangile selon Philippe,* 50; Eijk, "The Gospel of Philip and Clement of Alexandria," 104; Quispel, "The Birth of the Child," 285–309; Quispel, "Genius and Spirit," 164–167; Quispel, "The Study of Encratism," 74–75; Quispel, "The Original Doctrine of Valentinus the Gnostic," 334; Buckley, *Female Fault and Fulfillment in Gnosticism,* 121. See also her "A Cult-Mystery in the Gospel of Philip," 569–581.

⁵⁷ Pagels, "The 'Mystery of Marriage' in the *Gospel of Philip* Revisited," 454.

some of the Church Fathers, have created ambiguity by imposing their own definitions of various phrases on the texts, often assuming that the meaning of these phrases is consistent across different groups. In order to rediscover the Valentinian meaning, it is necessary to recontextualize the phrases within the larger Valentinian myth, while taking into account the more general mentality of the period. The phrases must make sense within the broader second-century worldview as well as within the larger theological framework of Valentinian musings about the human plight. In doing so, historical interpretation must be combined with literary analysis.

What do the Church Fathers and the Valentinians say about marriage and sexual activity? First, they state very clearly that it is a “great mystery” or sacrament reflecting the conjunctions within the Pleroma.⁵⁸ For instance, Irenaeus explains that the Valentinians interpreted Ephesians 5:32 (“This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church”) to refer to “the conjunctions within the Pleroma” and apparently associated Christ with the Anthropos aeon and Church with his aeonic spouse Ecclesia. Thus when Paul described the nature of “the conjugal union in this life,”⁵⁹ the Valentinians, according to Irenaeus, believed that he understood these conjugal unions to be a “great mystery” reflecting the conjunctions within the Pleroma.⁶⁰ This idea is repeated by Irenaeus later, when he mentions the Valentinian “bridal chamber.” He writes that some Valentinians claim to participate in “spiritual” marriages after “the likeness of the conjunctions above.”⁶¹

Clement uses this idea to contrast the Valentinians with several encratic groups that he vehemently opposes because they have a “hatred for the flesh,” which leads them to reject “the marriage union.”⁶² He applauds the Valentinians because they “take delight in marriage” for the reason that marriage is the syzygy brought down from the “divine emanations above.”⁶³ Does this marriage include sexual activity? Or is it a celibate “spiritual” marriage of the kind that is common in early Christianity? If we interpret this passage *within the context* of Clement’s

⁵⁸ Iren., *Adv. haer.* 1.8.4; 1.21.3; cp. *Gospel of Philip* 64.31–32.

⁵⁹ Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon*, 128.

⁶⁰ Iren., *Adv. haer.* 1.8.4.

⁶¹ Iren., *Adv. haer.* I.21.3 in Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon*, 299.

⁶² *Strom.* 3.7.60.

⁶³ Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, 195.

rampage against encratic groups, it is fairly plausible that he means to say that Valentinian marriage involves sexual relations, since he uses the Valentinians' position on marriage as a contrast to the encratic celibate option.

Clement contrasts the Valentinians with the Carpocratians, who he thinks participated in licentious sexual acts because they believed that by doing so they were imitating the primordial powers who had intercourse with one another in order to create the universe.⁶⁴ Clement is not upset by the fact that they are having sex with each other because they believe they are imitating the primordial powers (even the Valentinians do this, he infers), but because these relations are "carnal and wanton" rather than "spiritual."⁶⁵ He states that, "if these people performed spiritual intercourse (*pneumatikas koinonias*) like the Valentinians, perhaps one could accept their view."⁶⁶

What did Clement mean by "spiritual intercourse?" Certainly not sex generated by carnal desire, since he abhors such relations. And not celibate marriage either, since Clement portrays this encratic option negatively throughout his tract. This leaves us with a third option, which Clement tries to promote and contrast with the encratic position and which appears to depend on Stoic teachings:⁶⁷ marital sex for the purpose of procreation, controlled by the will rather than by lust. He tells us that Christians should

do nothing from lust (*epithumia*). Our will is to be directed only towards that which is necessary. For we are children not of lust but of will (*thelmatos*). A man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practice self-control so that it is not lust he feels for his wife, whom he ought to love, and that he may beget children with a chaste and controlled will.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Strom.* 3.29.

⁶⁵ Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, 209.

⁶⁶ *Strom.* 3.29, in Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, 209.

⁶⁷ For Clement's dependence on Stoic teachings for his view on marriage, see Pohlenz, "Klemens van Alexandria und sein hellenisches Christentum," 144; Spanneut, *Le stoïcisme*, 259–260; Noonan, *Contraception*, 46–49, 76–77; Broudéhoux, *Marriage et famille chez Clément d'Alexandrie*, 115–137. According to Eusebius, Clement's teacher, Pantaeus, was a former Stoic (*Ecl. Hist.* 5.10.1–11.2). On the connection between Musonius and Clement, see Wendland, *Quaestiones Musonianae* and his review of *Musonii Rufi reliquiae*, 197–202; Pomeroy Parker, "Musonius in Clement," 191–200. For an overview of Stoic positions on marriage and sexual behavior, see Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy*, 50–107.

⁶⁸ *Strom.* 3.58, in Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, 222.

*Contemplation and Procreation*⁶⁹

Are the mysterious marriages of the Valentinians similar to the procreative but self-controlled marriages that Clement prefers? Given their mythology of aeonic relationships which they believed to be procreative, it would certainly be accurate to state that they saw human marriage in procreative terms as well. Moreover, they describe aeonic procreation in terms of contemplative and intellectual acts, that is to say, the object of their thoughts during the procreative moment determines the nature of the beings that they generate. For instance, Sophia's focus on her desire and passion to "know" the Father resulted in an amorphous nasty miscarriage. Sophia's focus on the beauty of Jesus' attendant angels resulted in the production of spirit beings that were reflections of the angels. And so forth.

The connection between contemplation and procreation is very ancient: it stems back as far as the time of ancient Israel and even influenced husbandry practices. According to Genesis 30:37–39, Jacob placed peeled branches near his herd's water trough so that, when they bred in front of them, the flock would bear striped, spotted, and speckled offspring. Reproductive theories from at least as early as the fifth century B.C.E. in Greece reflect this concept. Empedocles, a Greek scientist and philosopher of the fifth century B.C.E., is credited with the opinion that the embryo is shaped by the imagination of the mother at the moment of conception.⁷⁰ This is proven to him by the fact that women who have fallen in love with statues often give birth to children that resemble them.⁷¹ Hence it was commonly accepted among the ancients that the characteristics of a child would be largely determined by the thoughts of the parents, particularly the mother, at the time of intercourse. For instance, in Soranus' *Gynecology* he remarks,

What is one to say concerning the fact that various states of the soul also produce certain changes in the mold of the fetus? For instance, some women, seeing monkeys during intercourse have borne children resembling monkeys. The tyrant of the Cyprians who was misshapen

⁶⁹ This section is based on my previous publication, "The Great Mystery of Marriage," 331–333.

⁷⁰ This belief seems very ancient and widespread. Cf. Kahn, *Das Versehen der Schwangeren in Volksglaube und Dichtung*, 42.

⁷¹ Empedocles, A 81.

compelled his wife to look at beautiful statues during intercourse and became the father of well-shaped children; and horse-breeders during covering, place noble horses in front of the mares. Thus, in order that the offspring may not be rendered misshapen, women must be sober during coitus because in drunkenness the soul becomes the victim of strange fantasies; this furthermore, because the offspring bears some resemblance to the mother as well, not only in body but in soul. Therefore it is good that the offspring be made to resemble the soul when it is stable and not deranged by drunkenness.⁷²

He goes on to remark that a woman must remain very calm and sensible throughout her pregnancy. If she does not, she risks not only miscarriage but may even produce a child that is malformed in body and mind because of her anxieties.⁷³

In addition to statues, paintings were also suspect, as we see in Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*. The birth of a white daughter to black parents is explained in these words:

During intercourse with my husband the picture of Andromeda (painted on the bedroom wall) presented her image to my eyes, showing her entirely nude, just as Perseus was taking her down from the rock, and it had thus by ill fortune given to the seed a form similar in appearance to that of the heroine.⁷⁴

In fact, the physician Galen did not allow images to be painted in bedrooms because "a monster . . . can be caused by a special action of the imaginative power of a woman having sex. It is possible that when such a figure springs to mind, the fetus will be disposed in accordance to it."⁷⁵

Certainly these ideas are based on a combination of two ancient beliefs, one having to do with ancient theories of the vision, the other with ancient theories of conception. A predominant understanding of vision stated that the image beheld was captured by the eye, traveled along the optic nerve, and literally stamped itself on the soul, transforming it: "The pleasure which comes from vision enters by the eyes and makes its home in the breast; bearing with it ever the image . . . it impresses it upon the mirror of the soul and leaves there its image."⁷⁶ This idea is as old as Plato, who suggested that the vision of the object

⁷² Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.39.

⁷³ Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.47.

⁷⁴ Heliodorus, *Ethiopian Story* 4.8.

⁷⁵ Pseudo-Albert's citation of Galen in Lemay, *Women's Secrets*, 116.

⁷⁶ Achilles Tatius, *Clitophon and Leucippe* 5.13.

touched the eye and was transmitted to the soul.⁷⁷ In fact, he uses the image of the soul as a block of wax upon which a vision received is imprinted like the stamp of a signet ring.⁷⁸

As for theories of conception, these were developed largely to explain family resemblances and to give function to some of the anatomical structures the ancients knew about. One popular theory held that the father implants his seed into the female, much like a farmer sows seed in the ground. The mother's uterus provides the environment for the seed to grow and be nourished by her menses.⁷⁹ There were a few authorities who thought that the mother actually provided seed from her own "testicles" and that it contributed to the formation of the child. These authors generally talked about the womb being a battleground for the two seeds, with the outcome of the battle determining whether the child more resembled the father or the mother.⁸⁰ This meant that the balance of four elements, qualities, and humors in the body of the parents would ultimately contribute to the formation of the fetus. In fact, the child's sex could be influenced by the parents' diet and even by the temperature and frequency of the baths the parents might take. At any rate, it was believed from both these perspectives that the condition of the mother's physical and mental state throughout pregnancy would impact the fetus' development.

*The Mystery of Valentinian Marriage*⁸¹

Given this reproductive theory, it should not be surprising that the Valentinian Christians prescribe a "correct" way for the aeons to procreate: they must work together as a couple, a *syzygy*, usually envisioned as a masculine and feminine pair (or, as in the case of the Marcosian version, as an androgynous being). Because the "fruit" of their intercourse reflects the attitude of their minds, when the aeons focus on the Father during their coupling, they will produce perfect offspring.

⁷⁷ Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 22–23.

⁷⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus* 191a–196c.

⁷⁹ Aristotle, *GA* 4.1, 763b30.

⁸⁰ Cf. Hippocratic Corpus, *Nature of the Child* 4.1 [VII: 474]; *On Generation* 4; Galen, *Usu part.* 14.6.

⁸¹ This section is based on my previous publications, "The Great Mystery of Marriage," 333–338, and "The True Mysteries," 250–252.

This means that there is an “incorrect” way for the aeons to procreate as well. In this scenario, an aeon who acts without its spouse, brings forth offspring through a solitary act of procreation. The offspring will always be less than perfect because it has only one parent. And horrendous problems may occur when the single parent is also procreating out of lust: the offspring will then reflect that passion, having neither form nor beauty.

Since the Valentinians believed that the universe and all it contained was an “image” or reflection of the Pleromic world above, it is not surprising that they understood their human physical marriages to be “images” of the aeonic intellectual marriages. Therefore, the Valentinians appear to have envisioned two types of human marriage, parallel to those of aeonic marriage. Human marriage was procreative, but one form of it produced more perfect offspring than the other. The higher form of marriage included some sort of consciousness-raising during sexual relations to insure that the children would resemble God. Physical intercourse was not driven by lust, but was a matter of the will or intention. The lower form of marriage was less desirable, or rather, it was undesirable. It was a form of human marriage in which sexual relations were carnal, based on the lustful feelings of the couple. It did not involve consciousness-raising and thus the offspring that it produced was thought to be defective in some way. Better for the couple to remain celibate than produce such error!

It is not surprising that in the background of Irenaeus’ polemic against the Valentinians we find fragments of this very ideology of marriage and sexual activity. He claims that the Valentinians believe themselves “to be perfect,” “the elect seed,” because they possess “grace” which has “descended from above by means of unspeakable and indescribable intercourse.” Thus the Valentinians maintain that “in every way it is always necessary for them to practice the mystery of intercourse.” But for the non-elect, sexual intercourse is dangerous because it is not performed as a sacral union but as an expression of sexual lust. Irenaeus quotes them as saying:

Whosoever being *in* this world does not so love a woman as to become one with her, is not of the truth, nor shall attain to the truth. But whosoever being *of* the world has intercourse with a wife, shall not attain to the truth, because his intercourse with his wife resulted from lust (*epithumia*).⁸²

⁸² Iren., *Adv. haer.* 1.6.4, in Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon*, 99.

Those *in* the world but not *of* the world are the Valentinians who will attain to the Pleroma. They are expected to be involved in sacral sexual practices as married couples. The psychics or ordinary Christians, however, are *of* the world. To be redeemed, they must practice “continnence and good works.”⁸³ If they are sexually active, even during their marriages, they are involved in impurity and sin because their minds might be focused on fulfilling their lustful desires. Similarly, Tertullian reports that the pneumatics,

for the purpose of honoring the celestial marriages, [are required] to contemplate and celebrate the mystery always by cleaving to a companion, that is to a woman; otherwise (they account any man) degenerate and a bastard to the truth, who spends his life in the world without loving a woman or uniting himself to her.⁸⁴

The psychics are advised to bear the “yoke of discipline,” growing in the works of “holiness and justice.”⁸⁵ Epiphanius states, tongue in cheek, that the pneumatics can do anything whatsoever without concern or fear, because they will be saved from anything, while the psychics save themselves “by labor and just deeds.”⁸⁶

We should not be surprised that the *Gospel of Philip* identifies the “mystery” of marriage with procreation: “Great is the mystery of marriage! For [without] it the world would [not exist].”⁸⁷ Like Irenaeus and Tertullian, *The Gospel of Philip* knows of two kinds of human marriage, one that he calls the “marriage of purity”⁸⁸ and another that he calls the “marriage of impurity.”⁸⁹ The ideal human marriage is based on “pure” thoughts rather than mere “carnal” (*sarkikon*) activity, “belonging not to desire (*epithumia*), but to the will.”⁹⁰ Even in the carnally-based marriage, the marriage of impurity, the private moment of procreation is a “mystery.” If this is so, how much more mysterious then is conception between partners who enjoy marriages of purity where procreation is a matter of will rather than desire: “If there is a hidden quality to the marriage of impurity, how much more is the marriage of purity a true mystery.”⁹¹

⁸³ *Adv. haer.* 1.6.4, in Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon*, 98–100.

⁸⁴ *Tert. Adv. Val.* 30.

⁸⁵ *Tert., Adv. Val.* 30.

⁸⁶ *Pan.* 31.7.8–9.

⁸⁷ 64:31–32, in Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex*, 170.

⁸⁸ 82:5.

⁸⁹ 64:36–37; 82:5. Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex*, 170 and 204.

⁹⁰ 82:9.

⁹¹ 82:4–6.

The Gospel of Philip states that, in the “marriage of purity,” during sexual intercourse the thoughts of the couple must not be adulterous, focusing on another lover. For if this is unfortunate enough to happen, the child conceived will resemble the lover rather than the spouse: “The children a woman bears resemble the man who loves her.”⁹² Nor must the couple’s thoughts be focused on the world, for if this happens, the child will resemble the world.⁹³ Instead, *The Gospel of Philip* advises the couple to direct their love to God, so that the child will resemble the Lord: “Now you who live together with the son of God, love not the world, but love the Lord, in order that those you will bring forth may not resemble the world, but may resemble the Lord.”⁹⁴

“To resemble the Lord” was a redemptive concern based on a Christological premise. The Valentinians were very advanced in their discussions of the binitarian problem, compared to many other second-century Christian theologians. They had carefully pondered the nature of the relation between the human and divine aspects of Christ and had differing opinions or emphasized different aspects of the equation. From the literature we have, it seems that the discussions among them focused on a Jesus of Nazareth who was made up of a combination of things: he had a corporeal body but one that had apparently been transformed by his *enkrateia* to such a degree that it was not necessary for him to defecate.⁹⁵ He had a psyche or soul given to him by the Demiurge. He had an elect spiritual seed implanted in his soul by Sophia. And either at his birth or his baptism—the Valentinians disagreed about this point—the Holy Spirit, the aeon from the Pleroma, had entered him.⁹⁶ When the Valentinians write that they want to birth children who “resemble the Lord,” what they seem to mean is that, if possible, they want to bear children whose souls, like that of Jesus, contain superior spiritual seeds.

This important passage in *Philip* continues: when the husband and wife had focused their minds on God rather than on the passion of the moment, it was believed that they would draw a spirit or thought

⁹² 78:14.

⁹³ 78:20–25.

⁹⁴ 78:20–25, in Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex*, 198.

⁹⁵ Clem. Alex., *Strom.* 3.59.

⁹⁶ Cf. Clem., *Strom.* 3.59; Iren., *Adv. haer.* 1.7.2, 3.16.6; Tert., *De Carne Christi* 15; Tert., *Adv. Val.* 26–27; Hipp., *Ref.* 6.35.7; Epiph., *Pan.* 31.7.3, 31.4.3–5; *Exc. Theo.* 59.1–4, 61.7–8; *Treat. Res.* 44.22–26; *Gos. Tri.* 20:10–14; *Tri. Tract.* 115:5–11, 116:29–10.

or light or angel down from the heavens, which would then join their own spirits or thoughts or light or angels:

Spirit mingles with spirit, and thought consorts with thought, and [light] shares [with light] . . . If you become [a spirit], it is the spirit which will be joined to you. If you become thought, it is thought which will mingle with you. If you become light, it is the light which will share with you. If you become one of those who belong above, it is those who belong above who will rest upon you.⁹⁷

Thus *The Gospel of Philip* states, regarding this mysterious moment of conception, that “[i]t belongs not to the darkness or the night but to the day and the light.”⁹⁸ During intercourse, the mingling of the parent’s spirits or angels together with the spirit or angel from above somehow resulted in the actual conception of the child’s spirit-seeded soul. This is alluded to in *The Exegesis on the Soul* too. When the soul adorns itself in beauty, she “enjoys” (*mate*) her beloved bridegroom, the son sent by the Father. As she is loved by him (*me*) at the moment of intercourse when he ejaculates his seed into her, she receives from him “the life-giving spirit,” so that by him she bears “good children.” This is called “the great, perfect marvel of birth.”⁹⁹

The language of this last-mentioned passage suggests to me that the Valentinians may not have been opposed to *eros*. The Coptic term *me* can render the Greek *eros*. So the Valentinian lovers appear to have made a distinction between *eros* and *epithumia*, between sexual pleasure and lust, between lovemaking and hedonism. They were certainly opposed to carnality, but perhaps not to sexual pleasure between married partners. In the Valentinian texts we do not encounter anything reminiscent of Augustine’s reproach of *eros*, the idea that sex should ideally be no more than a handshake. For the Valentinians, sex seems to have been understood as a delightful and sacred experience at the same time, when the souls of the parents mingled with the heavenly powers, resulting in the conception of a spiritually superior child, one that would be morally-inclined and redeemable, if not elect.

⁹⁷ 78:29–79:5, in Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex*, 198–200.

⁹⁸ 82:9–10.

⁹⁹ 133.31–134.5.

*The Embodiment of Souls and Redemption*¹⁰⁰

These ideas about conception may seem far-fetched to us today, but they actually reflect knowledge of ancient theological, philosophical and medical discussions. There were at least three prevailing theories about the origin of a person's psyche or soul.¹⁰¹ The most common theory among Greek theologians was creationism: each individual soul was created independently by God at the moment of its infusion into the body.¹⁰² Another theory was traducianism: each soul was believed to be generated from the souls of the parents, somehow transmitted through the semen which functioned as the "channel" (*traducem*).¹⁰³ The third theory was pre-existence: all souls had been created by God and existed prior to their assignment to individual bodies.¹⁰⁴

The Valentinians held to this last view: the psychic and the pneumatic stuff were pre-existent and, in fact, pre-cosmic. After the Demiurge had fashioned the physical and psychic bodies, Sophia (or the Logos) implanted pneumatic seeds into them, apparently with the help of an angel or holy spirit. It appears that, again, we are dealing with ancient theories about the origin of the soul. Clement of Alexandria speaks of angels who assist at procreation:

An old man said that that which is in the belly is living. For the soul enters the womb, which has been prepared for conception by purification [menstruation] and is introduced [into the womb] by one of those angels provided to oversee birth, who know in advance the time of conception to push the woman toward intercourse, and when the seed has been deposited, as it were, the *pneuma* which is in the seed is adapted and this takes part in the formation [of the embryo]... And if the angels bring good news to barren women, so also do they infuse souls at conception. In the gospel, 'the babe leapt' [means that it is] ensouled... And because of this barren women are barren, since the soul is not infused, accompanying the depositing of seed for the retention of conception and birth.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ This section contains material from "The Great Mystery of Marriage," 338–341.

¹⁰¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 344–346.

¹⁰² Cf. Cyril Hieros, *cat.* 4, 18–19; Epiph., *ancon.* 55; Cyril Alex., *in Ion.* 1, 9; Pelagius, *libellus fidei* 9.

¹⁰³ Cf. Tert., *De anima* 9, 20, 27; *Adv. Marc.* 2.15; *Test. Animae* 3; Greg. Nyssa, *De hom. opif.* 28–29; Aug., *de Gen. ad litt.* 10, 23–end; *ep.* 166, 6–12; 190, 14–15; *De lib. arbit.* 3, 56–59.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Origen, *De Princ.* 1.8.3–4; 2.9.2; 3.4.1; Didymus the Blind, *Comm. In Iob.* 3, 3–5; Leo, *ep.* 15, 10; Victorinus, *In Eph.* 1.4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ecl.* 50.1–3.

The angels, according to Clement, encourage the woman to have intercourse with her husband when the time of conception draws near. After the semen has been ejaculated into the womb, the angels then deposit the soul at the moment of conception. In fact, barrenness is due to the absence of angelic intervention, not to some problem with either parent!

Why were the Valentinians so concerned about conceiving souls implanted with a superior spirit like the Lord's, one that might be "elect" or, at least, inclined to live morally? Because this would increase the number of souls that had the opportunity to convert to Christianity and be redeemed. The *Excerpts of Theodotus* tells us that procreation must continue in order to ensure that the pneumatic seed will be incarnated in souls that might become Christian converts. The Valentinians supported this doctrine with their exegesis of Jesus' saying to Salome that death will reign as long as women bear children. They said that Jesus did not "reproach" birth because birthing "is necessary for the salvation of the believers:" it must continue until all of the "seed" has incarnated. The "birth" Jesus referred to was the generation of the formless substance as the result of Sophia's suffering in the Pleroma. Before Jesus' descent from the Pleroma, humans were called "children of the female only." These children were born out of "base intercourse" and were "incomplete," "infants," "senseless," "weak," "without form," and "brought forth like abortions." But because Jesus came to earth "to separate us from suffering" and grant humans "form" just as he had done with Sophia, the Valentinians stated "we have become children of a husband and a bridal chamber."¹⁰⁶ A little later in *Excerpts of Theodotus*, Clement speaks of the advent of Jesus in similar terms, highlighting the transformation of the female seeds. As long as the "seed is immature, it is the child of the female." But after Jesus came, "it was formed, it was changed to a man and becomes a son of the bridegroom."¹⁰⁷ The "woman" is said to be changed into a man, and the Church here on earth into "angels."¹⁰⁸

At the Eschaton, when the Pleroma would open up as the fantastic Bridal Chamber, a great communal wedding was imagined, including a banquet, at which all the saved souls would be transformed into

¹⁰⁶ *Exc. Theo.* 67, Sagnard, *Extraits de Théodote*, 190–192.

¹⁰⁷ *Exc. Theo.* 79, Sagnard, *Extraits de Théodote*, 202.

¹⁰⁸ *Exc. Theo.* 21.3.

perfected bodies. The Elect or male spirits, and the Called or saved female spirits, would be equalized so that all the pneumatic seeds, as “brides” and matured “intelligent spirits,” would enter the Bridal Chamber on the arms of their grooms, Jesus’ attendant angels¹⁰⁹ or the Logos himself.¹¹⁰ Their souls would be worn as glorious “wedding garments.”¹¹¹ These garments would then be stripped off and left at the door of the Pleromic bedroom, so that the brides and grooms could enter the nuptial chamber naked and join in the full ecstasy of aeonic embrace and marriage, an idea which Tertullian attributes to Valentinus himself.¹¹² Their entrance is described by Tertullian as “the angels of the males” together with the female seeds who will be received by Jesus and become a unity in the Pleroma.¹¹³

Thus the Eschaton and entrance into the Pleromic Bridal Chamber would correct what Adam had perpetuated in the beginning: the dispersion of the spirit in immature form within the corrupted soul. Since Adam had procreated from his material aspect, he had been acting from carnality, from lust. Therefore the child he bore, Cain, had a soul inclined toward evil, one whose spiritual seed was easily overcome by the presence of powerful demons and passions. The conception of Abel, on the other hand, was believed to have taken place in such a way that he acquired a soul with a pneumatic seed, but one that was able to respond positively, to live righteously and be redeemed. Seth’s soul, finally, was endowed with an elect spiritual seed because his conception was marked by Adam’s spiritual aspect, that is the raising of Adam’s soul to the heights of heaven as he lovingly embraced Eve. It was this form of lovemaking that the Valentinians considered sacred and believed would lead to their own redemption, which was nothing less than the redemption of God himself.

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¹⁰⁹ Iren., *Adv. haer.* 1.7.1; 1.7.5.

¹¹⁰ *Exc. Theo.* 21.3.

¹¹¹ *Exc. Theo.* 61.8.

¹¹² *Adv. Val.* 32.

¹¹³ *Val. Exp.* 39.22–39.

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SEXUAL INTERCOURSE BETWEEN HUMANS AND DEMONS IN THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

PIERRE LORY

Esoteric and Exoteric

The term “esoteric” has a very specific meaning in the Islamic tradition. The Koran as well as other fundamental religious texts emphasize the difference between what is “apparent” and “outward” (*ẓâhir*) and what is “hidden” and “inward” (*bâtin*). *Ẓâhir* is everything that is obvious in our perceptions and thoughts (an empirical phenomenon, the meaning of a text), about the presence of which no doubt can be raised. *Bâtin* is what is not expressed outwardly (feelings for instance), what is hidden in natural phenomena, or concealed in speech. The “hidden” is, however, no less real than the “apparent.” On the contrary, if anything, the opposite is true.¹ The very etymology of these two terms is significant in this respect. *Ẓâhir* refers to *zahr*, the back, while *bâtin* refers to *batn*, the belly. The image is clear: what is apparent in human life is actually the *backside* of reality, the less interesting part of it. The ‘belly’ of reality, the organism that gives life to it, is hidden from perception and common sense. This opposition between apparent and hidden can be applied to the entire universe. It reflects the structure of God’s manifestation in his creation: “He is the First and the Last, the Outward (*al-Ẓâhir*) and the Inward (*al-Bâtin*).”²

The existence of a hidden dimension of reality is also reflected in Islamic culture generally, in which human knowledge is basically divided between exoteric and esoteric sciences. Only the exoteric ones—grammar, religious sciences, or medicine and astronomy—are officially taught: the orthodox doctors do not approve of the quest for esoteric sciences such as alchemy, astrology or magic. They often harshly condemn them as leading to heresy and the transgression of God’s orders;

¹ The opposition *ẓâhir* / *bâtin* was masterly explained in the main works of Henry Corbin, especially *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth, En Islam Iranien* and *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. For a shorter summary of his thought, see Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, chapter IV.

² *Koran* LVII 3.

but many Sufis consider them, on the contrary, as possible means of transforming the ordinary man into the Perfect Man.³ In any case, practically nobody denies that these sciences are in some way true, that they refer to reality and have efficiency. In other words, traditional Islamic societies are living in a world of two dimensions:⁴ while mainly living in the sensible world, they know about a series of boundaries—and openings—between that world and the dimension of the invisible one.

The World of Demons

One of the most central tenets of esoteric knowledge in Islam is the link between human society and the world of the “demons.” “Demons” existed in Arabia before the rise of Islam. They were universally present in the common culture and daily life and highly relevant to the domains of illness and health, divination, and many psychic and intellectual phenomena, such as poetry or music. The belief in their existence continued in Islamic culture, but their function was modified and incorporated in the fabric of common Islamic beliefs and ethics. The function of demons in the Koran and the Sunni tradition is a rather paradoxical one. On the one hand, they are often mentioned. Sura LXXII of the Koran is even dedicated to them:

Say (o Muhammad): “It has been revealed to me that a company of the demons (*jinn*) gave ear, and they said ‘We have indeed heard a Koran that is wonderful, guiding to rectitude. We believe in it, and we will not associate with our Lord anyone.’”⁵

These “demons” are most commonly referred to as *jinn* (sg *jinnī*, fem. *jinnīyya*). The term stems from the Arabic root JNN and does not seem to be derived from the Latin *genius*, as has been suggested by some scholars. The root JNN suggests the idea of being covered, dark, unseen.

³ See Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, about the notion of “world of Hūrquâlā,” the “place” of the transformation of spirits into bodies and bodies into spirits, the realm of history beyond history. About alchemy specifically, see Part II, IX, 4.

⁴ Quite similar to the one described in Jeff Kripal’s interesting chapter “Sex with the Angels,” in Kripal, *Esalen*.

⁵ *Koran* LXXII 1–2. The text goes on: “...The fools among us spoke against God outrage, and we had thought that men and jinn would never speak a lie against God. But there were certain men of mankind who would take refuge with certain men of the *jinn*, and they increased them in vileness, and they thought, even as you also thought, that God would never raise up anyone, etc.” See also Suyûtî, *Laqt al-marjân*, 44–62.

For example, *janîn* means the foetus, *janân* means the heart, and the expression *janna al-layl* means “the night was falling.” For most Moslems there can be no doubt about the existence of the *jinn*s. They are described as earthly beings, generally living under the ground. They eat, drink, and reproduce, but in a way that is different from human beings: for example, they eat dirt and live in wild, abandoned regions.

It is important to realize that *jinn* are not necessarily evil. The so-called “satans” (*shaytân* pl. *shayâtîn*) of the Koran are generally considered rebellious, evil-doing *jinn*, such as the followers of Iblîs / Satan who refused to obey God’s commandments.⁶ Sura LXXII mentioned above explains that some *jinn* are believers and faithful, whereas others are sinners.⁷ Tradition explains that the beliefs of *jinn* mirror those of humans: some *jinn* are Muslims (sunna, shi’a, etc.), others are Christians, Jews, or pagans. Like humans, they are concerned with obedience and transgression.⁸ It is important to note that extensive confusion remains between the devils (*shayâtîn*) and the *jinn* in general in religious literature as well as in popular Islam. According to one tradition, Iblîs / Satan is indeed the father of the *jinn*, just like Adam was the father of mankind.⁹

The Koran suggests that prophets were sent to the *jinn* as well as to humans: “Company of *jinn* and mankind, did not Messengers come to you from among you, relating to you My signs and warning you of the encounter of this your day?”¹⁰ They closely resemble the human population, the main difference being their “fiery” shape,¹¹ which enables them to move very quickly, to fly, to become invisible to humans, and

⁶ *Koran* II 34–36, XVII 61–64; Shibli, *Âkâm al-marjân*, 149–166; Suyûtî, *Laqt al-marjân*, 17–18, 83–88; Fahd, “Anges, démons et djinns” 189–190. The theologians mentioned by Shibli and Suyûtî mention the important question of the difference between the Satanic inner voice tempting humans, and the voice of divine inspiration.

⁷ “And some of us are the righteous, and some of us are otherwise; we are sects differing . . . And some of us have surrendered, and some of us have deviated. Those who have surrendered sought rectitude; but those who have deviated, they have become firewood for Gehenna!” (LXXII 11, 14–15)

⁸ Arabic *mukallaf*, important notion meaning: responsible for the Law and for the divine Judgment the Day of Resurrection.

⁹ Chelhod, *Les structures du sacré*, 67–92, tries to explain the historical logic leading to this manifold confusion between angels, *jinn*, and devils where no scriptural coherence can be found.

¹⁰ *Koran* VI 130; Shibli, *Âkâm al-marjân*, 36–37; Suyûtî, *Laqt al-marjân*, 41–44; Chelhod, *Les structures du sacré*, 82.

¹¹ The *jinn* seem to have been created from fire; see *Koran* LVI 15, VII 12; Suyûtî, *Laqt al-marjân*, 19–20.

to enter into human bodies and cause illnesses such as epilepsy and nervous or mental diseases. They are linked to several types of animals, and often appear in the form of snakes, scorpions, rats, mice, ravens, pigeons, donkeys, or dogs.¹² *Jinn* have the ability to understand many things that are beyond human reach: hence the temptation for human beings of making them allies by means of magical practices. All this can be deduced from many Koranic passages and oral teachings of the prophet Muhammad, the *hadīth*.¹³ The idea put forward by some rationalistic thinkers that *jinn* could sometimes be a mere metaphor for hidden phenomena was rejected by the consensus of Sunni scholars.¹⁴

While they are widely believed in by Muslims, *jinn* play no important role in their *religious* life. Before the arrival of Islam, Arabs had established some connection between *jinn* and angels, but the Koranic exegesis refused any confusion between them, and *a fortiori* any direct link between *jinn* and God. This last point refers to the fact that pre-Islamic gods and goddesses were considered to be children of the marriage between God and female angels or *jinniyya*-s.¹⁵ Islamic Law tells believers to pay no attention to the *jinn*. Although king Salomo subjugated them so as to have their assistance in the construction of huge buildings, according to the Koran,¹⁶ Muslim doctors insist that for ordinary believers contact with *jinn* is useless and could become dangerous. These potential dangers concern the believers' material life, but also their spiritual evolution: *jinn* might tempt them into committing some kind of idolatry, the most terrible sin in Islamic belief. *Jinn* are in no

¹² Suyūṭī, *Laqṭ al-marjān*, 21 quotes an interesting *hadīth* (word of the Prophet, see following note): "God created *jinn* of three kinds. Some are like snakes, scorpions, earthly insects; others are like wind in the air; others are responsible for their acts and may be punished." Thus are enumerated the main manifestations of *jinn* for humans: they appear in the natural world of animals, in humanly incomprehensible illnesses, and as another sometimes evil counterpart of themselves.

¹³ The *hadīth* are oral teachings attributed to the prophet Muhammad, written two or three centuries after his death and gathered into large collections. Although considered less authoritative than the Koran itself, they play a role of paramount importance in the domains of Islamic dogma, Law, and ethics.

¹⁴ Among those intellectuals, one can think of several theologians belonging to the rather rationalistic theological school of the Mu'tazila. The Mu'tazila stated that no opposition was possible between the content of the Koran and reason; they were rather suspicious towards miracles etc. Several philosophers or free-thinkers like the physician Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā Rāzī (known as Rhazes in the Latin Middle Ages) were likewise skeptical about the very existence of *jinn*.

¹⁵ Chelhod, *Les structures du sacré*, 78–81.

¹⁶ *Koran* XXI 82, XXVII 39, XXXVIII 37, where no precise distinction seems to be made between *jinn* and devils; cf. Shiblī, *Ākām al-marjān*, 87–89, 97–102.

way comparable to angels,¹⁷ and many Muslim scholars even deny to *jinn* the possibility of attaining Paradise after death. As a consequence, *jinn* remain locked in the unspoken, dark level of Muslim consciousness and culture; and it is precisely here that lies their interest for the present volume. The official, scholarly religious discourse does not pay much attention to *jinn*, but actually they play a role of considerable importance in the daily life of ordinary believers. In some Islamic societies, as we shall see, nearly all the actions of daily life are influenced by the idea of the possible presence or intervention of *jinn*.

Sexual Relations with Demons

Jinn reproduce themselves sexually, as mentioned before, but they may also have intercourse with human beings. The Koran mentions the virgins of Paradise, the *hūrīs* promised to the believers, as “maidens . . . untouched before them by any man or *jinn*.”¹⁸ In this respect, our main source in Islamic tradition is *The Hills of Coral Concerning the Status of the Jinn*: a synthesis on the subject composed, with the traditional material available in Sunnite Islam, by Badr al-dīn al-Shiblī († 1367).¹⁹ Shiblī explains in his introduction that he decided to compose his treatise after a discussion he had had about the marriages between humans and *jinn*; thus the issue seems to have been an important one. According to most scholars quoted by Shiblī, the *jinn* may remain invisible, but may also appear to human beings in a physical shape. How do they appear? Here the Islamic tradition gave free rein to the imagination.

¹⁷ The myth of “fallen angels” is nevertheless not absent from the Koran. Verse II 102 alludes to “Babylon’s two angels Harut and Marut” who taught magical practices to humans. Several Islamic traditions assert that Harut and Marut were tempted by the beauty of human women, and therefore dwelled on earth disclosing heavenly secrets.

¹⁸ *Koran* LV 56, 74. The exegetes agree that the verb translated as “touching” means precisely “deflowering.” The question of how bodily intercourse is possible between the subtle, fiery *jinn* and human beings was discussed by Islamic scholars, similarly to debates on the same subject during the Latin Middle Ages (see Allison Coudert’s contribution in this volume); most scholars claimed that *jinn* could make their bodies as dense as those of humans for the purpose of having sex.

¹⁹ *Ākām al-marjān fi ahkām al-jānn*; the book was used by the great scholar Jalāl al-dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) in his own treatise dedicated to the *jinn*, *Laqṭ al-marjān fi ahkām al-jānn* (*The Gathering of Coral Concerning the Status of the Jinn*), which is also valuable because of the precision of his references. The reference to coral probably has to do with the Koranic verse LV 22–23: “From the two seas come forth the pearl and the coral. Which of your Lord’s bounties will you (human) and you (*jinn*) deny?”

Many stories describe *jinn* as similar to human beings, but with vertical pupils like cat's eyes and with legs resembling those of a goat or a camel.²⁰ The females appear either as ugly old women with hanging breasts, or as beautiful, fascinating young ladies. Many people think that *jinn* may adopt whatever appearance they choose. This explains why the frightening *jinniyya* called *ghûla* tries to attack men who are alone in the desert in order to steal their spirits, drive them mad and/or have intercourse with him. The poet Ta'abbata sharran²¹ described his own struggle in the desert with a terrifying *ghûla*: "She had two eyes like those of a cat, in an ugly face, and a split tongue, two thin legs, the skull of a dog, and her skin seemed to be a worn-out mantel or goatskin."²² A fellow poet, 'Amr ibn Yarbû', seems to have had more luck: he married a *jinniyya* who gave to him several children.

Traditions of the Prophet or his elder Companions give some further details about sexual intercourse with *jinn*, and Islamic Law devotes several sections to this controversial point. The following topics are raised:

(1) Intercourse between a woman and a *jinnî* along with her husband. A famous *hadîth* says: "He who has intercourse with his wife without saying 'in the name of Allâh', will have Satan enter his penis and participate in the intercourse."²³ Another well-known *hadîth* states: "He who has intercourse with his wife while she is menstruating will have Satan precede him, and she will get pregnant with an effeminate."²⁴ In the Koran itself, God authorizes Satan to tempt mankind by instructing him to "...share with them in their wealth and their children."²⁵

²⁰ Chelhod, *Les structures du sacré*, 72–74. These pre-Islamic representations were taken over by Islamic culture, and are to be found (with many variations) in all Islamic countries.

²¹ This poet lived in the sixth century, shortly before the rise of Islam; therefore, his poem is devoid of religious references. "Ta'abbata sharran" is actually a nickname meaning "he took an evil under his arm" and alludes to his famous fight with the *ghûla*.

²² Poem *A-lâ man mubligh^m fityâna fahm^m*, quoted by Ibn Qutayba, *Al-shi'r wa-al-shu'arâ*, 175.

²³ Shibli, *Âkâm al-marjân*, 65, 172–173; Suyûtî, *Laqt al-marjân*, 31. It is a religious recommendation for Moslems to pronounce the formula "In the name of God" before accomplishing important actions in daily life, like eating or having sex.

²⁴ Shibli, *Âkâm al-marjân*, 75–76, 173; Suyûtî, *Laqt al-marjân*, 30–31. It is true that the *hadîth* here mentions Satan and not a *jinnî*; but, as noticed before, there is much confusion between the two notions. Intercourse is forbidden to Moslems while the wife has her period.

²⁵ *Koran* XVII 64. The meaning of the verse—does it refer to the children of mankind, or of Iblîs himself—is not clear however.

(2) The possibility of children being born from intercourse between human beings and *jinn*. Several scholars assert that it is not possible, and that such unions remain sterile. But, as law specialists point out, this does not eliminate the possibility of marriages between men and *jinn*:²⁶ one may legally marry barren or old women without expecting children to be born. On the other hand, Islamic lore tells us much about the children that are in fact born from marriages between human beings and *jinn*. Bilqîs, the queen of Saba who married king Salomo, was supposedly the daughter of a Yemeni king and a princess of *jinn*.²⁷ According to the *Nawâdir al-usûl*, a famous collection of *hadîth* composed by the scholar and mystic al-Hakîm al-Tirmidhî († 930), the Prophet had said: “Among you are those who are expatriated (*mugharrabûn*);” and this, he explained, meant “crossed with *jinn*.”²⁸ The linguist Tha‘âlibî (d. 1038) mentions that the child born from a marriage between a man and a *jinniyya* is called a *khanas*, or a *‘amlûq*, depending on the species of the demon.

(3) The lawfulness of marriage. Tradition mentions the case of Muslim *jinn* requesting to marry Muslim women according to the *shari‘a*. Most of the juridical authorities of the first century questioned on this point—such as Qatâda, Hasan al-Basrî, al-Hakam—agree that such a marriage is not desirable (*makrûh*).²⁹ This means that it is not utterly forbidden (*harâm*), and we do in fact find several references to such unions; but it does mean that a believer should avoid marrying a *jinn* if he can. When questioned by Yemeni Muslims about this very subject, Mâlik ibn Anas († 796), the founder of the mâlikî juridical school, answered: “I do not see an impediment for this in religion, but I find it undesirable that the wife, if she becomes pregnant and is asked “who is your husband?,” answers “he is a *jinnî*,” because this could bring corruption in Islam.”³⁰ Several later *fatwas* confirmed this judgement,³¹ arguing that God created everything according to an order of harmony, which destined man and woman for each other and *jinnî* for *jinniyya*. It should be noticed here that the question is not concerned with the nature (*physis*, ar. *tabi‘a*) of man, but only with his status (juridical position, ar. *hukm*).

²⁶ Shibli, *Âkâm al-marjân*, 66.

²⁷ Shibli, *Âkâm al-marjân*, 69; Suyûtî, *Laqt al-marjân*, 31–32.

²⁸ Quoted by Suyûtî, *Laqt al-marjân*, 32.

²⁹ Shibli, *Âkâm al-marjân*, 67–69; Suyûtî, *Laqt al-marjân*, 33–38. Zuhri, relying on a *hadîth*, seems to have considered such a marriage as utterly forbidden.

³⁰ *Fiqh al-lughâ*, quoted by Shibli, *Âkâm al-marjân*, 69.

³¹ Shibli, *Âkâm al-marjân*, 65–66; Suyûtî, *Laqt al-marjân*, 33.

Whether one is a human being or a demon is not wholly decided by birth: the will of God and the intention of man can actually turn an individual into something like a *jinnī*, or, as we will see, an angel. In any case, the fact that mankind is in a process of decline causes the divinely ordained harmony to be broken, according to a *hadīth* about the Latter Days: “The Hour will come when the children of *jinn* will become many among you.”³²

Other arguments are adduced from the Koran. The Sacred Texts recommend marriage, but their many references to “wives” (*azwāj*) can only refer to human females. Shiblī calls particular attention to verses VII 189: “It is (God) who created you out of one living soul, and made of him his spouse that he might rest in her.” And XXX 21: “and one of His signs is that He created for you, of yourselves, spouses so you might repose in them, and He has set between you love and mercy.” Wives are given to men so that they may rest in them. But, says Shiblī, a man cannot rest in a *jinniyya*. When it happens that a man or a woman marries a demon, it is because the human partner in the relationship is frightened and threatened by the *jinn*, and this does not agree with the Koranic principles.³³ This fact—the *jinnī* or *jinniyya* appearing as a terrifying threat—underlines that the representation of erotic links with *jinn* is basically linked to fear and not to eros as pleasure.

Several traditional stories hint at another dimension of the question: the *jinn* may represent an unexpected, terrifying danger. Several accounts speak of the danger for a woman—especially when she is weakened by agony or illness—to be raped by a *jinni*. But the narratives are not always just an expression of fear about violence *done* by demons. According to traditions quoted by Shiblī and Suyûtī, some women assert that intercourse with a *jinnī* causes the same sensation of orgasm as intercourse with their husbands. It is not clear for Muslim lawyers whether actual intercourse is evoked or simply a kind of hallucination.³⁴ Another motive is that of men being kidnapped by *jinn*. Quite reminiscent of contemporary UFO abduction stories, such legends brought up the legal

³² Quoted by Suyûtī, *Laqt al-marjān*, 38, who in addition interprets this *hadīth* in terms of the increase of adultery at the end of history. This interpretation is important: it suggests not only the idea of an metaphorical exegesis of the *hadīth*, but also the idea that men may become similar to *jinn* as a result of their own behavior.

³³ Shiblī, *Ākām al-marjān*, 66–67.

³⁴ Shiblī, *Ākām al-marjān*, 73–76; Suyûtī, *Laqt al-marjān*, 31, 127–129.

question of what to do when a husband had been kidnapped for a long time and his wife asked for a new marriage.³⁵ In any case, these stories clearly indicate that *jinnī* were believed to be capable of interfering in daily life, albeit in a very special dimension of human consciousness, in an “inter-world” between dream and waking consciousness.³⁶ This in-between dimension—which is referred to for explaining not only relations with *jinn* but also with the souls of the dead or with angels—is of crucial importance for understanding Muslim approaches towards the domain of the “paranormal.”

For many centuries, the concept that intercourse is possible between humans and demons has exerted a tremendous influence over the popular imagination. To give only one example of the mediaeval mentality, we may look at the travel account of the Iranian scholar Ibn al-Mujâwir in Yemen in thirteenth-century Arabia:

The inhabitants of Turan are descended from a woman called al-Fâliqa who came out of the sea. She settled on land and married a prominent Arab who took her to live on the land of Turan. Children were born to her, both male and female. The Arabs declared: ‘The inhabitants of Turan are from the offspring of the Arab and the woman’, meaning Fâliqa. [Next follows an account of the miracles accomplished by Fâliqa.] I asked ‘Amr ibn ‘Alī ibn Muqbil: “What on earth happened to Fâliqa?” He replied that she was still alive. “Where does she live?”, I asked. “In Wādī Qutayna,” he replied. I asked where the wadi was. He said: “In the region of Turan. And she will not die until the Day of Resurrection.” I asked if anyone ever saw her. He replied: “Yes, everyone approaching the end of his life-span.”³⁷

*Sexual Intercourse as Possession in Contemporary Islam:
The Case of ‘Aīsha Qandīsha*

Nowadays, in Islamic countries (especially in rural areas, but in the cities as well) one can still observe how omnipresent the *jinn* are in social,

³⁵ Suyûtī, *Laqt al-marjân*, 93–97.

³⁶ Most Muslims consider such stories to be real (that is to say, to be more than dreams), even though they do not pertain to normal everyday reality. They must be understood in terms of an “in-between world” (*barzakh*), somewhat comparable to the occidental concept of an “astral plane,” but considered quite as real as the material world. One should not expect complete logical consistency: for example, if a man has been kidnapped he has become invisible, so the question is what has happened with his material body. Clear answers to such questions are not given.

³⁷ Smith, “Magic, Jinn and the Supernatural,” 9.

and hence also in sexual life. Furthermore, very similar concepts of *jinn* can also be encountered in other contexts, such as that of the Copts in Egypt.³⁸ *Jinn* are more generally believed to be active in causing illnesses, strange events, or simply (bad) luck. Love is one of the most frequent causes of relationships being established between humans and *jinn*. In her study of exorcism in the Yemeni province of Hadramawt, Sylvaine Camelin states:

Love seems to be the most frequent occasion of contact between men and *jinn*. A *jinnî* meets a woman and falls in love with her, or the reverse: a *jinniyya* meets a man and falls in love with him. In such a case, the *jinnî* wants to possess the human person. He enters his or her body. This possession is manifest notably when the *jinnî* has sexual intercourse with the person he/she possesses. In that case, the man (or the woman) behaves with gestures and words as if he (or she) were having sexual intercourse, although he (or she) is apparently alone in the room. Besides, this person seems to suddenly lose all interest for his/her environment—and especially for his wife (her husband) and withdraw into himself (herself).³⁹

These concepts of human/demonic couples are reminiscent of several rituals of a shamanistic type, such as the East-African, Nilotic and Yemeni *zâr* ceremonies, where the (female) officiants often act as if they were the wives or mothers of the spirits they invoke.⁴⁰

What we would consider as cases of “spirit possession” is often seen by the people concerned as actual sexual intercourse between *jinn* and human, the *jinnî* being an independent embodied entity. For example, in northern Morocco, several important saints, such as Sîdî ‘Ali ben Hamdûsh or Sîdî Ahmad Dghûghî, are venerated and sought out as healers. They are particularly important to people affiliated with marginal and shamanic brotherhoods like the Aïssawa or the Afro-Islamic

³⁸ Viaud, *Magie et coutumes*, 26–27.

³⁹ “Croyance aux djinns,” 173; see also Shibli, *Âkâm al-marjân*, 104–112; and Suyûti, *Laqt al-marjân*, 98–117.

⁴⁰ Battain, “Osservazioni sul rito zar”, 119. The thirteenth century author Ibn al-Mujâwir describes the quest for magical power as follows: “When a woman wants to learn perfect sorcery, she takes a human and roasts him until he dissolves and is reduced to grease. He cools down and when he has done so, she drinks all [the fat] from which she becomes pregnant. After seven months, she gives birth to a wild human like a cat in length and breadth, called a *‘afw*. It is said that he has on him a penis the same size as that of a grown young ass... When he reaches sexual maturity, the *‘afw* has intercourse with his mother... No one can see the *‘afw* except his mother, who is his spouse—no one but she can look upon him” (Smith, “Magic, Jinn and the Supernatural”, 10).

Gnawa⁴¹ and are supposed to diffuse their supernatural power (*baraka*) among their supplicants. The interesting point for us is that they are “coupled” with a female demon (as their wife, or sometimes daughter). These female demons actually share in the holiness of the saint with whom they are associated and in his spreading of *baraka*; and they often give the impression of possessing a power that is equal or even superior to that of the saint. The most famous of these *jinniyya*-s is called ‘Aïsha Qandîsha, or better Lalla (Lady) ‘Aïsha. She is described as being very powerful, fierce, and unsmiling. She may harm people and become very dangerous.⁴² The importance of this figure is that she elicits a double attitude of fascination with and fear of feminine power: Lalla ‘Aïsha seems to be a hard, severe mother, and yet at the same time she is the most attractive female figure one can imagine. One of her main activities is that of seducing men, whether bachelors or married. Actually, she manifests herself as a plurality of female demons who are venerated in various locations, not unlike the Roman Catholic veneration of Our Lady in a variety of cultic locations (Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe) with their specific attendant rituals. In the case of Lalla ‘Aïsha, the most well-known are:

- ‘Aïsha Hamdûshiyya, wife of Sîdî ‘Alî ben Hamdûsh; she is black and lives near a river.
- ‘Aïsha Sûdâniyya, a black *jinniyya*, wife of Sîdî Ahmad Dghûghî. Her domain is the desert and dry areas.
- ‘Aïsha Bahriyya is white, living near the coast, near Salé. She is said to be the wife of Sidi Mûsâ al-Dukkalî, a thirteenth-century saint, venerated as a spirit of the ocean.
- ‘Aïsha Gnawiyya is also a water-spirit. She is black.
- ‘Aïsha mûlet al-wed is another (white) water-*jinniyya*, living near the rivers.⁴³

Lalla ‘Aïsha is particularly dangerous because of the manner in which she seduces men. In an isolated place, a man may encounter her in

⁴¹ These brotherhoods have always had close relations with each other. They participate in common patronal feasts (*mawsem*) and share the veneration for the same saints, *jinn* etc. See Crapanzano, *Hamadcha*, 225.

⁴² For more details about the beliefs concerning ‘Aïsha Qandisha, see Crapanzano, *Hamadcha*, 220, 228–237.

⁴³ See Claisse, *Aspects des cultes féminins*.

the shape of a beautiful young lady who proposes intercourse and asks him to marry her. But once they have had intercourse, the man finds himself the prisoner of his own promise, of the contract made with her. If he refuses to fulfil it, he gets ill and may die.⁴⁴ If he accepts to marry Lalla ‘Aïsha, he must usually forsake all relations with other women (except his legal wife), wear old and dirty clothes, eat little or feed himself with no matter what, desert his friends, and in fact lead the life of a lunatic. Furthermore, he is required to regularly attend ceremonies celebrating ‘Aïsha.⁴⁵ The Moroccan psychologist Ali Aouattah relates several stories of this type. A certain Ben Aïssa, who was clinically treated for possession in a Moroccan hospital, had fallen in love with his cousin, but once having married her, he discovered to his dismay that she was no longer a virgin. Several days later he encountered a woman with red eyes and legs like those of a camel, who explained to him that she had taken the shape of her cousin in order to possess him, and that he now belonged to her. When he refused, she started to beat him fiercely. Henceforth she appeared to him regularly, beating him each time he refused, even after he had entered the army in an attempt to escape from her (since *jinn* supposedly do not like iron, he tried to protect himself by seeking out an environment with great amounts of this metal).⁴⁶

Another and more complicated case is that of a couple which had lost a young child due to an accident and were living in an atmosphere of guilt, fear and anger. The husband got possessed by ‘Aïsha Qandīsha, and his wife by a male *jinnī*, the husband of ‘Aïsha Qandīsha. Their sexual relations became scarce, and the double possession in fact resulted in a kind of therapeutic “ménage à quatre” (unthinkable though it may be in a Muslim climate), but somehow they managed to find a new balance by means of their double relationship with the *jinn*. A relationship of this kind is often officially established and organized in the frame of rituals during which *jinn* are supposed to be present and give their agreement to the situation. The therapeutic importance of such rituals—especially those involving ‘Aïsha Qandīsha—has been strongly emphasized by several anthropologists.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Cases of such possessions are given by Crapanzano, *Hamadcha*, 228–232, who also provides information about other ‘Aïsha’s well-known in northern Morocco.

⁴⁵ Crapanzano, *Hamadcha*, 252–262.

⁴⁶ *Ethnopsychiatrie maghrébine*, 52.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 63–65, where Aouattah gives other clinical examples. Aouattah refers partly to the article of Crapanzano “Mohammed and Dawia.”

Because Lalla ‘Aïsha is believed to be so powerful, women often try to establish “contracts” with her. They ask her for healing, children, money, or want her to attack a rival. Among the sacrifices given to her, milk (possibly as a symbol of semen) is common, but animals are also very important, because Lalla ‘Aïsha gets her strength from “drinking” their blood. Devotees often cut the skin of their heads to let it bleed for the same purpose.⁴⁸

Services addressed to the male saints take place in shrines during the day and are officiated by men. In contrast, the female ceremonies devoted to the many ‘Aïshas take place in natural surroundings (in a cave, near a well or a tree) during the night, and the leader of the ceremony is a woman. The offerings made to ‘Aïsha consist of blood—menstrual blood in particular—and excrements. The rituals may be private and restricted to a small circle, or they may be organized by several brotherhoods at the same time, like the Hamadsha, the Jilâla, and the Gnawa. The part of the ritual specifically dedicated to Lalla ‘Aïsha (for part of it is taken up by prayers addressed to God or the Prophet) takes place in the middle of the night, when she may become visible to her devotees. There does not seem to be any evidence in this context for sexual rituals involving intercourse between men and women, as one might perhaps expect: we are not dealing here with some kind of “Islamic Tantra,” nor with practices resembling the “sex magic” described by Hans Thomas Hakl elsewhere in this volume. The alleged rituals of the Nusayrî,⁴⁹ which have sparked the imagination of some Westerners, seem to be a legend forged by the Sunnis.

Discussion

From practices and beliefs such as those discussed above, many scholars have concluded that a clear distinction must be drawn between the “mystical” rituals of the Sufis, addressed to God and seeking union with Him, and “shamanic” practices, such as those that are based on contact with *jinn*. This interpretation is probably misleading. Although there is, of course, a theological difference between God, angels, saints, and *jinn*, these categories often get confused in popular opinion. For the Hamadsha observed by Crapanzano, for instance, ‘Aïsha Qandîsha is a

⁴⁸ Hell, *Le tourbillon des génies*, 335–336; Crapanzano, *Hamadcha*, 291–324.

⁴⁹ See Hugh Urban, “The Yoga of Sex,” elsewhere in this volume.

God-like creature, not just an ordinary *jinniyya*.⁵⁰ The key notion here is the question of *power* (*baraka*). *Baraka* is a spiritual energy which is effective in earthly life; it is subtle, all-pervading, and has something to do with holiness. The Islamic notion of holiness is quite different from a European one in that holiness is not necessarily based upon virtue, but upon reliance on God. God is the Almighty, all powers come from Him, and a man or a woman who prays to Him and relies on Him at every moment and for every action of his/her life receives a part of this divine power. This is true not only of ascetics or religious scholars, but also of a shaman, that is a person recognized by his group as a bearer of *baraka*. Holiness is based on the circulation of *baraka* through precise means and channels, one of them being the Koran itself: hence the recitation of verses of the Koran protects against the evil *jinn* and the devils but can also be helpful for other purposes. Such instrumental use of the Holy Text in talismans, magic squares, and so on may help to gain money, power—or love.⁵¹ But there are other sources of *baraka* too, especially those manifested in Morocco by the ‘Aïshas.

In a very patriarchal and “masculine” society like that of the Maghreb, the role of the ‘Aïshas can be interpreted in terms of *the visualisation of female energy*, flowing by means of Sufi sainthood. ‘Aïsha Hamdûshiyya is the female counterpart of Sîdî ‘Alî ben Hamdûsh’s *baraka*, and the same goes for ‘Aïsha Sûdâniyya and Sîdî Ahmad Dghûghî—‘Aïsha Qandîsha being the general designation for this kind of energy. Some scholars think that the unexplained surname ‘Qandîsha’ may derive from the Semitic root Q D SH, from which stems the meaning of the words “sacred” or “sacredness.” The sexual union of a man with Lalla ‘Aïsha has something to do with retrieving this specific kind of energy; and in an Islamic society, this must be understood not only as a kind of therapy, but as a means of spiritual advancement as well. The reason is simply that there is only one *baraka*, coming from God and leading to Him. Hence worshipping Lalla ‘Aïsha does not mean practicing anti-Islamic, pagan rites. On the contrary, contact with the saint (or his “wives”) is a means of improving the moral quality of daily life and of getting closer to the Lord of all beings.

⁵⁰ Crapanzano, *Hamadcha*, 217–218.

⁵¹ This use may be compared to the magic use of the *Song of Songs* studied by Claire Fanger, “Eros and Magic in the Middle Age,” in this volume.

Brief mention can be made here, finally, to another aspect of the question of relations between humans and *jinn*, which has some links with esotericism: the notion of the *Doppelgänger*, the spiritual double. In a well-known *hadīth*, Muhammad says:

You all have along with you your double (*qarīn*) from the *jinn*. They asked him: And you also, o messenger of God? He answered: I also, but God helped me against him, and he submitted [or: became Muslim, *aslama*] and now he only commands me to do good deeds.⁵²

The text does not specify whether the *jinnī* is male or female, but the idea of the couple is clearly present, and the Arabic word *qarīn* reflects the idea of companionship and marriage (*qarīna* = spouse). The demonic partner is not “external” to the individual, but rather lives inside him, as a part of himself and of his psychic life. In the Islamic tradition, the *qarīn* represents a kind of demonic, egoistic energy leading humans on the path of satisfying their selfish wishes and hence of temptation or even rebellion. The goal of religious life is to control this power, to tame it, and to finally get in harmony with it; hence the Law of Islam may go deeper than simple social regulations and religious institutions, to try to build up a new harmony in a man’s personality.

In conclusion: the world of *jinn* seems to be the reverse of our world. Hence, according to the pious—or even mystic—Muhāsibī († 857), the *jinn* will enter Paradise, but humans will be invisible to them: a situation which is exactly the reverse of the one here on earth. An anecdote found in another source epitomizes the above: it is said that the world of *jinn* is completely parallel to that of humans—but they have no mirrors, and that is why they are frightened to discover their own image in a mirror when they enter the human world.⁵³

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⁵² Shibli, *Ākām al-marjān*, 28–29; Suyûtī, *Laqā al-marjān*, 81–83. Both authors quote a *hadīth* where Muhammad claims his superiority over Adam: Muhammad’s *qarīn* became obedient and a Muslim, while Adam’s led him to transgression; again, Muhammad’s wives helped him in his mission, while Adam’s wife caused him to fall.

⁵³ Lambert, “L’œil des envieux,” 112.

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MURMURING SECRETS:
EROTICISM AND ESOTERICISM IN MEDIEVAL KABBALAH

ELLIOT R. WOLFSON

When it cannot achieve its perfect form, the A Bao A Qu suffers great pain, and its moaning is a barely perceptible murmur similar to the whisper of silk.

But when the man or woman that revives the creature is filled with purity, the A Bao A Qu is able to reach the topmost step, completely formed and radiating a clear blue light.

—Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*

Transmitting Secrets: Concealing the Concealment

I commence with a generalization the validity of which must be illustrated from particular instantiations: eroticism and esotericism converge at the point of their divergence. Or, so it might seem, as eroticism ostensibly exposes the concealed and esotericism conceals the exposed. On closer examination, however, this contrast does not engender divergence as much as difference that suggests its own sameness in being different. Alternatively expressed, exposure of the concealed and concealment of the exposed ought not be seen as binary opposites; hermeneutically, exposure is the most exposed concealment, and concealment the most concealed exposure. To attend this paradox is to ascertain that the exposed is precisely what is concealed in being exposed as what is concealed, an inherent duplicity that renders every act of uncovering a recovery, every act of undressing a redressing. It should be obvious that in this doubly concealed concealment, the exposure of exposing, one can discern something resonant with the nature of eros. In the course of this analysis, the relevance of this remark shall become more evident.

A specific application of this tenet may be elicited from the teachings expounded by medieval kabbalists. It is reasonable to presume that the elusive manner of divulging secrets through allusion satisfied a psychological need to reveal and a religious obligation to conceal, that is, to reveal in such a way that the revealing would conceal what was

revealed at the same time that the concealing would reveal what was concealed.¹ As Abraham Abulafia succinctly expressed the matter, “the way of the mouth is to reveal the hidden and to conceal the revealed (*legalot ha-nistar u-lekhsosot ha-nigleh*).”² A noteworthy formulation of this approach is found in an important text likely to have been composed in the late-thirteenth or early-fourteenth century where a total of 112 esoteric teachings are transmitted as oral traditions received from the elder (*zaqen*).³ In the context of writing about the mystical significance of the cloud into which God descended and through which the glory was revealed to Moses, the anonymous kabbalist notes, “we mentioned it here as an allusion from the allusions of its secret (*be-remez mi-rimzei sodo*) in order to hide it (*lema’an hastiro*).”⁴ In other passages from this

¹ I have articulated the paradoxical hermeneutic of esotericism in many of my previous publications. For example, see Wolfson, “Occultation of the Feminine”; *Abraham Abulafia*, 9–38; “Divine Suffering,” 110–115; *Language, Eros, Being*, 17–19, 27, 134–135, 222–224, 232–233, 262, 287, 363. The tension between disclosure and concealment in zoharic kabbalah has been explored as well by Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 26–30. I note, finally, that this dialectic was also a critical aspect of Gershom Scholem’s orientation, although there are important differences between our approaches and the respective theoretical frameworks that we adopt. Here I simply note that Scholem, in contrast to Liebes, expressed in creative ways an irresolvable tension between the urge to communicate secrets and the apparent impossibility to do so without rendering the esotericism inauthentic. Liebes, by contrast, entertains that kabbalists, at least from the zoharic circle, affirmed the possibility of a full disclosure of secrets in the messianic era, and thus the tension (or ambivalence) between revealing and concealing is reflective of living in a messianically charged time before the coming of the messiah (*Studies in Zohar*, 30). See Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms”; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 26–29. As I noted in the aforementioned study, Scholem’s view regarding the possibility of an esoteric tradition cannot be separated from his depiction of mystical language as the symbolic communication of the non-communicable. On Scholem’s linguistic mysticism and his approach to symbolism, see Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 89–92; Idel, “Zur Funktion von Symbolen bei G.G. Scholem.” Most tellingly, as part of his wrestling with the possibility of an esoteric tradition, Scholem at times questioned the legitimacy of his own participation in disseminating kabbalistic secrets. For recent discussion and citation of some of the relevant sources, see Weidner, “Reading Gershom Scholem,” 213–215. On the critical notion of an esoteric text in Scholem’s worldview, see Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 147–162.

² Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon*, 69.

³ A version of the complete text is extant in MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, 2396, fols. 1b–63b. I am presently preparing an annotated edition based primarily on this manuscript, though I am utilizing as well fragments of the work found in other manuscripts. The composition has been previously mentioned by a number of scholars. See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 188; *Kabbalah*, 61 (in that context, Scholem identifies the *zaqen* as Moses); Idel, *Golem*, 111–12; “Introduction,” 36; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 284 n. 50; “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 182–184 and the relevant notes; Abrams, “The Shekhinah Prays,” 531–532.

⁴ MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 2396, fol. 3b.

treatise, the written transmission of secrets through allusion is justified by the anxiety of loss, a fear that the traditions would be forgotten.⁵ The comment that I cited, however, pinpoints the paradox at a more poignant spot of juxtaposition: disclosure through allusion serves the twofold purpose of revealing what is concealed, and concealing what is revealed. Thus the secret telling of secrets—in the idiom of Maimonides, communicating truth in flashes⁶—enables one to divulge mystical truths to worthy recipients while keeping them hidden from the unworthy.

In a second extract, the practice of speaking secretly embraces a profounder sense of dissembling. Commenting on the words of Moses to Pharaoh, “we shall not know with what we are to worship the Lord until we arrive there” (Exod 10:26), the anonymous kabbalist writes: “He did not mention a specific place, a celebrated country, a recognized city, or a disclosed location that is known to any man, but he simply said ‘there.’ He concealed his knowledge from everyone, and he revealed it, and publicized it to everyone (*histir yedi’ato me-ha-kol we-gillah otto u-firsamo la-kol*).”⁷ How can we make sense of the assertion that Moses at the same time concealed and revealed his knowledge from everyone? To be sure, a more politically oriented form of esotericism, to which I have briefly alluded, turns on adopting a way of communication that reveals the secret to some and hides it from others, but this does not fit the description of Moses concealing and revealing knowledge indiscriminately to everyone. Clearly, from the standpoint of a binary logic, this is illogical—one either conceals or reveals, one cannot both conceal and reveal at the same time and in the same correlation. And yet, it is exactly this coincidence that we must take up, if we are to comprehend a paradox that has informed kabbalistic thinking on this matter.

In this essay, I will not rehash the various assumptions inherent in the duplicitous nature of the secret, a strategy deployed adroitly in the different trends of kabbalah, a topic I have discussed at length elsewhere.⁸

⁵ *Ibid.*, fols. 7a, 51b–52a, 62b, and see Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 183–184. The rationale for committing esoteric matters to writing in order to prevent forgetfulness is not unique to this text. See, for instance, Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, 179: “Our intention in this book is to make known in it matters that have been received from the prophets that have been forgotten from a long time ago since they were not written in books.” Abulafia’s remark echoes the opinion expressed by Maimonides, *Guide*, I.71, 176; III: Introduction, 415.

⁶ Maimonides, *Guide*, I: Introduction, 7–8; I.34, 78.

⁷ MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 2396, fol. 9a.

⁸ See references cited above, n. 1.

Instead, I will mark more carefully the spot where the erotic and esoteric crisscross, so that we may better ascertain the manner in which the secrecy of eros can be discerned from the eros of secrecy, and the eros of secrecy from the secrecy of eros, a reciprocity that prompts a doubling of vision, a re/vision, a secreting of the secret, a concealing of the concealment, the mystery revealed in the veiling of its unveiling.

The central place accorded the erotic in kabbalistic teaching is a theme that has been well studied by scholars. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that at the very center of the kabbalists' vision—and here, again, I see little value in making distinctions along typological lines, as the central place accorded the erotic is something shared by kabbalists from the different groups, classified by the dominant nomenclature of contemporary scholarship as theosophic and prophetic, even if we readily admit that the depiction of eros is not monolithic—is an appreciation of eros as imparting, to borrow the evocative terminology of George Steiner, a grammar of being.⁹ More specific to the mythopoetic sensibility cultivated by many kabbalists is an envisioning of God's unity in heteroerotic terms, an onto-theological assumption that undergirds the positive valorization of sex as a theurgic means to maintain the balance of forces in the divine and, by extension, in the universe. I am quick to add, however, that the theurgical cannot be separated from the deeply sexual nature of the mystical experience attested in kabbalistic literature. This is not to say that traditional kabbalah celebrates the sexual as such, but, rather, that the modes of rhetoric enlisted to describe the inner workings of the divine, and to account for the ecstatic experiences therewith, are infused with tropes of sexuality.¹⁰ Indeed, even gestures of ascetic renunciation, which may be excavated from kabbalistic sources, are expressions of the erotic. As we find in other forms of mystical spirituality, so too in various currents of medieval kabbalah, the intensity of desire is to be measured by the desire not to desire, the most passionate of passions by the passion to be dispassionate.¹¹ From a kabbalistic standpoint, contemplative envisioning of God revolves about the belonging-together, or the laying in proximity, of intercourse and discourse, not only two predominant

⁹ Steiner, *After Babel*, 39–40. See *ibid.*, 61–64, where kabbalah is discussed explicitly by the author.

¹⁰ My understanding of the correlation of the sacred and sexual, the mystical and erotic, resonates with the view espoused by Kripal in his writings, especially *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess*.

¹¹ For more extensive discussion, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 296–371.

modalities that structure human experience, as Steiner appreciated, but also two forms that indicate the nature of the divine being, and, indeed, the nature of being more generally.¹² The language of eros, one might say, reverberates with the eros of language. As kabbalists have repeatedly taught, the letter is the sign of the flesh that is the flesh of the sign. Inscribed therein, one knows the way.

Decoding Esotericism: Silence of Not-Speaking

The path I shall follow begins by attending the link between transmission of the mystery and the verbal gesticulation of the murmur, a course determined by the further assumption that, in the point of their meeting, one may fathom a significant facet of the eroticism that informed kabbalistic doctrine and practice. The link is attested in the rabbinic principle that a matter received in a whisper, even if derived exegetically from a scriptural proof-text, must be conveyed in a whisper.¹³ Especially important in this regard is the talmudic interpretation of the expression *nevon lahash* (Isa 3:3), which contextually denotes an expert in charms, as one who has the capacity of understanding one thing from another and, therefore, is worthy of receiving “words of Torah that are given in a whisper (*be-lahash*).”¹⁴ The whisper hovers between speech and speechlessness, as it is a verbal act, but one that, nonetheless, remains inaudible except to the person to whom it is directly communicated. It is worth noting, in passing, that a manner of silent oration—*qol dimmat elohim*, a locution likely based on the expression *qol demamah daqqah* in 1 Kings 19:12 to which I shall return below—is associated already in some Qumran fragments with angelic speech.¹⁵ Further evidence for the depiction of the liturgical utterance of angels as silent language may be educed from the Aramaic targum

¹² See above, n. 8 and the brief discussion in *Language, Eros, Being*, 118.

¹³ *Genesis Rabbah* 1:3, 19–20, and parallel sources cited on 19, n. 10; Altmann, “A Note on the Rabbinic Doctrine of Creation”; Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 58; Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 173–175; *Language, Eros, Being*, 521 n. 135.

¹⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 14a. See also Wewers, *Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung*, 116; Idel, “Secrecy, Binah and Derishah,” 319 and 326. For a review of the role of secrets in the rabbinic notion of revelation, but without any sustained discussion of the whisper, see Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 104–123.

¹⁵ See Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, 303–307, 312–314; Allison, “The Silence of Angels,” 189–197. See also the analysis of Paul’s reference to the worshipper conversant in the “tongues of angels” (1 Cor 14:2) in Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 168–170.

(traditionally ascribed to Jonathan ben Uziel) on the aforementioned phrase from 1 Kings 19:12, *qal dimeshabbehin ba-hasha'i*, the “voice of those who utter praise silently.” To utter praise silently is to execute a form of speech that is at the same time silence, to speak and not speak concomitantly, to speak by not speaking, not to speak by speaking. It is reasonable to surmise, though I cannot prove my conjecture, that at some point the characterization of the angelic mode of liturgical utterance was appropriated and utilized to depict the form of secret talk by which human beings should propagate esoteric wisdom. This surmise is enhanced by the further presumption that angels are privy to cosmological and theological mysteries known to God and on rare occasions revealed to extraordinary human beings, the righteous souls who are transformed and attain an angelic status.

Be that as it may, the emphasis on this form of entrusting secrets is all the more striking in light of the fact that the demand to be utterly silent, as opposed to speaking silently, is not unknown in Jewish mysticism, not to mention mystical literature produced in other contexts wherein the apophatic ascent leads the mind to what can be neither known nor spoken.¹⁶ If the most serious matters are, as Plato intimated, to remain unspoken (and this includes both verbal and written communication), then it is precisely by not speaking that these matters may be delivered. The unspeakable, in a word, is transmitted without being spoken, for if spoken, it is not the unspeakable that has been transmitted.¹⁷ Although Plato seemed to be especially anxious about the written dissemination of secrets, for, as commonsense dictates, what has been committed to writing cannot be unconditionally controlled,¹⁸ a concern later expressed by Maimonides as well,¹⁹ his philosophical esotericism runs deeper, as he apparently felt that certain topics should not be communicated by either oral or written means.

¹⁶ For a comparative analysis of this theme, see Williams, *Denying Divinity*, 84–92, 101–104, 128–134. See also the sources cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 422 n. 247.

¹⁷ See the illuminating discussion in Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 25–31, 110–112, 167–175, 534–539.

¹⁸ See Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 148 and references to other scholars cited in nn. 7–8 *ad locum*.

¹⁹ Maimonides, *Guide*, I.71, 176. Commenting on the rabbinic dictum that it is prohibited to put down in writing words that were communicated orally (Babylonian Talmud, *Giṭṭin* 60b), Maimonides wrote that “it was meant to prevent what has ultimately come about in this respect: I mean the multiplicity of opinion, the variety of schools, the confusions occurring in the expression of what is put down in writing, the negligence that accompanies what is written down, the divisions of the people, who are separated into sects, and the production of confusion with regard to actions.”

Here it is beneficial to recall the words attributed to Aqiva, “silence is a fence for wisdom.”²⁰ Aqiva’s dictum, which may have been inspired textually by Proverbs 17:28, is not connected to esotericism, even though he is portrayed in other contexts as adept in mystical secrets, the most well-known in the rabbinic tale of the four sages who entered Pardes.²¹ I do not think, however, that it is implausible to suggest that the requirement to be silent with respect to secrets promulgated by other rabbinic sages can be seen as a specific application of a more general pietistic sensibility regarding the nexus between wisdom and silence. Thus, for example, we find the following interpretation of “The glory of God is to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings is to search out a matter” (*kevod elohim haster davar u-khevod melakhim haqor davar*) (Prov 25:2) transmitted in the name of R. Levi: “‘The glory of God is to conceal the matter’—before the world was created. ‘And the glory of kings is to search out the matter’—after the world was created.”²² From this exegetical gloss, we may glean evidence that it is appropriate to be silent with regard to the most profound mysteries, secrets that relate to the divine nature prior to creation. The admonition is reiterated in a second tradition preserved in the name of R. Levi, explaining why the world was created with *beit*, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, but the first letter of *bere’shit*, the word with which the Torah begins: “Just as *beit* is closed on all its sides but open from one side, so you have no permission to seek out what is above, below, before, or after, but only from the day the word was created and forward.”²³

The reticence to divulge secrets about the account of creation (*ma’aseh bere’shit*) is affirmed as well with respect to secrets about the account of the chariot (*ma’aseh merkavah*), two central taxonomies employed by rabbinic scribes to circumscribe the contours of esoteric wisdom. For example, we find the following teaching attributed to R. Aḥa bar Jacob:

²⁰ Mishnah, Avot 3:13; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, ch. 26, 82. On the benefit of silence for physical well-being, see the tradition transmitted in the name of Simeon ben Gamliel in Mishnah, Avot 1:16; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, ch. 22, 75; Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 99a.

²¹ The bibliography related to this talmudic tale is rather substantial, and here I will mention only one useful source that incorporates references to various other studies: Bregman, “Introduction.”

²² Palestinian Talmud, Hagigah 2:1, 77c. For an alternative version of this teaching, see *Genesis Rabbah* 9:1, 67–68.

²³ Palestinian Talmud, Hagigah 2:1, 77c. Cf. *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 21:52, 502. For the later reverberation of this aggadic motif in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, one of the early textual repositories of kabbalistic teaching, see Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 124–125.

There is another firmament above the heads of the beasts, as it is written, "Above the heads of the creatures was a form: an expanse, with an awe-inspiring gleam as of crystal" (Ezek 1:22). Until here you have permission to talk, but from there and beyond you have no permission to speak, as it is written in the book of Ben Sira, "Do not seek out what is too enigmatic for you and do not investigate what is concealed from you." Contemplate that for which you have permission, but you have no business being occupied with hidden matters.²⁴

In the same section of the Babylonian Talmud, there is another rabbinic dictum that makes a comparable point about the exposition of matters pertaining to the chariot: "It has been taught with respect to them, 'Honey and milk are under your tongue' (Song 4:11), matters that are sweeter than honey and milk should be under the tongue."²⁵ A similar outlook is expressed in what appears to be a later scribal interpolation that serves as the opening of *Heikhalot Zūṭarti*,²⁶ a textual unit from the corpus of ancient *merkavah* mysticism: "Do not investigate the words of your lips, contemplate what is in your heart, and be silent, so that you will merit the beauties of the chariot."²⁷ Bracketing the provenance of this interpolation, the critical point is that attested therein is the avowal of silent contemplation as the appropriate means to occasion a vision of the divine throne.

The need for silence with respect to esoteric matters is reiterated in a passage from the first part of the ancient cosmological work *Sefer Yeṣirah* (a composition that is better described as an aggregate of disparate parts that were assembled over a lengthy period of time and eventually redacted into a text, but still one whose boundaries remained porous),²⁸ where the word *belimah* in the expression *eser sefirot belimah* is rendered midrashically as *belom pikha mi-ledabber belom libbekha mi-leharher*, "close your mouth from speaking and stop your heart from thinking."²⁹ We may presume that encoded here is a code of esotericism—perhaps, as

²⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Ḥagigah 13a.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 77, already surmised that the remarks at the beginning of *Heikhalot Zūṭarti* "may not constitute an original part of the *Urform* of the book."

²⁷ Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, §335, 142–143. The thematic link between this passage and the text from *Sefer Yeṣirah* was previously noted by Elior in her annotated edition of *Hekhalot Zūṭarti*, 60 n. 3.

²⁸ For a more detailed discussion with reference to other scholarly treatments, see Wolfson, "Text, Context, and Pretext," 218–228.

²⁹ There are a number of variants connected to this passage including a reversal of the order of the two phrases "mouth" and "heart." For references see Gruenwald, "A Preliminary Critical Edition," 142 (section 5); Hayman, *Sefer Yeṣira*, 72–74.

has been suggested, an oath of secrecy, alluded to as well in the continuation of the passage where reference is made to a covenant (*berit*) that is decreed in relation to this affair³⁰—which impels the initiate not to discourse about or to meditate on the *sefirot* excessively, a stance that was linked by kabbalists at a later period to the verse already crucial to the talmudic tradition mentioned above, *kevod elohim haster davar*, “The glory of God is to conceal a matter” (Prov 25:2).³¹ To cite one of numerous examples, the thirteenth-century kabbalist, Azriel of Gerona, commenting on the aforementioned directive in *Sefer Yesirah*, remarks that “even with respect to what you have permission to contemplate, ‘Do not allow your mouth to cause your flesh to sin’ (Eccles 5:5), for it says ‘The glory of God is to conceal the matter.’”³² It is possible to interpret this statement politically, that is, silence is necessary to prevent the transmission of secrets to those who are not fit to receive them, a form of esotericism at work, for instance, in the thought of Maimonides.³³ However, it is equally feasible that the issue here is not political, but rather epistemological and ontological, that is, the need to be silent rests on the surmise that the secrets portend the inherently inscrutable dimensions of divine reality, even if permission has been granted to contemplate them. Indeed, the contemplation thereof leads one to the discernment that these are matters beyond comprehension. The citation from Ecclesiastes is also significant, as it brings together indiscretion of the mouth and sin of the flesh. In the medieval kabbalistic imaginary, especially pronounced in zoharic kabbalah,³⁴ the reserve to hide secrets is juxtaposed to the modesty of covering the genitals, for the inappropriate disclosure of esoteric wisdom is on a par

³⁰ Gruenwald, “Some Critical Notes,” 490. See, more recently, Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yesira*, 55–56.

³¹ The verse was utilized by other masters of esoteric lore in the Jewish middle ages. See, for instance, the very beginning of Eleazar of Worms, *Sodei Razayya ha-Shalem*, 1. This part of the text was previously published in the compendium of magical and mystical texts, *Sefer Razi’el*, 7b.

³² Azriel of Gerona, *Perush le-Sefer Yesirah*, 2:456. The comment of Azriel seems to have been inspired by a section from *Sefer ha-Bahir*. See Abrams, *The Book Bahir*, §§32–33, 135–137; and brief analysis in Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 235 n. 32. The bahiric passage is cited together with the interpretation of Proverbs 25:2 in the dictum attributed to R. Levi in the Palestinian Talmud (see above, n. 13) in Todros Abulafia, *Sha’ar ha-Razim*, 46.

³³ Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 38–52. For the possible influence of Avicenna on Maimonides, see Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism*, 100.

³⁴ Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 24–26, 30.

with sexual improprieties.³⁵ Thus, according to one zoharic passage, R. Isaac applied the scriptural idiom of the mouth causing the sin to flesh to the transgression of explicating matters of the Torah that one did not receive directly from his master, an indiscretion that is linked as well, both thematically and exegetically, to the prohibition against making idols and/or worshipping images.³⁶

The nexus between these two elements comes to the fore in the following interpretation of the forecited verse from Proverbs attributed to R. Ḥiyya in a zoharic homily:

“The glory of God is to the conceal a matter,” for a man does not have permission to reveal hidden matters that were not transmitted to be revealed, matters that the Ancient of Days covers, as it says “that they may eat their fill and clothe themselves elegantly (Isa 23:18).” “That they may eat their fill,” to the place for which there is permission, and not more. And “clothe themselves elegantly” (*we-limekhasseh attiq*), surely [these words must be applied] to what the Ancient One (*attiq*) covers (*mekhasseh*).³⁷

The zoharic interpretation of the key term *we-limekhasseh attiq* is based on the midrashic rendering attested in the talmudic dictum, “What is [the meaning of] *we-limekhasseh attiq*? The one who covers matters that the Ancient of Days (*attiq yomin*) covered. And what are they? Secrets of Torah.”³⁸ In the zoharic context, the Ancient of Days is one of the technical designations of *Keter*, the first of the ten emanations. From the exegesis transmitted in the name of R. Ḥiyya, it would seem that these secrets must always be concealed in emulation of the aspect of the Godhead that covers them, the terminus beyond the place about which there is permission to investigate and to converse. This suggestion is supported by the continuation of the zoharic text in which another explanation is offered, an explanation that, I suggest, challenges the perspective implied in the words attributed to R. Ḥiyya.

Another explanation: “That they may eat their fill,” these are the comrades who know the ways and paths to go in the way of faith, as is appropriate,

³⁵ It should be noted that also attested in other passages from the zoharic text is the moralistic interpretation of Ecclesiastes 5:5, which explains the mouth causing the flesh to sin as lewd speech that may lead a man to illicit sexual behavior. See *Zohar* 1:8a; *Zohar Hadash*, 60d–61a.

³⁶ *Zohar* 2:87a. See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 24. For a more extensive discussion on idolatry in this literary setting, see Wolfson, “Iconicity of the Text.”

³⁷ *Zohar* 3:105b.

³⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 119a. See as well *Zohar* 3:28a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*); Moses de León, “Sefer ha-Mishkal”, 49.

like the generation in which R. Simeon dwells. “And the Ancient One covers,” this refers to other generations, for they are not worthy to eat or to drink, or for words to be revealed in their midst. Rather, “and the Ancient One covers,” as it is said, “Do not allow your mouth to cause your flesh to sin” (Eccles 5:5). In the days of R. Simeon, a man would say to his neighbor, “Open your mouth and let your words shine.”³⁹ After he departed, they would say, “Do not allow your mouth [to cause your flesh to sin].” In his days, “that they may eat their fill,” after he departed, “and the Ancient One covers.” For the comrades were stammering, and the words were not established.⁴⁰

According to this textual layer, a distinction must be made between the status of esoteric knowledge when Simeon ben Yoḥai is alive and its status after he has expired. In his presence, the code of secrecy could be disbanded, as the master elevates the stature of all those who live in his time, but with his absence the mysteries that were revealed have to be hidden again. This aspect of the zoharic hermeneutic of secrecy has been duly noted in previous scholarship, with particular attention paid to the messianic implications implied thereby,⁴¹ but I wish to focus on the view preserved in the name of R. Ḥiyya. It seems to me that that this view is reiterated in the explication of the phrase from Isaiah 23:18 proffered at the end of the passage: “Another explanation: ‘That they may eat their fill,’ in those matters that were revealed; ‘and the Ancient One covers,’ in those matters that are covered.”⁴² Some matters may be revealed, other matters must be concealed. These are secrets that forever elude our grasp, even in the generation of the supreme master of esoteric lore.

The point is reiterated in another zoharic homily where the distinction is made (based, in part, on the language of Deut 29:28) between the revealed matters (*niglot*) that one has permission to know and to investigate and the concealed matters (*nistarot*) about which one has no permission to acquire knowledge.⁴³ The admonition against seeking what lies beyond our capacity to seek is linked textually to Ecclesiastes 5:5, that is, the mouth that speaks what cannot be spoken brings about sin to the flesh. In that context, the apophatic orientation is immediately qualified by the statement that no one has permission to utter or to

³⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 22a.

⁴⁰ *Zohar* 3:105b. For a parallel version, see *Zohar* 3:79a.

⁴¹ Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 25–26.

⁴² *Zohar* 3:105b.

⁴³ *Zohar* 3:159a.

explicate hidden matters except for Simeon ben Yoḥai. I submit that we can identify in this instance as well two distinct approaches preserved in the zoharic text, one predicated on the assumption that some things are forever beyond human comprehension and another that maintains that R. Simeon is the exception to the rule since he was empowered to disclose mysteries that had been hidden prior to his time and that would not be revealed again until the era of the messiah.

As intriguing as is the portrait of Simeon ben Yoḥai that emerges from these passages, and especially the implicit messianic significance attributed to his role as master of esoteric lore, the other opinion expressed in the *Zohar* is the one I wish to emphasize, as it sheds light on the erotic nature of secrecy and the secret nature of eros. The mysteries that the Ancient One conceals can be (un)seen only through a veil, simultaneously seen and not seen, seen precisely because not seen, and not seen precisely because seen. The pursuit of the most recondite truths, which can never be apprehended, lures the heart with the greatest enticement, just as in matters of sexual temptation, the object of the gaze becomes more exposed precisely when it is most hidden. Moses de León alludes to this paradox in his commentary on Ezekiel's chariot vision when he notes that the verse "And Moses approached the thick cloud where God was" (Exod 20:18) indicates that one cannot draw near the *sefirot* without a garment, *ein lavo lahem beli levush*. A double connotation is implied here, though the two meanings can be understood as two sides of the selfsame coin. On the one hand, the statement conveys that one cannot approach the divine emanations without being properly attired, a gesture that has a decidedly erotic connotation in the zoharic symbolism,⁴⁴ and, on the other hand, the statement also communicates that the emanations cannot be envisioned unless they are garbed in a form by which they appear to be other than what they appear to be, a general tenet that is illustrated by the particular liturgical practice of vocalizing the ineffable name (YHWH) by way of its epithet (Adonai).⁴⁵ Just as the ineffability of the name is preserved by the epithet by which it is (mis)pronounced, so the form-

⁴⁴ On the erotic connotation of the entry of Moses into the cloud, see the explication of the relevant zoharic text in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 386–387.

⁴⁵ Moses de León, *R. Moses de León's Commentary to Ezekiel's Chariot*, 63. See *ibid.*, 65, where the author relates this idea to images of the four beasts beheld by Ezekiel: the face of the human, which corresponds to YHW, the core letters of the Tetragrammaton, is clothed in the faces of the lion, ox, and eagle.

lessness of the inner reality is preserved by the garment by which it (dis)appears.⁴⁶ As de León puts it in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, the “Book of the Pomegranate,” a lengthy kabbalistic exposition of the 613 commandments enumerated in rabbinic jurisprudence,

The matter of his existence is hidden, and the scrutiny of him is concealed, and there is no one who can understand his secret, but even so from the revealed one can comprehend in the contemplation of the hidden matter [*ki mi-tokh ha-nigleh yukhal ha-adam lehavin be-hitbonenut be-inyan ha-nistar*], as you find that the secret of the matter of the soul is concealed and not revealed or discerned, for it is concealed and hidden, but its rank is revealed and discerned from its many actions through the limbs of the body, the limbs that act by its power and on account of its agency. Analogously, the essence of God’s existence, blessed be he, is concealed and hidden, but through his being conjoined to the inner gradations, he displays his power and his actions, and through his actions his rank is discerned.⁴⁷

De León’s words reflect the distinction made by Maimonides between the unknowable essence of God’s being and the attributes by which his actions are known,⁴⁸ but he subverts the distinction by identifying the attributes that disclose the providential power of the divine actions as the “inner gradations” (*madregot ha-penimiyot*), that is, the sefirotic emanations, the potencies that reveal the inscrutable essence by concealing it. From an anthropocentric perspective, the task is similarly to emulate this pattern, primarily by exposing the secrets hidden in the Torah by way of the appropriate forms of dissimilitude.⁴⁹

The same point of view is expressed in a different terminological register in the conclusion of the first part of the anonymous *Sefer ha-Temunah*, the “Book of the Image,” an important and influential kabbalistic text whose provenance is still a matter of dispute, though it is likely to have been composed sometime in the fourteenth century:⁵⁰

⁴⁶ For a more elaborate discussion of this dimension of kabbalistic hermeneutics, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 221–224.

⁴⁷ Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 20–21 (Hebrew section).

⁴⁸ The impact of Maimonides on Moses de León is well-established in the intellectual portraits of his life proffered by scholars. For discussion and references to other sources, see Wolfson, “Introduction” to *Book of the Pomegranate*, 36–38.

⁴⁹ Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 162 (Hebrew section) where the hidden and revealed aspects of Torah are mentioned.

⁵⁰ According to the record of Gershom Scholem’s view in *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temurah*, 21, *Sefer ha-Temunah* was composed most likely in Catalonia (and perhaps in Gerona itself, the center of kabbalistic activity) sometime in the thirteenth century. In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 178, Scholem wrote that *Sefer ha-Temunah* was composed

“The twenty-two letters are forces from above in thousands and myriads. Know and understand everything well, and your mind should be very strong, conceal and seal the matters, for ‘The glory of God is to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings is to search out a matter.’”⁵¹ The little attention that this treatise has commanded has been mostly focused on the doctrine of cosmic cycles (*shemittot*) and their eschatological implication, especially as they relate to the antinomian (or what I would prefer to call the hypernomian)⁵² status of the messianic Torah.⁵³ There are, however, many other important ideas in this textual aggregate and here I offer a modest attempt to articulate briefly some features of the esotericism that may be elicited from a selection of the relevant passages, concentrating particularly on those aspects that touch on the nature of eroticism as well.

The first thing to note is that the mandate to place a seal around mysteries, to double the secrecy by secreting the secrets that one secretes, is followed dutifully by the anonymous author of *Sefer ha-Temunah*. As Scholem astutely noted, the kabbalist responsible for this text employed a “highly allusive style that conceals more than it reveals in matters

“around 1250,” and, similarly, in *On the Kabbalah*, 78, he described the book as having “appeared about 1250 in Catalonia.” See Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 111, where *Sefer ha-Temunah* is described as “a mystical treatise written in early thirteenth-century Spain.” But see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 52, where this view is modified somewhat by the suggestion that it was composed in the first half of the thirteenth century by a kabbalist living either in Provence or Gerona. See *ibid.*, 120 and 347 (in that context, Scholem asserts more definitively that *Sefer ha-Temunah* “originated in a circle associated with the kabbalists of Gerona.”) See, however, Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 460–461 n. 233, where Scholem accepts the view espoused by Gottlieb and Idel (see the continuation of this note for the more recent opinion expressed by the latter) that *Sefer ha-Temunah* “was written around 1300.” In that context, moreover, he is more inclined to locate the place of composition in Provence rather than Catalonia (see *ibid.*, 468). For discussion of other texts composed by kabbalists who belonged to the circle surrounding *Sefer ha-Temunah*, see Scholem, “*The Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 67–70; Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, 570–571. For an alternative view that locates the text in mid-fourteenth century Byzantium, see Idel, “Some Concepts of Time,” 168; *Messianic Mystics*, 56, and see *ibid.*, 125 and 191. On the relation of *Sefer ha-Temunah* to the kabbalistic writings of Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi and David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, see Idel, “The Meaning of Ta’amei Ha-Ofot Ha-Teme’im,” 18–21.

⁵¹ *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 8a. On the place accorded esotericism in this text, see the brief but incisive comments of Scholem, *Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 29.

⁵² See Wolfson, “Beyond Good and Evil,” and the revised version in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 186–285. I regret that in both of these publications I neglected to include *Sefer ha-Temunah* in my attempt to articulate the hypernomian ideal that may be elicited from kabbalistic sources.

⁵³ Scholem, *Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 40–50; *On the Kabbalah*, 77–81, 83–85; *Origins*, 466–474; *Messianic Idea*, 111; *Kabbalah*, 120–122.

of detail.”⁵⁴ The need to hide mystical secrets connected to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which constitute the divine image that is configured in the Torah as it is beheld in the contemplative vision,⁵⁵ is reiterated in the conclusion of the second part of this treatise, albeit in a somewhat more expansive and effusive tone:

These are the inner matters, concealed, wondrous, mysterious, pure, radiating in the eye of the intellect [*ein ha-sekhel*], and from them there is the light for the soul, for this is the light of the image [*or ha-temunah*] upon which those who contemplate gazed, and from them their faces were illumined, and from them they were darkened, and from them glory extended to glory. Concerning this [it is said] “Do not come at any moment” (Lev 16:2) into them, but on a pure day and with a pure soul and a pure intellect, and a mind that is good, pure, clean, and subtle, to expand and to rise to the resplendent light, to ascend to the “mount of the Lord” and to the “holy place” (Ps 24:3), “one of clean hands and a pure heart” (ibid., 4), to contemplate and to comprehend great, wondrous matters. A person should not probe faith and knowledge [*ma’amiq dat we-da’at*] except by way of a straight path [*derekh yesharah*] so that he does not expire as Elisha the heretic [*aher*] expired.⁵⁶ And you must understand well that all is before you like a “set table” (Ezek 23:41), and you should eat and live eternally, for “this is the table that is before the Lord” (ibid., 41:22), and the angels of the living God derive pleasure from it. You must be careful as to how you draw near them or how you draw away from them. Conceal and secure the matters in a seal [*hotam*] and in an encasement [*misgeret*], “and make a gold molding for its rim round about” (Exod 25:25), and a seal upon a seal [*hotam al hotam*], for “The glory of God is to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings is to search out a matter.”⁵⁷

It lies beyond the scope of this essay to do justice to this extraordinarily rich text. To highlight the point most critical to this study, we reiterate the admonition near the conclusion: the one who contemplates mysteries

⁵⁴ Scholem, *Origins*, 461. On the tendency of the author of *Sefer ha-Temunah* to conceal his thoughts, see also the astute comments of Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, 571.

⁵⁵ Scholem, *Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 25–39; “The Name of God,” *Diogenes* 80, 174–175; *On the Kabbalah*, 78; *Origins*, 460–461.

⁵⁶ This statement is somewhat enigmatic as the fate of Elisha according to the earlier rabbinic sources is not death but heresy in virtue of which he received the appellation *aher*, that is, the “other one,” the one whose views and/or actions led to his exclusion from the body politic of Israel. For some relatively recent analyses of this archetypal rabbinic sinner, see Liebes, *The Sin of Elisha*; Rubenstein, “Elisha ben Abuya”; *Talmudic Stories*, 64–104; and Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, 21–229.

⁵⁷ *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 26b. On the hidden and formless letters within *Hokhmah* according to *Sefer ha-Temunah*, see Scholem, *Origins*, 466–467.

must know how to approach them and how to withdraw from them. Engagement with secrecy demands a twofold movement, taking-hold and letting-go,⁵⁸ “to distance that which is remote and to draw near that which is proximate,” according to a passage in *Sod Illan ha-Ašilut*, “The Tree of Emanation,” an anonymous text that was composed in all likelihood by someone who belonged to the circle of kabbalists responsible for *Sefer ha-Temunah*.⁵⁹ I would propose that here we have come to the point where the erotic and esoteric intersect: the former, as the latter, can be spoken of as exhibiting the duplicity of attraction and repulsion. The stipulation to secure the secrets in a seal suggests, moreover, that the interplay of coming-near and pulling-away must be thought from the point of their conjunction and not as oppositional. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the encasement of the mysteries is depicted as the “seal upon a seal.” One might have thought that a single seal would have been sufficient. What is the import of the rhetorical replication? That the seal must be sealed imparts the sense that the hiddenness must be hidden as the hiddenness exposed as what is hidden. The truth of the secret is disclosed through the guise of the disclosure that is secret. The twofold seal opens the door through which one can enter to behold the mystery of eros from within the eros of mystery.

The notion of double secrecy, the secret secreted and thereby uncovered as secret, is expanded in the introduction to the third part of the book where the author relates that the “twenty-two supernal and wondrous letters” (*kaf-beit otuyyot elyonot we-nora’ot*) and the “ten closed and hidden emanations” (*eser sefirot segurot we-ne’elamot*) were

inscribed in the secret of the power of *Hokhmah*, subtle and greatly concealed, without image, form, or boundary on account of the abundance of its subtlety, and they emanated in *Binah*, and *Binah* brings them to light in subtle inscriptions and great merit, the thirty-two wondrous paths from which all beings and cycles derive, and the spirit of God is in their midst, and all of them were hidden, sealed, and concealed within *Hokhmah*.⁶⁰

The description of the thirty-two paths, the ontic source of all beings and of all the historical epochs in which they will be manifest, inscripted without image or form within the depths of the splendor of divine wisdom provides a model to understand the ideal of iteration prof-

⁵⁸ For elaboration, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 111–115.

⁵⁹ “Secret of the Tree of Emanation,” 73.

⁶⁰ *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 27a.

ferred in the figure of the duplicate seal, the seal that is sealed within the seal, an unfolding that unfolds all that is enfolded in *Hokhmah* to the attribute of *Binah*,⁶¹ where the entities assume differentiated form, and from there to *Tiferet* and *Aṭarah*,⁶² four of the ten attributes that correspond to the four letters of the name, which comprise all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the fullness of the divine pleroma. The profundity of the erotic secrecy, which is always at the same time a secret eroticism, proffered in this text is underscored particularly by the notion of alphabetic ciphers that have neither ocular nor acoustic images. In the precise language of the text itself:

And in this wondrous Torah that is acquired and that is comprised of the ten emanations . . . everything is written in a supernal language, concealed and very sublime, supernal letters, wondrous and hidden, not understood by an angel or a supernal archon but only by God, may he be blessed, glorious and awesome, blessed be he, who explained them to Moses our master, may peace be upon him, and he informed him of all of their secrets and their matters, and Moses wrote them in his language in the order of the supernal way that is alluded to in the Torah, in the crownlets, titles, great and small letters, broken, crooked, folded, straight, vocal and graphic forms, opened and closed sections. All of these supernal, wondrous allusions were concealed, for he did not have the capacity to find a language to write them or any way to stipulate them.⁶³

⁶¹ In “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 74, *Hokhmah* is identified as the “secret of the world of letters” (*sod olan ha-otiyot*). And see *ibid.*, 75, where it is said that in *Hokhmah* is the “place of the Torah of the letters in [their] forms” (*torat ha-otiyot be-ṣiyyurim*).

⁶² *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 28b.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30a. Consider the following statement in “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 72: “Cease from finding a true explanation and a reply in his mouth except by way of the wondrous and deep wisdom, the divine wisdom.” According to this text, the secrets are discernible only through divine wisdom, *hokhmat ha-elohut*, a theosophic *gnosis* that is transmitted exclusively to the Jews, the “holy seed of Israel,” in contrast to the “other nations” for whom the tradition is inaccessible. Hence, the author of this treatise insists that there is no way to explain the hidden matters (*devarim ne’elamin*) except by this wisdom though he also emphasizes that all forms of knowledge are contained in it: “Everything is unified in the order of the emanation of the ten *sefirot*, for there is no wisdom, great or small, that does not emerge from there and that is comprised therein, and it is called the world-to-come, the good and elongated world, the eternal world, the awesome world, exceedingly hidden and elevated.” (73) The radical difference between Israel and the nations of the world, a common theme affirmed by kabbalists through the generations (see extensive documentation of this point in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 17–128), is expressed in another passage in the “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 78: “In the secret of the first unleavened bread (*maṣṣah ri’shonah*) alluded to in the river Chebar (*nehar kevar*) (Ezek 1:1), and thus [it says] ‘all who are uncircumcised will not eat of it’ (Exod 12:48), for no shell shall derive pleasure from it, as it is wholly of the river that already was and there is no foreskin or closing of the heart there.”

The matter is reiterated in slightly different terms in a passage in the aforementioned *Sod Illan ha-Ašilut* where the ultimate unity in which the ten *sefirot* are incorporated is described as follows:

Thus you must know that there is no form [*temunah*] or image [*dimyon*] there, no measure [*middah*] or computation [*heshbon*], no face [*panim*] or back [*ahor*], no upper [*elyon*] or lower [*tahton*], but there is discrete unity [*yihud meyuhad*], holy [*qadosh*] and sanctified [*mequddash*], awesome [*nora*] and majestic [*adir*], lofty [*nisgav*] and hidden [*ne'elam*], concealed [*nistar*] and elevated [*na'aleh*] above every other creature in this cycle.⁶⁴

From the perspective of the world of creation (*olam ha-beri'ah*), the unity of the realm of emanation (*ašilut*) is fractured and hence it is perceived under the guise of binary opposites—left/right, up/down, front/back, mercy/judgment, inside/outside, pure/impure, distant/proximate—but from the perspective of the divine all divisions are integrated into the attribute (*middah*) that

is consumed in its being to the [point of] the unification of being for all of them [*ha-mitballa'at be-hawayatah ad be-yihud hawayayah le-khullam*], a wondrous, concealed, and hidden name, lofty and elevated in the Infinite [*shem nora we-nistam we-ne'elam nisgav we-na'aleh be-ein sof*], beginning [and] end for all of them [*ro'sh [we-]sof*⁶⁵ *le-khullam*].⁶⁶

A proper analysis of the consumption of all things in the Infinite, the topos of apocatastasis well known from kabbalistic compositions as well as mystical literature in other religious cultures, will have to await a separate study, but the crucial point to underscore here is the depiction of the concealed name so sublime that it is devoured in the silent mystery of the Cause of Causes (*illat ha-illot*), the indifferent one that is the commencement and terminus of all that exists in the continuous chain of differentiated being. Needless to say, the image of consumption deployed in this citation suggests a loss of identity that has obvious erotic overtones. To be even more precise, it is said of *Keter*, which is characterized as the “first” of the ten utterances of creation (*ma'amar ri'shon*) or as the “first” of the ten words of revelation (*dibbur ri'shon*), that it has no place (*ein lo maqom*) and consequently that it is not included in

⁶⁴ “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 72.

⁶⁵ I have accepted Scholem’s suggestion, “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 73 n. 17a, to emend the text from *ro'sh sof* to *ro'sh we-sof*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

the enumeration (*heshbon*) of the *sefirot*,⁶⁷ but it is nonetheless depicted as beginning and end; indeed, in this ultimate state of ontological indifference, future and past meet in the compresence of the moment at hand, a point that is conveyed as well by the fact that this attribute, also called the “supernal supplement” (*musaf elyon*) for the increase (*tosefet*) of the divine efflux overflows from it to the other emanations, the “supernal appointed times” (*mo'adim elyonim*), is designated by the appellation “Ehyeh” and identified as the “root of the river Khebar.” The former, the name of God revealed to Moses at the epiphany of the burning bush (Exod 3:14), denotes what shall be, and the latter, the place in Babylonia where Ezekiel had his vision of the heavenly chariot (Ezek 1:1), signifies by a play on words (*kevar*, which means “previous,” but it is also the proper name of the river) what has come to pass.⁶⁸ The import of this wordplay is underscored by another title assigned in this text to *Keter*, the “light that has been” (*or kevar*), a turn of phrase based on the rabbinic idea that a portion of the primordial light was stored away for the righteous in the eschaton. It is likely, as Scholem has already suggested, that the biblical and rabbinic idioms are meant to be joined together insofar as the Hebrew *nahar* can be linked philologically to the Aramaic *nehora*, which means “light.”⁶⁹ If we accept this suggestion, and I think it reasonable to do so, then *nehar kevar*, literally, the “river Chebar,” can be transposed into *or kevar*, the “light that has been

⁶⁷ Ibid., 75. On the virtual identity of *Keter* and Ein Sof, see *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 38b: “All of these wonders issue from the potency of *Keter*, for there is the true unity and the infinite limit of his essence, in *Keter* is his unity and his essence, and he is called ‘Ein Sof’ inasmuch as he is the innermost interiority (*tokh tokho*) of *Keter*, as there is no limit (*she-ein sof*) to his comprehension that is there, and from there and within there is the essence of his unity, and from Ein Sof will be comprehended the essence of his light, his splendor, and the limit of his unity...for everything from the unity of Ein Sof, and his secret and his mystery that are there, and this is the secret of the thirteen concealed gradations, and this is the Sabbath, the repose of all the Sabbaths, holidays, and appointed times, the one Sabbath that is called ‘peace’ in truth, the single unity, for everything comes in peace, the lights and souls, and in truth and in peace all is one unity.” See *ibid.*, 45b.

⁶⁸ “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 74. In that context, the author further describes *Keter*, *Tiferet*, and *Malkhut*, also referred to as the three beings (*hawwayot*) and demarcated respectively by the names Ehyeh, YHWH, and Adonai, as the “essence of all the emanation” (*iqqar kol ha-ašilut*). The three names are contrasted in the following way: Ehyeh is “hidden and concealed in its pronunciation and in its scripting;” YHWH “is written but not pronounced except through its epithets;” and Adonai “is pronounced and it is seen.” On the hiddenness of YHWH in the name Ehyeh, which is said to be beyond all knowledge and beyond any discernable name, see *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 70a.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 74 n. 24.

beforehand.” The confluence of opposites in *Keter* yields the ideational structure that underlies the kabbalistic conception of time as a circular linearity—a present determined concurrently by the past of the future that is yet to come as what has already been and by the future of the past that has already been what is yet to come.⁷⁰ Language here falters as the notion of temporality can be properly enunciated only through the withdrawal of speech that bespeaks the annihilation of thought at the point of its fullest realization.

As a final illustration of the role accorded silence in kabbalistic esotericism, I cite a passage from the commentary on the Torah by Baḥya ben Asher that forges a synthesis between the negative theology embraced by Maimonides and the code of secrecy attested in Jewish esotericism.⁷¹ The relevant comment appears as an elucidation of the scriptural decree “Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below, there is no other” (Deut 4:39):

This is a positive commandment from the Torah regarding the knowledge of God, blessed be he, for we are commanded to know him, to investigate about his unity, and not to rely solely on tradition. This knowledge is from his actions and wondrous deeds, the lower and upper created beings. Thus this knowledge is [of] the contingent [*ha-efsharit*], but knowledge from the aspect of his substance [*mahuto*] and essence [*ašmuto*] is inaccessible, and it is impossible to attain it, and concerning it is said “The glory of God is to conceal the matter” (Prov 25:2). Since the matter of divinity [*inyan ha-elohut*] is not comprehended by man through his intellect in the beginning of his thought the expression “keep in mind” [*wa-hashevota el levavekha*] is mentioned in relation to it, like a man who contemplates something and he must go back and contemplate, as we find in the case of Elijah: “[And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord;] but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire—a soft murmuring sound” (1 Kings 19:11–12). The matter of what is written: when a man thinks about him, whether he is wind, or an earthquake, or fire, he goes back and closes the edifice of his mind with respect to everything he thinks about him, and after all of the thoughts he will find nothing but concealment [*ha'alamah*] and ineffability [*belimah*], and this [the import of the words] “After the

⁷⁰ This aspect of kabbalistic thought is elaborated in Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 87–98.

⁷¹ For a more extensive discussion of this topic, see Wolfson, “*Via Negativa* in Maimonides.”

fire—a soft murmuring sound,” in accordance with the matter that was mentioned in *Sefer Yeširah*,⁷² “Close your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking” [*belom pikha mi-ledabber we-libbekha mi-leharher*].⁷³

This passage well demonstrates the genuine tension between the katephatic orientation of scriptural faith, on one hand, and the apophatic orientation of the medieval theological perspective, on the other. The conflictual tug is resolved to some degree by appeal to the Maimonidean approach, that is, the injunction to know God is limited to apprehension of the contingent beings of the cosmos, whereas knowledge of the divine essence is not available to the human mind. The thirteenth-century kabbalist from Saragossa thus interprets the sequence of images from Elijah’s epiphany on Mount Carmel in a manner that accords with the negative theology of Maimonides. Apropos of the above discussion regarding the exegetical link of the gesture of the whisper to the scriptural elocution *qol demamah daqah*, it is important to emphasize that in Bahya’s mind the “soft murmuring sound” denotes the cessation of thought, the “concealment” and “ineffability” that marks the culmination of the path, the silence that re/sounds after the wind, earthquake, and fire. The philosophical insight is supported by the mystical directive in *Sefer Yeširah* to close one’s mouth from speaking and one’s heart from thinking about the *sefirot*.

Whispering Secrets: Dispelling Mysteries of Torah

In contrast to these statements that implore the adept to be quiet, there was another strategy advocated by some kabbalists, a tactic connected to the rabbinic stipulation to transmit secrets in a whisper, a form of speaking silently. With respect to this type of speech, as opposed to an unmitigated silence, we can grasp another component of the intimate nexus between the esoteric and erotic. Here it is worth recalling the comment of Hai Gaon, a leading figure in the rabbinic academy of Pumbedita in the tenth and eleventh centuries, on the talmudic instruction that secret matters be transmitted in a whisper: “They whisper to him in whispers, give him the principles, he understands them, and from

⁷² See above, n. 29.

⁷³ *Rabbenu Bahya*, 3:268.

heaven they show him the mysteries of the heart.”⁷⁴ Medieval masters of esoteric lore elaborated and embellished this notion of communicating secrets in a murmur. As an illustration, I will mention a passage in the first part of the compendium of mystical doctrines *Sodei Razayya* composed by Eleazar of Worms, the thirteenth-century Rhineland Jewish pietist. According to this text, the secret of the chariot (*sod ha-merkavah*), which is associated with three distinct literary compositions, *Sefer ha-Merkavah*, *Sefer Yeširah*, and *Sefer ha-Qomah*, can be revealed only in a murmur (*be-laḥash* or *bi-leḥishah*).⁷⁵ Eleazar does not indicate either explicitly or implicitly that the esotericism surrounding the chariot entails an erotic dimension. This possibility cannot be ignored, however, given comments scattered about in the works of Eleazar as well as in other pietistic writings that overtly utilize sexual symbolism to discuss the nature and experience of the chariot.⁷⁶

The connection between esotericism and eroticism is made more openly by Spanish kabbalists who were active in the second half of the thirteenth century. Consider, for example, the following statement in Abraham Abulafia’s *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, one of the three commentaries he wrote on *The Guide of Perplexed* by Maimonides:⁷⁷

In the beginning of creation were contained three types of transgression, idolatry, illicit sexual relations, and murder.⁷⁸ These three are also found

⁷⁴ *Oṣar ha-Geonim*, 4:12 (Hebrew). The text was cited by Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 58 n. 10, and see Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 215 n. 82; Idel, “The Concept of Torah,” 39 n. 41; “Secrecy, Binah and Derishah,” 326–327.

⁷⁵ Eleazar of Worms, *Sodei Razayya ha-Shalem*, 115.

⁷⁶ A number of scholars have dealt with this issue, and here I will offer a modest sampling of the relevant studies: Farber, “The Concept of the Merkavah”; Wolfson, “The Image of Jacob” (revised English version published in Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 1–62); Abrams, *Sexual Symbolism and Merkavah Speculation*.

⁷⁷ On the impact of Maimonides on Abulafia, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 126, 138–139, 383 n. 76; *Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 107, 127–128, 151–152; Idel, “Maimonides and Kabbalah”; “Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*.” See also other references to Idel cited below, n. 83, and Altmann, “Maimonides’s Attitude.”

⁷⁸ These three sins are often classified together in rabbinic literature to signify cardinal acts of impiety. To mention some examples, the three sins are singled out as the transgressions through which exile and destruction come to the world (Mishnah, *Avot* 5:9; Tosefta, *Menahot* 13:4; Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 9b; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, ch. 38, p. 115; *Massekhet Kallah*, ch. 8; *Numbers Rabbah* 7:10), the sins for which one must be prepared to die rather than to violate (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 74a), or as the only sins that cancel out the permission, indeed the obligation, to transgress for the sake of saving a life (Tosefta, *Shabbat* 10:14; Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 82a, *Ketuvot* 19a). See also Tosefta, *Nedarim* 2:6; *Soṭah* 6:3; *Bava Mešī’a* 6:6; Babylonian Talmud, *Pesaḥim* 25a–b, *Yoma* 67b, *Sanhedrin* 56b, *Shavu’ot* 7b, *Erkhin* 15b; *Genesis Rabbah* 31:6, 41:7; *Exodus Rabbah* 16:2, 42:1. These three sins are also included in the

in the secret of circumcision, for from it is the beginning of the creation of the species and its perpetual existence. And this in order to overturn what was created corresponding to the final divine intention [*ha-kawwanah ha-elohit ha-ahronah*], and this is the first natural intention [*ha-kawwanah hativ'it ha-rishonah*], for the natural intention, which is the account of creation [*ma'aseh bere'shit*], is to preserve the species perpetually and to maintain its particulars, the attribute of a single time [*middat zeman ehad*] through the intermediary of the uncovering of the genitals [*giluy arayot*]. And the divine intention, which is the account of the chariot [*ma'aseh merkavah*], is to sustain the unique individual [*ha-ish ha-meyuhad*] perpetually by means of the disclosure of secrets [*giluy nistarot*], which are like the uncovering of the genitals in the case of the multitude of the species [*ha-hamon haminyyim*],⁷⁹ lewd matters to speak about and concerning which it is not appropriate to listen like words pertaining to illicit sexual relations [*ke-divrei arayot*], and they are the essence and the rest is secondary. Therefore it is necessary for the select ones [*yehidim*] to believe their opposite, and this is to uncover the nakedness of the revealed to themselves [*legallot erwat ha-nigleh le'asnam*] but to cover it in relation to others [*lekhasoto mi-zulatom*], and to take the hidden [*nistar*] as wheat and the revealed [*nigleh*] as chaff. Concerning something similar to this Solomon, peace be upon him, said “Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten secretly is tasty” (Prov 9:17), that is, mysteries of Torah [*sitrei torah*] are the secrets said in a murmur [*setarim ha-ne'emarim bi-lehishah*] and are known by the intellect with an abundance of thought [*ha-sekhel be-rov mahshavah*], and they are stolen and hidden from the multitude, and all the hidden matters attest to the two inclinations. When one of the necessary and beneficial commandments of the commandments, which are for the sake of the welfare of the body [*tiqqun ha-guf*] or for the welfare of the soul [*tiqqun ha-nefesh*], is revealed, the revealed [*ha-nigleh*] is a key to open the gates of the hidden [*sha'arei ha-nistar*]... for rectification of the body is preparation for rectification of the soul, and rectification of the soul is preparation for the final perfection, which is the goal of the final divine intention, and this is comprehension of the name [*hassagat ha-shem*].⁸⁰

list of the seven Noachide laws, the rabbinic classification that embraces some notion of a universal moral law that is foundational for human society in general and not exclusively for the covenantal community of Israel. See Tosefta, Avodah Zarah 9:4; Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 56a.

⁷⁹ The adjectival form *miniyim* is derived from *min*, which can denote either the species or the sexual. It is reasonable to presume that Abulafia had both connotations in mind.

⁸⁰ Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, 15. For an earlier translation and explication of a section of this passage, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 190–193, and for an alternative analysis, in part inspired as a response to my own discussion, see Idel, “Kabbalistic Interpretation,” 160–162.

The Abulafian text can be read as an interpretive gloss on a number of philosophical claims by Maimonides. To begin with there is the correspondence made between the account of creation and physics, on the one hand, and the account of the chariot and metaphysics, on the other. For Abulafia, the rabbinic classifications allude respectively to the natural and divine intentions, the former characterized as the impetus to maintain the existence of the species and of the particulars comprised within them, and the latter as the impulse to sustain the existence of unique individuals. The natural intention is identified, moreover, with *gilluy arayot*, the disclosure of secrets that are linked exegetically to the delineation of illicit sexual relations in the eighteenth chapter of Leviticus, which together with *ma'aseh bere'shit* and *ma'aseh merkawah* are the subjects designated by tannaitic authorities as too dangerous to be divulged publicly.⁸¹ It seems to me, however, that Abulafia employed the term in a way that was closer to an alternative connotation of “uncovering the genitals” attested in rabbinic literature,⁸² which is based, in turn, on the scriptural expression *legallot erwah*, “to uncover nakedness,” (Lev 18:2) the root *eryah* signifying that which is without garment. This is also the import of the comment that the “secret of circumcision” (*sod ha-milah*) is the “beginning of the creation of the species and its perpetual existence,” the word “circumcision” obviously denoting in this context the male organ upon which the ritual cut is performed.

Abulafia thus draws an analogy between two forms of denuding, uncovering the genitals and exposing secrets, the former associated with the account of creation, which is revealed to the masses, and the latter with the account of the chariot, which is set aside for unique individuals. The preservation of the species quite literally depends on the former and hence *gilluy arayot* fulfils the first natural intention. But this interpretation relates only to the external level, the chaff that is disclosed for the multitude; the internal meaning or the wheat consists of the secrets that are revealed exclusively to select individuals (*yehidim*). The point is reiterated when Abulafia notes that the “mysteries of Torah,” which are the secrets said in a murmur and are known by the intellect with an abundance of thought,⁸³ are hidden from the multitude. He

⁸¹ See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 192–195; Idel, “Kabbalistic Interpretation,” 155–185.

⁸² Tosefta, *Soṭah* 6:3.

⁸³ Abulafia’s insistence that the mysteries “are known by the intellect with an abundance of thought” reflects his view that kabbalistic truths are linked to the overflow that ensues from the Active Intellect, which is personified in the ecstatic vision principally in

adds that “all the hidden matters attest to the two inclinations,” a tacit reference to the imagination and intellect.⁸⁴ Abulafia does not disclose in this context the esoteric import of the secrets that are connected to the illicit sexual relations, but from other treatises that he composed, and especially a passage from his *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*,⁸⁵ we can assert that the mysteries pertaining to *arayot* refer to the allegorical representation of form and matter, which are associated respectively with Adam and Eve. This is implied as well in the connection that Abulafia draws between *sitrei arayot* and the aggadic theme of the serpent having intercourse with Eve.⁸⁶

In the conclusion of the aforecited passage from *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Abulafia establishes a hierarchy based on another teaching of Maimonides concerning the twofold purpose of the law, the welfare of the body and the welfare of the soul.⁸⁷ Abulafia’s reworking of the Maimonidean view yields three perfections, which correspond to body, soul, and intellect.⁸⁸ The ritual performance of the commandment, which encompasses the two goals specified by Maimonides, constitutes the revealed aspect that is appropriate for the consumption of the populace, but the revealed aspect opens the gates of the hidden aspect, which corresponds to the final perfection, the comprehension of the name that is ascertained exclusively by the elite. There are many important themes in this text that can be clarified only by an intertextual analysis with other writings of Abulafia, a task that lies beyond the scope of this study. What is most important to underscore for our purposes is Abulafia’s acceptance of the older tradition that the proper way to transmit secrets is through the still

the figure of Metatron. As Idel (*Absorbing Perfections*, 400) noted, Abulafia, in contrast to a kabbalist like Nahmanides, rarely mentions an explicit reception of an oral tradition from an actual master. The point I have made independently corroborates this claim. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that the technique of letter-combination and the prophetic experience occasioned thereby advocated by Abulafia is a level of attainment that exceeds the discursive thought embraced by philosophers. On this point, see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 54; Altmann, “Maimonides’s Attitude,” 207–209; Idel, “*Sitre Arayot* in Maimonides’ Thought,” 89; “Abulafia’s Secrets of the Guide.”

⁸⁴ As noted by Idel, “Kabbalistic Interpretation,” 161 n. 507.

⁸⁵ Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, 7–10. For an annotated citation and analysis of the text, see Idel, “Kabbalistic Interpretation,” 155–157. See also Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, 69–70.

⁸⁶ For translation of the relevant passage, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 194.

⁸⁷ Maimonides, *Guide*, III.27, pp. 510–11; Galston, “The Purpose of the Law.”

⁸⁸ On the delineation of three human perfections corresponding to body, soul, and intellect, see Abulafia, *Shomer Miṣvāh*, 24, cited by Idel, “Kabbalistic Interpretation,” 161 n. 514.

speech of the murmur.⁸⁹ However, it must be pointed out that several passages in Abulafia's corpus indicate that he interpreted the gesture of the whisper in a novel way (though he may have been influenced in part by Maimonides)⁹⁰ as a reference to a technical meditative technique, an idea he supports by the fact that the consonants of *be-laḥash*, "in quiet," can be rearranged to spell *laḥashov*, "to contemplate."⁹¹ For Abulafia, therefore, the notion that secrets are transmitted in a whisper is not to be interpreted literally, but rather as a figurative expression of the contemplative ideal. The distinctiveness of Abulafia's approach is brought into sharp relief when we compare it, for example, to the insistence in the anonymous text to which I referred above wherein the kabbalistic secrets attributed to the *zaqen* must be transmitted in a whisper.⁹² There is no reason to interpret the relevant comments from this treatise figuratively; on the contrary, one of the fascinating aspects of this text is that it seems to preserve the behavior of an actual fraternity

⁸⁹ See *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, 76, where it is emphasized that the name is transmitted in a whisper (*be-laḥash*) just as it has been received. On the need to transmit the divine names in this manner, see also *Sitrei Torah*, 77, and *Shomer Miṣwah*, 32 (in that context, the matter is connected with humility, which is depicted as the supreme virtue that comprises all other virtues).

⁹⁰ In *Guide*, I.34, p. 78, Maimonides interprets whispering as the capacity to give a "concise and coherent expression of the most hidden notions." Maimonides thus understands the whisper in a figurative way and in this respect Abulafia may have been indebted to him even though the substance of the latter's explanation is different. Concerning the interpretation of Maimonides, see Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon*, 94–96. The author suggests that it is reasonable to conclude that the affirmation of the whisper (*laḥash*) on the part of Maimonides as the way to transmit mysteries of Torah reflects the passage about Simeon bar Yehoṣadaq and Samuel bar Naḥman in *Genesis Rabbah* 1:3 (see above, n. 13). While I concur that it is likely that Maimonides had this text in mind, this should not obfuscate the fact that the medieval sage interpreted the rabbinic idea of incantation figuratively.

⁹¹ Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, 48. In that passage, Abulafia connects the saying of the *Shema*, the traditional confession of Israel's monotheistic faith (Deut 6:4), with the ideal of ascetic piety, that is, only one who has withdrawn from the desires of the material world can properly unify the name of divine unity. Following the rabbinic ritual, moreover, he writes about the need to utter silently the phrase *barukh shem kevod malkhuto le'olam wa'ed*. Abulafia glosses the expression *be-laḥash* as *laḥashov libbo be-khawwanah*, "his heart should contemplate with intention." On the need to praise the name of the glory silently and openly, *leshabeah shem kevodo be-laḥash u-ve-gilluy*, see Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Ot*, 30. See also Abulafia, *Hotam ha-Haftarah*, 109. In that setting, Abulafia relates the biblical phrase *ma'aseh ḥoshev*, "worked in design," which is used in conjunction with the construction of various sacred objects of the Tabernacle (Exod 26:31, 28:6, 28:15, 36:8, 35, 39:3, 8), to the word *laḥashov*, which he then transposes into *be-laḥash*, a term that he links, in turn, to the words *shaliḥ* and *mashiah*, the angelic messenger and the messianic figure.

⁹² MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 2396, fols. 30b and 36b; see Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word," 182–183.

structured around a master and his disciples. A crucial practice attested in this treatise was the communication of mystical doctrine through the whisper, and therefore comments such as the one that a particular secret connected to sacrifices is too deep to be comprehended except by one who hears the matter received orally from the elder⁹³ are to be taken quite plainly—the mystical truth is whispered by the master into the ear of the worthy disciple.⁹⁴ In contrast to the silence of not-speaking, the speech of the murmur yields an erotic texture that is not embodied in the paradox of a secret that must be hidden if it is the secret that is revealed, but in the sensual transmission of the secret from mouth to ear, a diffusion of truth that partakes of the timbre of eros displayed in the stillness of the muted word.

Gestural Unsayings/Envisioning Silence

In the concluding section of this study, I will focus in greater detail on the juxtaposition of three elements that have shaped the contours of esotericism in medieval kabbalah, to wit, the whisper, the secret, and the erotic. It is instructive that this mode of dissemination is appropriated by kabbalists and made especially explicit by the Castilian kabbalists of the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries responsible for the early stages of the literary production and redaction of what may be called the zoharic canon (*sifrut ha-zohar*),⁹⁵ as an acceptable manner to converse about divine sexuality, the sacred union of the male and female through the medium of the phallus. The analysis of the particular motif that I have proposed should shed light on the intertwining of eros and the esoteric in the religious philosophy that may be elicited from zoharic texts, a philosophical sensibility that had a significant impact on subsequent generations of kabbalistic productivity.

Let me begin by noting that several zoharic passages simply reiterate the rabbinic contention that secretive matters—and in some contexts these are related more specifically to prophecy or to the muse of the

⁹³ MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 2396, fol. 6b.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 7a.

⁹⁵ For some studies that deal with the historical and literary history of the *Zohar*, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 156–204; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1–126; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 85–138; Huss, “*Sefer ha-Zohar* as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text”; “The Appearance of *Sefer ha-Zohar*”; Mopsik, “Le corpus Zoharique”; Abrams, “Critical and Post-Critical Textual Scholarship,” 61–64; “The *Zohar* as a Book”; Meroz, “Zoharic Narratives”; Giller, *Reading the Zohar*, 3–33.

holy spirit—are transmitted in a whisper.⁹⁶ One text, in particular, is noteworthy as it illustrates the tension that the medieval kabbalist would have likely felt between upholding the traditional emphasis on concealing secrets and the impulse to share them so that they may be preserved for posterity.⁹⁷

R. Simeon wept and said, “One word from those words whispered to me [*millin di-lehishu li*] from the head of the academy of Paradise that were not said openly [*be-itgalyya*], this word is a mystery [*sitra*], and I will say to you, my beloved sons, my sons, the beloved ones of my soul, what shall I do? They said it to me in a whisper [*bi-lehisha*] but I will say it to you openly [*be-itgalyya*], and in the future when we see one another face-to-face, all the faces will rely on this.”⁹⁸

The master reveals overtly the secret he had received in a whisper, and the ostensibly transgressive act is transformed into a sign of initiation. The author of this passage has captured concisely the hermeneutical dilemma (expressed by Maimonides as well⁹⁹) on the part of the master confronted with the urge to disclose and the injunction to hide, which is voiced in several other places in zoharic literature in the words “Woe if I reveal, woe if I do not reveal!”¹⁰⁰ On the face of it, the whisper would seem to allow one to occupy the space between these two inclinations, as it is a form of disclosure that is at the same time a form of concealment. Yet, in the aforementioned passage, R. Simeon cannot contain himself, and thus he reveals openly what he received clandestinely through a whisper.

In other passages scattered in the zoharic topography, the cryptic gesture of whispering the secret is framed in a more complex theosophic manner. As an illustration I will cite a key excerpt that is marked as belonging to the Tosefta stratum.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ *Zohar* 1:217a; 2:130b, 179b.

⁹⁷ On the tension between disclosure and concealment in zoharic kabbalah as it pertains specifically to a messianic theosophy, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 26–30.

⁹⁸ *Zohar* 2:190b. See *ibid.*, 291a.

⁹⁹ Maimonides, *Guide*, III: Introduction, pp. 415–416.

¹⁰⁰ *Zohar* 2:257b; 3:127b (*Idra Rabba*). See also *Zohar* 1:11b: “R. Simeon wept and said: Woe if I speak, woe if I do not speak.” And *Zohar* 3:74b: “R. Simeon struck his hands and wept, and he said: Woe if I speak and I reveal the secret, woe if I do not speak and the comrades will lose the matter.” See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 34; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 23–25.

¹⁰¹ On this strata of the zoharic anthology, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 161; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 3; Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, 163–214.

The voice of the sphere rotates from below to above, and chariots that are closed go forth and rotate. A pleasant voice ascends and descends, it goes forth and roams the world. The voice of the ram's horn extends in the depths of the gradations and it causes the sphere to spin round. Two pipes are placed from the right and left in two colors that emanate together,¹⁰² one white and the other red. Both of them rotate the sphere above, when it turns to the right the white ascends, and when it turns to the left the red descends. The sphere rotates continuously and it does not rest. Two birds ascend when they chirp, one to the south side, and the other to the north side, they fly through the air. The chirping and the pleasant voice of the sphere join together, concerning which [it is written] "A psalm, a song for the sabbath day" (Ps 92:1). All the blessings issue forth in the murmur of this sound from the love of the voice of the ram's horn. Corresponding to these the blessings descend from above to below and they are concealed as one within the depth of the well, the spring of the well, which does not cease, in a murmur until the rotating sphere is filled.¹⁰³

It lies beyond the scope of this study to decode all of the intricate details implied in this text. What is most important for the main focus of this analysis, however, is the assertion that the blessings ascend from below in a murmur that is incited by the sound of the ram's horn, and the further claim that the blessings from above similarly come forth in a murmur from the depth of the well (*umqa de-veira*),¹⁰⁴ a symbolic reference to *Binah*, whence the lower seven *sefirot* emanate. To be more precise, the blessings are said to issue from the spring of the well (*nevi'u de-veira*), a technical expression that I propose refers more specifically to the womb of *Binah*,¹⁰⁵ which is characterized in zoharic literature and other kabbalistic sources in decidedly phallic terms.¹⁰⁶ The issuing forth of all blessings from this attribute of the divine pleroma in a murmur—and I note, parenthetically, that in other zoharic passages instruction is given to the worshipper to direct the intention of the heart to this depth of the well in order to draw down the blessings

¹⁰² Literally, "are drawn forth, one with the other" (*mishta'avin da be-da*). For a similar use of this term, see *Zohar* 1:165a; 2:98b; 3:209a.

¹⁰³ *Zohar* 1:234a.

¹⁰⁴ On the attribution of the term *umqa* to *Binah*, see *Zohar* 1:30a, 31a, 147a, 2:63b, 3:26a, 70a, 146a, 285a, 289b. On the mystical-esoteric resonance of the word *omeq*, the Hebrew equivalent of the Aramaic *umqa*, see Idel, "Secrecy," 317 n. 24, 321 n. 47, 327 n. 84, 335 n. 133, and other scholarly references cited by the author in these notes.

¹⁰⁵ The locution appears as well in *Zohar* 2:142a.

¹⁰⁶ See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 98–106; *Language, Eros, Being*, 83, 138, 456 n. 231, 458 n. 241.

that sustain the world¹⁰⁷—is consistent with the many characterizations of *Binah* in medieval kabbalistic works that center around notions of secrecy and hiddenness,¹⁰⁸ as we find, for instance, in the zoharic idiom *alma de-itkasya*¹⁰⁹ and in its Hebrew equivalent in the works of Moses de León *olam ha-nistar*.¹¹⁰ The application of the eschatological term employed in rabbinic literature *olam ha-ba*, the world-to-come, to *Binah* is cast in the same mystical light, as this is a realm of existence that no human eye has seen (based on the language of Isa 64:3),¹¹¹ an inherent inscrutability that is communicated as well by the scriptural injunction to send forth the mother bird before one takes fledglings from the nest (Deut 22:6–7).¹¹² Most importantly, this attribute is demarcated as the silence of the “subtle inner voice,” *qol ha-daḡ ha-penimi*,¹¹³ the “hidden voice that is not externalized,” *qol satum asher einno yoṣe huṣah*,¹¹⁴ the “mighty voice without end,” *qol gadol we-lo yasaf* (Deut 5:19), the “soft murmuring sound,” *qol demamah daqqah* (1 Kings 19:12),¹¹⁵ a litany of acoustic images (to which other examples could have been added) meant to convey what I shall call the *gestural unsaying*, that is, the verbal act of saying-not rather than the muteness of not-saying, affixing a sign to the sign that does not signify identity of difference, but rather marks difference of identity.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁷ *Zohar* 2:63b, 3:70a.

¹⁰⁸ Idel, “Secrecy,” 325–334.

¹⁰⁹ *Zohar* 1:152a, 154a, 156a, 158a; 2:29b.

¹¹⁰ Moses de León, *Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah*, 375; *Sefer Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 23–24, 26–27; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 22–23, 105–106, 191–192 (Hebrew section); “She’clot u-Teshuvot le-R. Moshe di li’on be-Inyenci Qabbalah,” 41.

¹¹¹ *Zohar* 1:59a, 130b; 2:156b, 210b; Moses de León, “Sefer ha-Mishkal,” 59–60.

¹¹² Moses de León, *R. Moses de Leon’s Commentary to Ezekiel’s Chariot*, 70.

¹¹³ Moses de León, *Shushan Edut*, 336 and 370; *Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah*, 375; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 6, 26. See also Moses de León, *Perush Yod-Gimmel Middot*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1609, fol. 130b: “You must contemplate the matter that from the Primordial Wisdom (*ha-hokhmah ha-qedumah*) the Torah comes forth in the secret of the thirty-two paths. . . . And contemplate that this father produces a construct to be built from him, and this is the eighth sphere that establishes everything, but this sphere is the inner subtle voice (*ha-qol ha-daḡ ha-penimi*), and it is called the construct of the father (*binyan av*).” Compare *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 6, 88.

¹¹⁴ Moses de León, *Shushan Edut*, 370.

¹¹⁵ Moses de León, *Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah*, 376.

¹¹⁶ I am here indebted to the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure as deflected and applied in the phenomenological analysis of “indirect language” and “voices of silence” in Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 39–83. Many scholars and philosophers have written about the role accorded language in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological psychology, and here I offer a modest representation of the relevant studies. For a succinct but incisive summary, see the foreword by James M. Edie to Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness*

It is important to emphasize that the muffled speech to which I here allude is not the wordlessness beyond all phonemic gesticulation and/or graphic inscription, a state (or, as the case may be, nonstate) that kabbalists associate with the nondifferentiated mystery of Ein Sof or *Keter*.¹¹⁷ Nor is it the stillness that results from the severance of speech (*dibbur*) and voice (*qol*), the separation of the sixth and tenth emanations, the masculine *Tiferet* and the feminine *Malkhut*.¹¹⁸ The murmur is allied with the third emanation, *Binah*, the attribute that is also envisioned as the source whence the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are derived like stones excavated from a quarry. In a very precise sense, then, this murmur can be demarcated as the sound of silence that engenders the silence of sound. The letters are depicted, moreover, as the substance of the seminal overflow that *Binah* receives from *Hokhmah*.¹¹⁹ In a number of zoharic homilies, the efflux of divine light is portrayed figuratively as the overflow of seed from thought (*Hokhmah*), the Primordial Torah, whence comes forth the inaudible voice, which is also troped as inscription (*ketav* or *ketivah*); that voice, the sound of the ram's horn (*shofar*), reverberates in turn and fractures further into discrete phonemes and

and the Acquisition of Language, xi–xxxii, and for more expansive analyses see Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 108–144; Burke, “Listening at the Abyss”; Bucher, *Zwischen Phänomenologie und Sprachwissenschaft*.

¹¹⁷ For an analysis of several typological forms of silence exemplified in works of Jewish mysticism, see Hallamish, “On Silence in Kabbalah and Hasidism”. On the apophatic depiction of Ein Sof in terms of Neoplatonic thought, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 207–209, 214–217, 271–273; *Kabbalah*, 88–91; *Origins*, 265–276, 431–443; *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 38, 41–42, 46, 159; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 233–235; Idel, “The Image of Adam Above the Sefirot”; “The Sefirot Above the Sefirot”; “Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism”; “On the Doctrine of Divinity”; Matt, “Ayin”; Katz, “Utterance and Ineffability”, 287–294; Wolfson, “Negative Theology and Positive Assertion”; *Through a Speculum*, 67–68. On the relationship of Ein Sof and *Keter* in zoharic kabbalah, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 242–246.

¹¹⁸ Moses de León, *Shushan Edut*, in “Shenei Quntresim,” 336. See also David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, *Or Zarua*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America Mic. 2203, fols. 3a–b: “The secret of the matter is that the Community of Israel is dead, as it were, when amidst the nations for the speech (*dibbur*) is separated from her, for there is no voice (*qol*) without speech (*dibbur*) or speech without voice, as it is written ‘I was dumb, silent’ (Ps 39:3).” It is of interest to note in this context that in *Zohar* 3:30a the biblical expression “soft murmuring sound”, *qol demamah daqah* (1 Kings 19:11–12), which is more typically associated with *Binah*, is related to *Malkhut*, “the last voice that is silent as it has no particular word, but it is speechless in and of itself. But when they gather upon her, she is heard in all of the worlds and they all tremble from her.” This characterization of *Malkhut* corresponds to the standard kabbalistic depiction of the last of the emanations as the attribute that has no light or substance except for what she reflects and absorbs from the potencies above her.

¹¹⁹ *Zohar* 1:15b.

graphemes—the phonological and grammatological should not be conceived as independent aspects, but rather as two forms of one phenomenon—manifest in *Tif'eret*, the “audible voice” (*qol de-ishtema*) that is the script of the Written Torah, and *Malkhut*, the “speech” (*dib-bura*) declaimed in the ongoing interpretative narration that makes up the collective body of the Oral Torah.¹²⁰ With respect to both *Binah*, the “great voice,” and *Tif'eret*, the “voice that is heard,” we detect a coalescence of the auditory and visual,¹²¹ and hence we can describe the emanative process in either acoustic or ocular terms.¹²² This should alert us to the difficulty of casting the traditional kabbalistic scheme in terms of the contemporary distinction (largely indebted to Derrida) between the grammatological and logocentric. From the hermeneutical standpoint of medieval kabbalah, the graphic and oral cannot be severed, as every act of writing is simultaneously a spoken declamation, and every spoken declamation an act of writing.

In the citation that has been transmitted as part of the Tosefta stratum of the zoharic compilation, the gesture of the whisper is linked symbolically to *Binah*, the “soft murmuring sound” beyond imaginal or

¹²⁰ See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 293. A particularly interesting formulation of this notion is found in Moses de León, *Perush Yod-Gimmel Middot*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1609, fols. 130b–131a.

¹²¹ A striking example of the convergence of epistemic modes is found in the description of the knowledge of the “voice that is heard” (*qol de-ishtema*) through the “vision of the holy spirit” (*hezyona de-ruah qudsha*) in *Zohar* 2:43b (*Piqqudin*). In that context, the unity of the threefold in the audible voice, which corresponds to *Tif'eret*, is linked exegetically to the three occurrences of the divine name in Deuteronomy 6:4, the traditional proclamation of the monotheistic faith. Regarding this passage and other trinitarian formulations in zoharic literature, see Jellinek, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kabbala*, 2: 51–56; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 973–974; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 140–145. See also Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 257–258. It is of interest to point out the connection that is drawn in the aforementioned passage from the *Piqqudin* section of the *Zohar* between the divine attribute depicted symbolically as the “voice” and the actual voice of the worshipper who recites the verse liturgically. The proper intention that one must have when one articulates the *Shema* is to unify the divine from “the Infinite to the end of everything” (*me-ein sof ad sof de-khola*). The verbal gesture is complemented by a meditative practice of an ocular nature, the seeing of interior colors through the “vision of the closed eye” (*heizu de-eina setima*). For further discussion of this technique of visualization in zoharic kabbalah, see Scholem, “Colors and Their Symbolism,” 34; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 380–383. See below, n. 129.

¹²² The inseparability of the acoustic and ocular in the kabbalistic understanding of language, which was a central component of Scholem’s presentation of kabbalistic phenomenology, has informed my own thinking as well. See Scholem, “The Name of God” *Diogenes* 79, 71, and *Diogenes* 80, 167–168; *Origins*, 277; Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism*, 52; Biale, *Geršhom Scholem*, 99–100; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 4, 286–287, 400–401 n. 18, 555 n. 151.

iconic representation, the primordial void (*tohu*) that is the womb of all possibility, “the place in which there is no color (*gawwan*) and no image (*diyogna*), and it is not comprised within the mystery of the image (*raza de-diyogna*). Now it is within an image, but when they contemplate it, it has no image at all (*kad mistakkelan beih leit leih diyogna kelal*). Everything has a garment in which it is encloded except for this one.”¹²³ *Binah*, the “soft murmuring sound”, *qol demamah daqah* (1 Kings 19:11–12)—demarcated elsewhere in zoharic homilies as the “inner place whence all the lights emerge”¹²⁴ or as the “Tabernacle of gold” upon which the “inner and subtle incense is offered” and in which “the knot of faith is bound”¹²⁵—assumes the form of the gradations that emanate from it, but inherently it is without image,¹²⁶ and hence contemplation of it essentially entails envisioning the essence of inessentiality, seeing nothing, as it were, for in the absence of a garment what can be seen?¹²⁷ As the matter is expressed in the zoharic commentary on the image of the *hashmal*, which figures prominently in the appearance of the glory in Ezekiel’s prophetic vision of the chariot:

The internal vision (*heizu penima’ah*) is the vision in silence (*heizu bi-lehishu*), as it says “After the fire—a soft murmuring sound” (1 Kings 19:11–12), and this is the mystery of the image that comprises all the images in the prism that is above (*raza de-diyogna de-khalil kol diyognin be-heizu di-le’ela*), the supernal voice in the silence that is above (*qol ila’ah bi-lehishu di-le’ela*) whence all the images emerge.¹²⁸

Explicating the symbol of the *hashmal* in his commentary on Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot, Moses de León similarly described *Binah* as the “secret of the inner splendor (*sod zohar penimi*) in the secret of

¹²³ *Zohar* 1:16a.

¹²⁴ *Zohar* 1:209a.

¹²⁵ *Zohar* 3:30b.

¹²⁶ See the commentary on Ezekiel’s chariot vision from the author of the later strata of zoharic literature printed in *Zohar Hadash*, 33b: “The soul (*nishmata*) is from the aspect of *Binah* upon which the Thought that has no end rests, and in it there is no image (*dimyon*), no form (*surah*), and no likeness (*diyogna*) for it is the world-to-come and in it there is no body (*gufa*) and no likeness (*diyogna*), as the masters of the Mishnah have established, ‘There is no body or corporeality in the world-to-come.’ . . . And in that Thought all prophets would imagine all the images (*dimyonin*) and all the forms (*siyyurin*) that are beneath it. Above it they did not apprehend any image (*siyyur*) at all. They were not able to grasp any image (*siyyur*) or any form (*gawwan*) with respect to it let alone with respect to what is above it.”

¹²⁷ See Wolfson, *Occultation*, 115–118, 133–135, and the more extensive analysis in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 220–233.

¹²⁸ *Zohar Hadash*, 38c.

intellectualized intellect (*sekhel muskal*) that shimmers momentarily and then disappears, and it is not comprehended in any manner that may be understood, for it is the denuded splendor without a garment (*zohar nishlal beli levush*). Therefore it is called *hashmal*, for it shimmers in the heart momentarily, and then it disappears momentarily.”¹²⁹ Inasmuch as the locus of secrecy is this aspect of the divine that exceeds any and every optic or acoustic figuration—thus it is characterized as both the “great voice” that emits no sound and as the “internal vision” that has no form—it follows that the apophatic path is the appropriate means to access it, emulating thereby the prophets (with the exception of Moses) who are implored “to contemplate through the luminosity of the heart” (*le’istakkela be-ṣahuta de-libba*) the *hashmal* until “they saw within what they saw in silence” (*hamu lego mah de-ḥamu bi-leḥishu*), thereby apprehending “the mystery within silence (*raza bi-leḥishu*), the mystery that exists within the brain (*raza de-qayyema lego be-moḥa*)... the inner mystery of the brain that exists within the supernal mysteries in the supernal

¹²⁹ Farber-Ginat, *R. Moses de Leon’s Commentary*, 60. In the same context, de León also interprets the word *hashmal* as a reference to the “beasts” (*ḥayyot*), i.e., the central *sefirot* of *Ḥesed*, *Din*, and *Raḥamim*, that are unified within *Bimah*. See *ibid.*, 66 and 67 (in that context, the unification of the beasts is symbolically encoded in the name YAHDWNHY, which is formed by a combination of the Tetragrammaton and its epithet, YHWH and ADNY. It is worth noting as well that de León (Farber-Ginat’s *Commentary*, 66) utilizes the scriptural locution *demut ha-ḥayyot*, “image of the beasts” (Ezek 1:13), to distinguish between the “supernal beasts” *ḥayyot ha-elyonot*, that are “stripped of every matter” (*nishlalot mi-kol davar*) and hence beyond visual contemplation, and the lower beasts that can be seen in accordance with the capacity of the one who contemplates them. Presumably, the “supernal beasts” denote the supernal sefirotic potencies whereas the “lower beasts” are the refraction of the upper ones in *Malkhut* or perhaps the angelic beings in the realm beneath the world of the emanations. See *ibid.*, 67, where the supernal beasts, also identified as the “splendor of the speculum that shines” (*zohar aspaqlarya ha-me’irah*), are described as being visually comprehended through rotating the closed eye (see above, n. 121). The fleeting vision that results from this rather simple technique is compared to the reflection of the sunlight upon a dish of water, images that are meant to convey the inability of human intellect to apprehend the sefirotic emanations. For a similar explanation of the poetic imagery in Ezekiel’s vision, see Gikatilla, *R. Joseph Gikatilla’s Commentary*, 64: “Know that there are external beasts and they are called ‘holy,’ and they are bound to the throne. And there are inner beasts, which have no measure or aspect in a mind that is created. From the comprehension of the external beasts a man can contemplate a little from within the speculum that does not shine, to comprehend something of an allusion to the interior (*remez bi-penimiyut*).” See *ibid.*, 72: “There are supernal beasts in the secret of the great name, blessed be he, in the inner secret, and no mind can enter and comprehend. And there is below in the [world of] separation beasts that are the thrones and chariots for the supernal beasts.”

image (*raza penima'ah be-moħa qayyema go razin illa'in be-diyogna illa'ah*).¹³⁰ Encoded in these words is the epistemic basis of the principle of ontic dissimilitude: the vision within the silence is contemplated through the silence within the vision. The point is made in more direct language in the gloss attributed to Simeon ben Yoħai on the middle term in the key expression *qol demamah daqah*, which is identified both as the *qol ha-shofar*, the “voice of the ram’s horn” (Exod 19:19, 20:14), and as the *qol gadol*, the “mighty voice” (Deut 5:19), biblical terms associated symbolically with *Binah*, the source of divine revelation:

“Murmuring”—what is “murmuring” (*demamah*)? R. Simeon said: A person must be silent with respect to it and to close his mouth (*lemishtoqa minneih u-lemehsam pumeih*), as it says “I resolved I would watch my step lest I offend by my speech; I would keep my mouth muzzled” (Ps 39:2). “Murmuring”—this is the silence that is not heard on the outside (*shituqa de-lo ishtema levar*).¹³¹

The implication of the scriptural locution *qol demamah daqah*, then, is that the divine attribute to which it refers is the silence that is not heard on the outside and, consequently, one must close one’s mouth and remain silent with respect to it. The attentive ear, however, will heed the double silence in the signpost of the murmur, silently speaking in speaking silently about the speech of silence that is the silence of speech, the token action that betokens the erotic underpinning of kabbalistic esotericism.

Secreted Eros In Eros Secreted

As the voice of silence that is not heard except as the silence of the voice, *Binah* is troped with a plethora of images that convey her occlusion from sight. In the succinct formulation of Moses de León, “With respect to this hidden world, its essence is not heard on the outside as it is being built, for all of its matter is in a whisper, in a secret.”¹³² Yet, it is precisely from this nonphenomenalizable depth, the depth that is manifest as what remains hidden, that one can envisage the profundity

¹³⁰ *Zohar Hadash*, 38b.

¹³¹ *Zohar* 2:81b. See *ibid.*, 3:209a, where *Binah* is described as the mother who in a whisper issues the supernal gifts that stimulate the overflow of light from the King to the Matrona.

¹³² Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 192 (Hebrew section).

of the nexus of the erotic and esoteric that figures prominently in the psychosexual worldview of the kabbalists and particularly as it is expressed in the symbolism enunciated in zoharic literature. As we saw in the case of Abulafia, so too in the zoharic anthology, a connection is made between *gilluy arayot*, the uncovering of the genitals, related to illicit sexual relations, and inappropriate disclosure of secrets.¹³³ By contrast, the suitable revelation of secrets, exemplified in the case of Simeon ben Yoḥai, is correlated with a state of sexual purity. On occasion in the *Zohar*, this virtue is associated with the murmur, the very gesture deemed as the most pertinent method to divulge mystical wisdom. Consider, for example, the following passage:

Therefore, prayer is silent [*selota ve-laḥash*], like one who speaks secretly with a king [*de-mallil be-raza im malka*], and as long as he is with him in secret, he is not removed from him at all. . . . Thus, when one juxtaposes [the blessing dealing with] redemption [*ge'ullah*] and the [standing] prayer [*tefillah*], one must hold on to him, and to speak to him silently [*vi-leḥishu*], in secret [*ve-raza*], so that he will not be distant from him, and he will not be abandoned us.¹³⁴

The main concern of this text is to secure the conjunction of the people of Israel below to the divine attribute above to which they are attached. Since it is the tendency of all the attributes to extend upward and to be absorbed in the Infinite,¹³⁵ how can the bond be preserved? The response relates to the liturgical saying of the *Amidah*, the standing prayer, also known as the *Shemoneh Esreh*, the eighteen benedictions, which, according to rabbinic practice, is to be recited silently. Secrecy maintains the union, and thus by uttering this prayer in a whisper the Jewish people guarantee that they will be united to God.

The erotic aspect of the murmur is implied in the rabbinic notion alluded to above concerning the need not to separate the redemption (*ge'ullah*) and prayer (*tefillah*), that is, the blessing that ends with a reference to the redeemer of Israel (*go'el yisra'el*) and the beginning of the *Amidah*.¹³⁶ When rendered through the prism of kabbalistic symbolism, the juxtaposition of redemption (*ge'ullah*) and prayer (*tefillah*) signifies the

¹³³ *Zohar* 3:79a; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 25.

¹³⁴ *Zohar* 2:138b.

¹³⁵ On the ascent to the Infinite in the zoharic conception of intention, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 955.

¹³⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 4b, 9b.

unification of the male and female potencies in the divine.¹³⁷ Insofar as the time of the utterance of the *Amidah* by the male Jewish worshipper (that is, in accordance with the medieval kabbalistic assumption regarding halakhic ritual) corresponds to the initiatory moment of copulation between the masculine *Tiferet* and the feminine *Malkhut* through the phallic potency of *Yesod*—the process reaches its climax at the conclusion of the *Amidah*—it follows that everything is “in silence.” In the words of one zoharic homily: “That Righteous One [*Yesod*] is aroused to be united in love, affection, joy, and desire, with the place that is necessary [*Malkhut*] . . . and then everything is in a murmur (*khola vi-lehishu*), above and below, in the kisses of desire.”¹³⁸ The silent prayer is located symbolically at the beginning of the union of the male and female potencies, and, therefore, the appropriate liturgical response is reticence, which reflects, in turn, the quality of modesty that is apposite to one witnessing the erotically charged drama in the divine pleroma.¹³⁹ Confirmation of this complex of ideas is found in the following passage:

It has been taught: R. Judah said, “When priests below rise and spread out their hands, all of the holy crowns above are aroused, and they are arrayed to be blessed, and they shine from the depth of the well [*umqa de-veira*], which overflows to them from that depth that issues forth continuously, and the blessings that flow from the wellsprings to all the worlds do not cease, and they are blessed and irrigated from all of them.” We

¹³⁷ *Zohar* 1:132b, 205b; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 79 (Hebrew section); *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 75; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 966–967. On the mystery of intercourse or the repair (*tiqqun*) of male and female as the primary intentionality (*kawwanah*) assigned to prayer, see *ibid.*, 957–959.

¹³⁸ *Zohar* 2:128b. According to *Zohar* 1:209b–210a, the custom to utter the *Amidah* silently (*be-lahash*) is explained by the symbolic link of this prayer and the *Shekhinah*, which is identified as the inaudible voice that is dependent on the masculine *Tiferet*, the “voice that is heard” (see above, n. 120). This explanation clashes with another view expressed in the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic treatises according to which the posture of standing is valenced as male and that of sitting as female, which leads to the conclusion that the standing prayer corresponds to the masculine, in contrast to the prayers that are uttered in a sitting posture, which correspond to the feminine, just as the head phylacteries correspond to the masculine and the arm phylacteries to the feminine. See *Zohar* 1:132b, 205b; 3:120b; Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 79 (Hebrew section).

¹³⁹ See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 133–134. For a later reverberation of the erotic connotation of the whisper according to the zoharic symbolism in the poetic compositions of Isaac Luria, see Liebes, “Hymns for the Sabbath Meals,” 548, where the “pure olive oil” is described as being drawn into the *Shekhinah* “in silence” (*bi-lehishin*), and 550, where the hope is expressed that “we will be shown his mystery/spoken in a whisper” (*we-yahwei lan sitreh/de-mitmar bi-lehishah*).

have learnt that at that time silence [*lehishuta*] and stillness [*shettiquta*] are in all of the worlds. [This may be compared] to a king who desires to unite with the matrona, and he desires to enter her in silence [*bi-lehishu*], and all the servants are stirred up at that time and they whisper “Behold, the king has come to be joined to the matrona.” Who is the matrona? This is the Community of Israel.”¹⁴⁰

According to the teaching attributed to R. Judah, the priestly blessing sets into motion the downpour of light from the depth of the well, which, as we have seen, is a technical designation of *Binah*, onto all of the emanations and thence onto all of the worlds. A gloss on this teaching introduces the element of the whisper: When the blessings overflow from *Binah* to all of reality, there is a hush that permeates everything. The erotic implications of this stillness are brought into sharp relief by the parable according to which the king desires to enter the matrona “in silence.” We may conclude, therefore, that the opening of the womb of *Binah* is rendered symbolically equivalent to the act of coitus, which is likewise marked by silence, a moment that calls for timidity.¹⁴¹

I will end with the discussion of one final zoharic passage that brings into clear focus the nexus of eroticism and esotericism related to the murmuring of secrets. The text builds on the rabbinic custom to utter quietly *barukh shem kevod malkhuto le-olam wa'ed*, “Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever,” after proclaiming out loud the confession of God’s oneness, *shema yisra’el yhw h elohenu yhw h ehad*, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4). The zoharic author notes that there is a parallel between these two utterances, each one consisting of six words, and both together constitute the “supernal order of faith” (*sidura illa’ah di-meheimanuta*): the former effects the unification of the *sefrot*, especially the lower six emanations from *Hesed* to *Yesod*, and the latter the unification of *Malkhut* in the forces beneath her. For our purposes, it is necessary to focus on the latter. In the precise words of the zoharic text:

In that moment, the matrona is crowned and adorned, and her servants enter into her with an abundant silence [*vi-lehishu saggi*], and they say, “Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever.” This is in silence [*vi-lehishu*], for thus must she be taken into her husband.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ *Zohar* 3:146a.

¹⁴¹ Compare the description in *Zohar* 3:209a, of the mother issuing gifts “in silence” and bestowing them upon the crown that sits on the head of the king.

¹⁴² *Zohar* 2:133b. Compare *Zohar* 3:253b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*).

Deviating from the talmudic explanation, the zoharic author understands the gesture of the murmur in decidedly erotic terms. The blessing of *Malkhut* is whispered because the time of its utterance is when she is united with her male consort, a conjunction that occurs in silence. In the continuation of the zoharic passage, however, we learn of another reason for the silence:

They bring her into him in silence. Why in silence? So that the foreign one will not mix in with this joy, as it says, “And no outsider can share in his joy” (Prov 14:10)... In the time to come, the evil eye will be removed from the world and it will have no rule, then [the word] “one” [*ehad*] will be proclaimed [in relation to *Malkhut*] openly. Presently, since the Other Side cleaves to her, she is not one, and we unify her silently [*vi-lehishu*], in the mystery of alternative letters, and we say “forever” [*wa’ed*]. But in the future that is coming, that side will separate from her and it will be removed from the world, and then surely she will be called “one”... as it says, “On that day the Lord will be one and his name one” (Zech 14:9), openly and explicitly, not silently and secretly.¹⁴³

In the present state of the world, there is a struggle between the right side of holiness and the left side of unholiness. As long as this Other Side exists, the unification of the feminine must be uttered silently so that the foreign element will not intrude and penetrate into the space of the holy. In the messianic future, however, the demonic force will be obliterated, and thus it will no longer be necessary to unify *Malkhut* in a muted way. On the contrary, both male and female will be unified overtly, a situation that is expressed in the eschatological vision of Zechariah, “On that day the Lord will be one and his name one,” *ba-yom ha-hu yihyeh yhwah ehad u-shemo ehad*.

The unification of the male and female implied in this verse represents the ideal of the heterosexual coupling. As I have argued elsewhere, the gender construction that overwhelmingly informs the kabbalistic worldview (based on a close reading of the biblical accounts of creation) is such that sexual union results in the restoration of the female to the male,¹⁴⁴ a restitution that, in turn, occasions a shift from the heteroerotic to the homoerotic, the latter signifying, at least ideally, the carnality of ascetic renunciation, which is fully instantiated in the messianic redemption.¹⁴⁵ I would suggest that this metamorphosis of the erotic is implied

¹⁴³ *Zohar* 2:133b–134a; Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 73–75 (Hebrew section); *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 83. See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 30.

¹⁴⁴ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 49, 62, 108–110, 175–176, 188–189, 373–374.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 148, 311–312, 324–332, 350, 366–371, 388–389.

in the above passage as well. Support for this interpretation may be adduced from the fact that the liturgical formula “Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever” is proclaimed out loud on the eve of Yom Kippur, the day of fasting that anticipates the eschaton. Precisely when sexual intercourse is prohibited, and the people of Israel stand in the posture of angelic beings, there is no more need to use the form of silent speech in relation to the divine feminine.¹⁴⁶ What is enacted on Yom Kippur proleptically portends the future when the bind of secrecy is undone completely, and the secret nature of eros will be exposed fully in the erotic nature of the secret.

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¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 364–371.

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TA'ANUG:
EROTIC DELIGHTS FROM KABBALAH TO HASIDISM

MOSHE IDEL

Describing feelings is a notoriously difficult thing to do. The problem is enhanced when those who do so use a language that is not their vernacular, and even more so when that language is part of sacred scriptures, which are understood as paradigmatic and as informing or teaching some sublime forms of experience that took place in the glorious past. Caught between the artificiality of the language and the authority of the sacred texts, the dimension of personal experience is often attenuated and sometimes even obliterated. Clichés, models, paragons, rituals, and ideals canonized in the ancient past are powerful obstacles to representing present experiences. These observations certainly apply to Jewish mystical literatures, written in their vast majority during the Middle Ages, and later, in Hebrew and Aramaic, under the strong impact of biblical and other Jewish canonical values and writings. Jewish thinkers and mystics used ancient terminology not only to express their own experiences during the Middle Ages, but also to develop complex systems of thought which emerged from the appropriation of significant parts of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, which were grafted on the canonical Jewish writings. As part of this process, among many other things they developed a variety of views regarding delight.¹

The ancient Hebrew vocabulary is rich in terms that can be translated as delight or pleasure, such as *ta'anug*, *'oneg*, *no'am*, *hana'ah*, *sha'ashu'a* (and in its plural form *sha'ashu'im*), or *nahat ruah*. Each of these terms has its own semantic field, but to describe them with sufficient nuance would go beyond the scope of this chapter. With regard to the following discussions, most important is the first of these six terms, which expresses a stronger form of pleasure than the others. In the Song of Songs 7:7, the term *'Ahavah* (love) accompanies *ta'anug* as a qualifier: *'ahavah be-ta'anugim*, literally a love [full] of delight. However, the expression here describes not a feeling, but the beloved herself; it has therefore quite a personal

¹ For concepts of delight in Jewish philosophy see the important survey by Berezin, "Felicity", "Delight", and "Virtue."

dimension and, we may assume, also carries some kind of corporeal implication. This is also the case with the other occurrence of a plural form that becomes more accepted in later layers of Hebrew; it is found in Ecclesiastes 2:8, where it takes the form *ta'anugot benei 'adam*, that is to say, the delights of men and women.

Even more important for the subsequent development of Jewish mysticism is the biblical assumption that man can delight in God. In various verses (Isaiah 58:14, Psalms 37:4, Job 22:6 and 27:10), the reflexive form of the verb *'ng*, *tit'aneg* refers to a contact with God, which means that someone may, in principle, take delight in God. The implication of this type of relationship is that God is not conceived of as substantially transcendental or unapproachable, even less unknown by man, but that, at least according to these biblical verses, a strong erotic relationship is deemed to be possible. Or, to put the following discussions in a wider perspective: on the one hand, the biblical theology of the covenant has sometimes been cast in marital imagery, thus creating a sense of intimacy which has some erotic aspects; and, on the other hand, the biblical and rabbinic rituals that were regarded as quintessential for this covenant were understood in rabbinic and later forms of Judaism as some kind of activity that creates intimacy, including an erotic one, between God as the male and the people of Israel—or its counterpart on high, *Knesset Israel*—as the female.² The theme of delight, found in other parts of the Bible, has been drawn into this development, thus creating the assumption that the rituals in question have some erotic valences, described by the term delight.

In the following, we shall survey a few of the instances in which *ta'anug* is used by Jewish mystics, but it should be noted that we will skip the most widespread application of the noun and the verb, related in rabbinic literature and in Jewish mysticism to the post-mortem delight of the righteous, or their souls, in Paradise known as beatitude. Thus the following discussions do not deal with post-mortem beatific visions, but with experiences that take place while the mystic is alive. Still, those personal eschatological descriptions would deserve separate treatment, since they also had an impact on how mystics understood their experiences while alive, that is, as an adumbration of the Paradisiacal states, or an actualization of future experiences by elite figures in the present.

² See Idel, "Rabbinism versus Kabbalism," and *Kabbalah and Eros*, 22–38.

Ta'anug: Mysticism, Ritual, Theurgy, and Theosophy

Let me start with a survey of the issue that is central to our discussion below: the nexus between delight and ritual. Such a linkage occurs explicitly in the Bible (Isaiah 58:13), where the Sabbath is called *'Oneg* (delight), and has been reiterated thousands of times in subsequent Jewish literatures.³ In rabbinic literature, the performance of the complex rituals connected to the rest that is required during the Sabbath has been understood as inducing a state of delight without further systemic explanations. Indeed, even a Jewish philosopher who was not much inclined to appreciate the need to gladden the body, such as the early thirteenth century R. David Qimhi, wrote in his commentary on Isaiah that

it is a positive commandment to cause delight to the body during the day of Sabbath by pleasant and good food, since by distinguishing it from the other days in a positive manner he will remember the creation, and that God created the world *ex nihilo* and rested on the seventh day, and because of it he will praise God and exalt him by his mouth and heart, and his soul will delight.⁴

Qimhi sees the Sabbath as the opportunity for progressing from bodily pleasure to spiritual delight; the latter, in its turn, is connected to the pure contemplation of God, detached from the demands of the body, which have already been satisfied. Evidently, only the soul of the observer of the Sabbath ritual enjoys the experience—God's reaction is neither specified nor assumed.

In the Kabbalistic literature, however, the delight of the Sabbath was interpreted in terms of the affinities that were believed to exist between this day and a supernal divine power, referred to in many cases as Sabbath: with the *sefirah* either of *Binah*, or *Yessod*, or *Malkhut*.⁵ The Sabbath as a supernal power constellates the time of the earthly Sabbath, which is the time of delight in general and, according to a widespread view, also the time of conjugal union.⁶

³ On the connections between delight and Sabbath in rabbinic literature and in Kabbalah see the important monographs of Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah*, 63–64, 152 note 94, 154 note 103; and *Sod ha-Shabbat*, 54–55, 167, 179–180; and Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, III, 1215–1238.

⁴ See his commentary on Isaiah 58:13, printed in *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, fol. 83d.

⁵ See the studies mentioned above, note 3.

⁶ Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah*, 289–296.

A brief though quite significant mention of delight is found already in the *Book of Bahir*, one of the earliest and most important documents of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, which emerged at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The anonymous Kabbalist writes: “Habakuk said ‘I know that my prayer has being received in a delightful manner, and I too have been delighted.’”⁷ This attribution of delight to the prophet has no parallels in the Bible. We may assume that the text means to refer to a double delight: the divine one that emerges in response to the prayer of the Kabbalist, and that of the Kabbalist himself. The first one is a variant of the earlier rabbinic statements according to which God wishes to receive the prayers of righteous and is affected by them.⁸ The second one is part of a rabbinic view, already described above, which assumes that the ritual of Sabbath generates delight.⁹ We may surmise therefore that prayer is an action that induces delight within the divine realm: a view that I propose to describe as a theurgical operation and which reflects a position that can be discerned also elsewhere in the *Book of Bahir*.¹⁰ Thus a ritual event is understood as generating delight both in the divine and in the human realms. This simultaneity is important, since it attributes to the most widespread ritual in rabbinic and Kabbalistic Judaism an overarching status: its performance generates delight on the two different levels of reality, divine and human. Given the centrality of *Sefer ha-Bahir* in the history of early Kabbalah, we may assume that this short statement left its imprint on many discussions involving delight, even when the title of the book was not explicitly quoted.

For how delight is related to another theosophical stand, we may quote an early thirteenth-century Kabbalist, R. Ezra ben Shlomo of Gerona, who resorted several times to the noun *ta’anug*:

“Let him kiss me by the kisses [of his mouth]”:¹¹ Those are the words of the glory¹² that desires, as one who wants to ascend, to adhere [in order] to be enlightened by the supernal light, which is not imagined,

⁷ See Abrams, *The Book Bahir*, 145 note 48, and for the Kabbalists who used this section see Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir*, 49.

⁸ See, e.g., *Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah*, fol. 60b. On Rabbinic theurgy see, e.g., Lorberbaum, *Image of God*, 156–169 (Hebrew), and Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism*, 28–46, 91–97 (Hebrew).

⁹ See above, note 3.

¹⁰ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 161–162.

¹¹ Song of Songs 1:2.

¹² Namely the *sefirah* of *Tiferet*. See Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah I*, 27 note 75 (Hebrew), and Vajda, *Le commentaire d’Ezra de Gerone*, 56.

but ascends [only] in thought and as an idea, and this is the reason why it is addressed [in the verse] in a third person [namely “his mouth”]. And the kiss is an allegory for the delight of the adherence of the soul to the “source of life”,¹³ and the “addition of holy spirit” and this is the reason why it is written “by kisses” [*mi-neshiqqot*], since each and every cause¹⁴ receives thought and addition from the sweet light¹⁵ and from that pure splendor.¹⁶

I understand this passage—and some of its parallels, which are even more strongly influenced by Neoplatonism—as describing two moments in the mystical life: one is the conjunction with the source, and the other is its sequel, namely the augmentation of the Holy Spirit as the result of that adherence.¹⁷ If a nexus is assumed to exist between the two moments, the question may be asked: whose, exactly, is the delight? If it is the human soul alone who enjoys the experience of delight, it is difficult to understand why an additional effluence of the Holy Spirit is generated. However, if we attribute the delight to the hypostasis, designated as “source of life,” that enjoys the adherence of the soul, then we may regard the increased influx as resulting from the excitation of that hypostatic level of divinity by the mystic’s soul. Indeed, as we learn later on the same page, the “addition of the holy spirit” refers to an influx pouring down upon the “seventy-two names,”¹⁸ and the phrase “the addition of blessing” refers to a process that takes place within the *sefirot*.¹⁹ In any case, it should be emphasized that an explicit link between adherence of thought and addition of blessing or influx is found also in other instances in R. Ezra. This allows us to assume that we are dealing here with a stable connection, not just a casual one.²⁰

¹³ Presumably the first or the second *sefirah*. See Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, I, 32 note 120. See also the footnote of Tishby, in his edition of R. Azriel of Gerone, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, 35 note 13 (Hebrew).

¹⁴ I.e. *sefirah*.

¹⁵ *Or matoq*. This expression occurs also in R. Azriel of Gerone’s *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, 34, in a similar context, i.e. dealing with the return of the soul to its source and the joy it enjoys.

¹⁶ *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, II, 485. For another English translation see Brody, *Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona*, 39–40; Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, 166–167 (Hebrew); Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being*, 264. For the occurrence of *ta’anug* in some other instances in this book, see *Kitvei ha-Ramban II*, 491.

¹⁷ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 46–47.

¹⁸ *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, II, 485, 498. The phrase occurs also on 530.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, II, 485, 526. See especially Vajda, *Le commentaire d’Ezra de Gerone*, 257 and the pertinent footnotes.

²⁰ See the passage in R. Ezra, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, fol. 114b–115a, published in Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers*, 119–120 (Hebrew), with the pertinent bibliography.

By attributing delight to supernal causes as well, I do not mean to deny the possibility that, in R. Ezra, the soul is also delighted, as we can learn from the phrase *ta'anug ha-neshamah*—the delight of the soul—that occurs a bit further on the same page.²¹ My assumption is that by ascending on high, the soul enters the theosophical system and undergoes processes similar to those of the divine powers. Thus in this case too delight has a double subject, just as in the *Book of Bahir*. Indeed, elsewhere in this commentary, the term *ta'anug* refers, quite plausibly, to the reception of the divine influx by the supernal feminine power, the *Shekhinah*.²² In fact, in R. Ezra's theosophy, there is a strong parallelism between the last *sefirah* and the human soul.²³ Let me point out that the nexus between *devequt* (adherence or union) and delight became quite widespread in Hasidism, to such an extent that it is quite difficult to distinguish between the two terms.²⁴

In a collection of Kabbalistic traditions written down at the end of the fifteenth century, perhaps in the Ukraine or in the Byzantine Empire, by a certain R. Moshe of Kiev, we find a clear expression (that may well reflect an earlier tradition) of connections being drawn between delight, on the one hand, and a theosophical-theurgical stand, on the other:

The lower entities leave an imprint on the supernal one²⁵ by their actions, and this is the reason why each man should delight during the elected day because of the delight of the King and the Queen. And whoever adds to this delight, it is [even] better.²⁶

The members of the “royal” pair mentioned here are the *sefirot Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, that is to say, the male and the female divine manifestations respectively, and their erotic union is considered to be of paramount importance for the state of harmony in the higher and lower worlds. Their delight depends upon the human performance here below, and hence by adding delight below a person induces an addition of delight on high. Therefore we have here a first explicit testimony for the induc-

²¹ *Kävei ha-Ramban*, II, 485.

²² *Ibid.*, II, p. 486.

²³ See R. Azriel's *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, 12–13.

²⁴ See, e.g., the many occurrences in R. Benjamin of Zalisch, *'Ahavat Dodim*, 22, 23, 52, 53, 215 etc.

²⁵ I.e. the sefirotic powers.

²⁶ *Sefer Shushan Sodot*, fol. 77b, par. 473. On the possibility that this collection of traditions has been influential on Hasidism, see Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 262, 311, 315–317 (Hebrew). On Sabbath and theurgy see also Idel, “Sabbath,” 74–79.

tion of delight on high by means of human delight, understood as a theurgical activity. However, in this instance, the processes taking place within the divine world as the result of the human delight—what I call theurgy—are not described as having an effect outside this world, namely in the lower realms of reality (which would turn them into an instance of magic).

Let me now turn to the eighteenth century, where we find a dramatic increase of interest in the nexus between delight and ritual. For example, R. Nathan-Neta' of Sieniawa, a mid-eighteenth-century author of a commentary on the prayer-book, entitled *'Olat Tamid* writes that

Sometimes, when a person recites the verses of the Psalms, a voice is stirred up for him, [namely] a voice to him, and it is from his [own] soul, for out of his joy a great voice enters him, to urge the love of lovers. This happens sometimes even when the person does not know the intention²⁷ [and nevertheless] his soul knows and enjoys a spiritual delight. In the *Qeriyat Shema'* as well, a person brings upon himself, with each and every [pronounced] letter, light to the soul [and to] the 248 limbs. And it is incumbent [upon the person] to pray with intention [as far as concerns] each and every [pronounced] letter, since [he] hints to the supernal worlds, by each letter [pronounced] in holiness.²⁸

The delight mentioned here is related, as we learn from the second part of the passage, to a dwelling of divine light upon the soul and body of the person who prays. This experience does not depend upon whether the text someone is ritualistically performing is understood, but on the capacity of the sounds of the text to draw down the light within this world, thereby causing human delight.

However, the unquestionable peak of interest in the mystical aspects of delight occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century, basically in Hasidic literature. The transition from Kabbalah to the first Hasidic writings marks a further step in the process of the eroticization of Jewish mysticism. As we shall see below, the Hasidic literature resorts to the term *ta'anug* much more often—possibly as much as ten times more often—than is the case in the much more extensive corpus of Kabbalistic literature. This statistic preponderance is, in my opinion, of the utmost importance in order to appreciate the new strong emphasis on delight in Hasidism, which is less concerned with discussions of the coupling of the divine pair, the *sefirot* of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* of

²⁷ *Kavvanah* namely the meaning of the words.

²⁸ R. Nathan-Neta' of Sieniawa, *'Olat Tamid*, I, fol. 33b, and see also *ibid.*, fols. 47b–48a.

Kabbalah, and much more with the feeling of delight, which is related to the direct contact between the worshipper and God.²⁹

There can be no doubt that R. Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov [1699–1760] (known also as the Besht), the founder of eighteenth-century Hasidism, put more emphasis on the importance of delight as a religious value than any other Jewish mystic before him. More thorough research into his seminal views on the topic is a desideratum, and in the future I hope to dedicate a separate study to them. For example, the affinity between delight and worship is found already in a statement attributed to him, which describes the *Tzaddiq* as “one who delights in the worship of God.”³⁰ According to another view of the Besht, the alternation between coming closer to God and retreating from him, *ratzo va-shov*, is intended to continuously recreate the feeling of delight that is “the quintessence of the worship of God.”³¹ In the name of the Besht, we learn from a passage in one of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy's books that

there are ten *sefirot* in man, who is called microcosm, since the thought is named 'Abba' [Father], and after the *Tzimtzum* it was called 'Imma' [Mother] and so on, down to faith, which is called “two loins of truth”; and delight [*ta'anug*] in worship of God is called *Yessod*, *Tzaddiq*, and sign of the Covenant.³²

This is a comparison between microcosm and theocosm. However, for our purpose it is important to emphasize the affinity between *ta'anug* and the *membrum virile*. Though it is the worship of God that is explicitly invoked as generating the delight, its occurrence in the immediate conceptual vicinity of the “sign of Covenant”—a widespread term for circumcision—and the *sefirah* of *Yessod* do not leave any place for ambiguity about the fact that the two concepts, delight and the phallus, are directly related (we will discuss this topic in more detail in section 5).

The Great Maggid of Medziretch, one of the main disciples of the Besht, asserts that

²⁹ Idel, *Hasidism*, 120–121, 136–137, 140–142–143, 153, 234–235, 262, 328, 370; Etkes, *Ba'al Hashem*, 140 (Hebrew); Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*, 144–147, 285–286 (Hebrew); and Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 121, 187, 218–220, 352–353, 358, 360, 370.

³⁰ R. Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov as quoted in *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fols. 86a and 170a.

³¹ Cf. Ba'al Shem Tov, *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fols. 92b, 139c; compare also the Great Maggid's *Keter Shem Tov*, fol. 16b.

³² *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fol. 86a. See also Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 150–151, 352 n. 366. For a parallel discussion found in the same book see below, section 5.

when [the sons of] Israel perform the will of the Place [in Hebrew a term for God] they are adding delight on high...when [the sons of] Israel are repenting and cause the return of everything to its source, they add delight on high.³³

We witness here the phenomenon of a rabbinic theurgical term being substituted by *Ta'anug*: in the case of the rabbinic view, Israel, or the righteous, provide sustenance [*mefarnesim*] to God,³⁴ but in Hasidism this becomes "Israel provides delight to God."³⁵ Elsewhere the Great Maggid described those who serve God in order to induce delight, just as sons who delight their father.³⁶ In a tradition that originates from the Great Maggid's circle, it is said that by means of praying someone is inducing delight into God, that He then dwells within the world, and hence the world is replete with delight as well.³⁷ Likewise, the Great Maggid's son, R. Abraham Friedmann (also called the Angel), mentions two forms of worship: that of the righteous persons [the *Tzaddiqim*] who perform the commandments in order to induce delight into God, and another—described as higher, and performed by the greater *Tzaddiq*—that intends to bring grace to the entire world.³⁸ According to this master, it is by means of his very annihilation that the *Tzaddiq* draws the divine revelation down into the world here below.³⁹ Thus the theurgy of delight is understood as inferior to the process—to which I would refer as magic, as indicated above—of the drawing down of the divine influx.⁴⁰ The specific sequence between the two stages may be significant: the delight, or erotic excitement, which the worshiper induces in God, creates the influx, which can be imagined as an emission that enters the world. Indeed, according to a viewpoint that we find in the Hasidic masters, the world in its entirety is conceived of as a female in comparison to God, imagined as a male.⁴¹

³³ *'Or ha-'Emmet*, fol. 51b.

³⁴ See e.g., *Midrash Zutta on Shir ha-Shirim*, ch. I.

³⁵ See the collection of traditions from the Great Maggid's circle, entitled *'Or ha-'Emmet*, fol. 53c. Compare also to his *'Or Torah*, fol. 27b.

³⁶ See the passage adduced in the name of the Great Maggid by R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev, *Qdushat Levi ha-Shalem*, 100 translated and analyzed in Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 155. See also the same tradition *Qdushat Levi ha-Shalem*, 194.

³⁷ See Schatz Uffenheimer, *ibidem*, 162. See, also *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, 93–96.

³⁸ *Hesed le-'Avraham*, fol. 7bc.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 12c.

⁴⁰ See Idel, *Hasidism*, 65–81.

⁴¹ See, e.g., R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *'Or ha-Me'ir*, fol. 16c; and Idel, *Hasidism*, 134.

A similar distinction between delight and drawing down is found in another Hasidic tradition, from the school of a disciple of the Great Maggid, R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev:

Sometimes the letters rule over man, and sometimes man rules over the letters. This means that when man pronounces speeches with power and devotion, the speeches then rule over him, because the [divine] light within the letters confers to him vitality and delight so that he may address speeches to the Creator; but this man cannot abolish anything bad by performing other combinations [of letters]. But when someone pronounces speeches with devotion and brings all his power within the letters and cleaves to the light of the Infinite, Blessed be He, that dwells within the letters, this person is higher than the letters and he combines letters as he likes... and he will be capable of drawing down the influx, the blessing, and the good things.⁴²

By investing all one own's power and devotion in recitation, a person can take over the initiative and rule the letters; by combining them in new ways, he can thus govern the whole of reality.

This second aspect of Hasidism I would call "magical". In contrast, the righteous of a lesser kind (the "theurgical" one, described in the first part of the passage) does not invest "all" his power. Hence he is only given delight, without being capable of transforming reality: the process remains limited to that of his own self-transformation.

That religious deeds intend to create delight in God is particularly conspicuous in a book of R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, another student of the Great Maggid, who gave a brief and fine description:

He who directs all his deeds in order to create delight for his Creator, draws down the *'Alef*, the symbol of the Ruler of the World, in all his deeds. But if he takes the delight for himself [alone], not in order to create a delight in his Creator, he is separating the *'Alef*, the Ruler of the world.⁴³

Therefore the act of drawing down is part of a broader scheme that begins with the induction of delight into the higher world, apparently envisioned as male (as we saw above), but not for the sake of the operator alone. For the concept of mystical attainment as being generated

⁴² R. Aharon of Zhitomir, *Toledot 'Aharon*, I, fol. 40ab. See also *ibid.*, II, fol. 47d. On the phenomenon of bringing down the influx by means of intense study see Idel, *Hasidism*, 182–185.

⁴³ R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, *Ma'ayan ha-Hokhmah* (Podgorze, 1897), fol. 38c. For the two stages, namely inducing delight and then drawing down influx, see also R. Israel of Ruzhyn, *Sefer 'Irin Qaddishin Tanyyana* (1907), fol. 10d.

by the drawing forth of *ʿAleph*—a symbol of God—into something, especially the mystic himself, there are several parallels in Hasidism.⁴⁴ In the passage just quoted, it is sharply distinguished from an egoistic type of delight that will actually separate God from the mystic: it is only a devotional mood, which intends to create delight in God, that will draw Him down within the mystic and his deeds. We can discern here an attempt at minimizing the magical aspect of the act of “drawing down”. Thus, for example, we learn from some traditions belonging to the school of the Great Maggid, who was R. Israel of Kuznitz’s teacher, that the *Tzaddiq* induces the emergence of a feminine facet in the divine. R. Levi Isaac adduces, in the name of his master the Great Maggid, the following passage:

As is well-known, the word ζo^{\prime} ⁴⁵ refers to the feminine facet [of God]... [if] the quintessence of the worship of God is to cause delight to the Creator, blessed be He, then the Creator is referred to as if he is a Recipient, this being the meaning of the verse: “This [ζo^{\prime}] came from God”⁴⁶ namely as if the Holy One, Blessed be He, implies the facet of the female, the facet of ζo^{\prime} , which is a wondrous thing in our eyes.⁴⁷

The ritual is understood as creating delight for God, perceived now under the aspect of a recipient, that is to say as a feminine entity that is affected by a masculine one: basically a male worshiper. This inversion of the traditional roles is reminiscent of the theurgical activity in the mainstream of Kabbalah, where the divine realm is imagined to be deeply affected by human activity.⁴⁸ A similar idea is found in another important disciple of the Great Maggid, R. Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apta. In his widespread *ʿOhev Israel* he distinguishes between two dimensions of the worshipper:

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 65.

⁴⁵ This is the feminine demonstrative pronoun in Hebrew.

⁴⁶ Psalms 118, 23.

⁴⁷ R. Levi Isaac, *Qdushat Levi ha-Shalem*, 195 and see also *ibid.*, 194 and 353. This tradition was adduced and discussed by R. Moshe Eliaqum Beri’ah, *Da’at Moshe*, fol. 75a, and see also his relative, R. Elimelekh ben Hayyim of Kuznitz, a descendant of the Kuznitzer Rebbe, in his *ʿImrei Elimelekh*, fols. 6d, 136d. Compare also to a similar interpretation in a collection of the views of the Great Maggid, *Shemu’ah Tovah*, fols. 51a, 55b, 94ab and *ʿOr ha-ʿEmmet*, fol. 6d; R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, *Ma’ayan ha-Hokhmah*, fols. 39b, 86ab, 93b, and R. Meir ha-Levi of Apta, *ʿOr la-Shamayyim*, fol. 98d. On the experience of delight while studying the Torah see the quote in the name of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, adduced in R. Benjamin of Zalisch, *Ahavat Dodim*, 20–21. More on delight in the last book; see, e.g., the interesting discussions on 24, 85.

⁴⁸ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 156–199.

everything in the world necessarily possesses aspects of male and female. This is especially true in the case of the worshiper of God, who has to possess the aspects of male and female...namely that of emanator and recipient. The male aspect means, for example, that which is always emanating: by dint of his holiness and great cleaving, and the purity of his thought, he emanates a spiritual delight into the supernal lights, worlds and attributes. And he has also a female aspect, namely that which is the recipient and draws down to the lower worlds the influx from the supernal worlds, and to all [the members of] the community of Israel whatever they need and all kinds of good graces...The male aspect causes an influx on high and this influx becomes semen and becomes a male aspect with respect to the female...and the female aspect of the *Tzaddiq* is his faculty of receiving the supernal influx and of drawing from above to below all kinds of good things and material issues.⁴⁹

The recipient of delight is therefore defined, by the very quality of receptivity, as female, independent of any question of gender or sex. This approach, reminiscent of Jung's views of male and female as two qualities found in both men and women, is here part of the more abstract and ontological category of emanator and recipient, stemming from Neoplatonic sources. Inducing delight defines, or redefines the hierarchical relationship and the gender of the factors involved in the experience. In the same vein we read in R. Nahman of Bratzlav, one of the prodigies of Hasidic world:

It is known that the recipient of delight from someone else is called a female...Therefore when the Holy One, blessed be He, receives delight from the prayer of Israel it is as if He becomes a female in relation to Israel...since by the smell that God receives from the prayers of Israel He [then] becomes the secret of the female.⁵⁰

Thus, we may conclude that both in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah and in Hasidism the ritual—consisting basically, although not exclusively, of prayer—is widely understood as having a real impact on the divinity: it induces delight and generates a state in the divine world that may be understood as feminine. Unlike the hypostatic feminine power in the theosophical Kabbalah, which is affected but not generated by human actions, in Hasidic texts it is assumed that the feminine aspect in divin-

⁴⁹ R. Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apta, *Ohev Israel*, fol. 81cd. On delight see also *ibid.*, fols. 80cd, 81ab, 83cd, 85b. Compare also to R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, *Ma'ayan Hokhmah*, fol. 93b.

⁵⁰ *Liqutei Moharan*, Mahadura Qamma, no. 73.

ity emerges as the result of a specific ritual act that induces delight.⁵¹ This entity constitutes a form of relationship between the human and the divine, rather than a distinct female hypostasis, and this correlative situation is pertinent for the understanding of the above passages. Likewise, the two aspects of the righteous—male and female—do not pertain to sex or gender, or to changes on that level.

I refer to this two-tiered relationship between the human elite—the righteous—and the divine as the mystical-magical model that informed many discussions in Kabbalah and Hasidism.⁵² Among the main interpretations of this model is the erotic one that emphasizes the importance of inducing delight as the first stage of this model. While marginal in the general economy of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, this erotic interpretation of the mystical-magical model moved to center stage in Hasidic literature.

Delight in Ecstatic Kabbalah

Most of the discussions above assume that it is possible for ritual to have an impact on the complex divine realm, mainly understood as compounded of ten *sefirot*. The induction of delight was therefore part of a more elaborate theory concerning the religious task of the Kabbalist, who had to perform the commandments in such a way as to contribute to improving the relations between the divine powers. While the main trend of Kabbalah therefore attributed great importance to the correspondence between human deeds and divine powers, a somewhat later Kabbalistic school, developing in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, focused upon human activity aimed at a direct contact with the divine. One of the signs of this contact was the feeling of delight that the mystic felt during his mystical experience. Many of the expressions of delight found in this current, known as “ecstatic Kabbalah,” owe much to neo-Aristotelean and Neoplatonic philosophical texts, where delight was described as accompanying the supreme human activities, such as the act of intellection and adherence to supernal spheres. This trend draws its inspiration mainly from the kind of perspective

⁵¹ See also R. Abraham Yehoshua Heschel, *Ohev Israel*, fols. 83cd, 85c; R. Jacob Isaac ha-Levi Horowitz, known as the Hozeh of Lublin, *Zot Zikkaron*, fol. 3b, etc.; and R. Yehudah Leib of Yanov, *Ool Yehudah*, fol. 5c.

⁵² Idel, *Hasidism*, 95–145, especially 133–140.

exemplified by Maimonides' descriptions of the pleasure and joy of the few *perfecti* in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:51.⁵³

Essential for understanding both Maimonides and other Jewish philosophers, as compared to the Kabbalists and the Hasidic masters discussed above, is the fact that while the mystic feels delight when he is in cognitive contact with God, God as an intellect does not share this delight. The impassible God of the philosophers intelligizes constantly, but without being himself subject to the feeling of delight. Unlike Maimonides' earlier discussions of the delight that is the patrimony of the righteous in their post-mortem existence as part of their intellectual activity, the passage in his *Guide of the Perplexed* referred to above deals with a near-to-death experience of delight, which may occur in quite exceptional individuals.

Much more Plotinian, on the other hand, is the language used to describe a mystical experience in a treatise known in Hebrew as *Peraqim be-Hatzlahah* and attributed to Maimonides. Written originally in Arabic, presumably in the mid-thirteenth century and with some relation to Sufism or to Jewish Sufi circles in the Near East, it evinces some interesting parallels to ecstatic Kabbalah. Here the nexus between ritual, ecstasy, and delight is quite explicit:

The one who prays shall turn towards God, stand on his feet and feel delight in his heart and his lips, his hands stretched forward, and his organs of speech speak while the other parts [of his body] are all afraid and trembling, while he does not cease uttering sweet sounds; [then] he makes himself broken-hearted, prepares himself, beseeches, bows down and prostrates himself weeping, as if he is before a great and awesome king. And feels a sensation of sinking and trembling until he finds himself in the world of intellective beings⁵⁴

Apart from these two examples—Maimonides' *Guide* and the *Peraqim be-Hatzlahah*—the term delight occurs only rarely in philosophical sources until the mid-thirteenth century.⁵⁵ However, in the ecstatic Kabbalah

⁵³ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 627–628.

⁵⁴ *Peraqim be-Hatzlahah*, 7. The Hebrew translation uses the term *ta'anug*, which is translated as delight. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, 167 n. 225; *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 93, 98, 165. Compare also to Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, 173–177. On Jewish Sufism in the thirteenth century Near East see the numerous studies of Fenton, e.g., "Judaism and Sufism," 755–768 or Fenton, ed. & tr., *The Treatise of the Pool*. This is a Plotinian stand. See the Jewish appropriations of the theory of ascent to the intellectual world discussed in Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 41, 51, 168–169; and Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 192–193.

⁵⁵ See Berezin, "'Felicity', 'Delight', and 'Virtue.'"

of Abraham Abulafia (1240–c.1291) we find numerous instances of the term *ta'anug*—more, in fact, than in the entire philosophical and Kabbalistic literature before him. Already in one of his earliest writings, Abulafia writes

And I see that up to Him [i.e., God], the quintessence of all experience arrives, as there comes from Him all the wisdom of logic [and] to every intellectual soul [comes] the delight of vision.⁵⁶

A fuller discussion of the concept of delight, in an explicitly erotic context, is found in his *'Or ha-Sekhel*, written in the early eighties of the thirteenth century in Messina:

The name [of God, namely the Tetragrammaton] is composed of two parts since there are two parts of love [divided between] two lovers and the [parts of] love turn into one [entity] when love becomes actuated. The divine intellectual love and the human intellectual love are conjoined, being one. Exactly in the same manner the name [of God] includes [the words] One, because of the connection of the human existence with the divine existence during the [act of] intellection—which is identical with the intellect in [its] existence—until he and He become one [entity]. This is the [great] power of man: he can link the lower part with the higher one, and the lower [part] will ascend and cleave to the higher, and the higher [part] will descend and will kiss the entity ascending towards it, like a bridegroom actually kisses his bride out of his great and real desire, characteristic of the delight [*ta'anug*] of both, from the power of the name [of God].⁵⁷

In the context of the present discussion, the salient point is the claim that the two loves are but two parts of a more comprehensive unit reflected by the structure of the consonants of the Tetragrammaton, which in terms of gematria comprises the value of the Hebrew words *'Ahavah* (= love) and *'Ehad* (= one), both words having the numerical value of 13. Therefore “two loves” and “two times one” are comprised in the numerical value of the consonants of the Tetragrammaton, which is 26. Abulafia apparently implies that the union between the two types of love, or the two types of existence, is possible because of the fact that they are derived from a basic unity (similar to how Plato in his *Symposium* envisioned the two halves of the male and the female as having originally been part of one organic unity). Spiritually, the lower human love can meet and be transformed into a more comprehensive

⁵⁶ *Mafteah ha-Re'ayon*, fol. 21a.

⁵⁷ *'Or ha-Sekhel*, fol. 115a, and Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 66–67, where I suggested that this passage is a possible source for Spinoza's *amor dei intellectualis*.

entity, which also comprises the higher divine love. We thus witness an interesting case of *unio mystica* by means of love and intellection. The mystic feels delight; and the question that arises from this passage is whether God, or the cosmic Active Intellect that may play the role of the bridegroom, is delighted too. The end of the passage suggests that the question should be answered in the affirmative. This also seems to be the case in another passage: in Abulafia's commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed*, entitled *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, where he writes about

the cleaving of all [human] knowledge to the Name in its activities, in the secret of the delight of bridegroom and bride. And it is known that this wondrous way is accepted by all the "prophetic" disciples, who write what they write according to the Holy Spirit, and they are those who know the ways of prophecy.⁵⁸

The main gematria—referred as the secret—that informs this passage is $ta'anug = 529 = ha-hatan ve-ha-kallah$ (the groom and the bride), which suggests that delight is not just a pure spiritual or intellectual feeling but has some erotic overtones for both of the entities implied in the process. The same gematria appears also in another passage stemming from Abulafia's circle, found at the end of the anonymous *Sefer ha-Tzeruf*, where the phrase *ha-hokmah ha-'Elohit* (the science of the Divine) = 529 is adduced in this context, thus concisely expressing the main features of Abulafia's view of the subject:⁵⁹ the study of metaphysics is a delight, and it points to the common delight of the human and the cosmic intellect. In any case, here and in the following passages delight is understood as basically derived from an intellectual act.

A leitmotif in these and other passages is that the feeling of delight not only accompanies mystical experiences, but that this pleasure may in fact be the aim of mystical practice. In his *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*, Abulafia writes: "the letter is like matter, and the vocalization is like spirit, which moves the matter, and the apprehension of the intention of the one moved and of the mover, is like the intellect; and it is that which acts in spirit and matter, while the delight received by the one who apprehends, constitutes the telos."⁶⁰ According to the Aristotelian hierarchy of the four causes customary in the Middle Ages, the ultimate cause,

⁵⁸ *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, fol. 65b, and see now ed. Gross, 113.

⁵⁹ *Sefer ha-Tzeruf*, fol. 35a. The science of the divine is mentioned also immediately before the passage quoted from *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*. See note 59 above.

⁶⁰ *'Or ha-Sekhel*, fols. 106b–107a.

the purpose or the *telos* of a thing, is the most important of the four.⁶¹ For that reason, this passage of Abulafia may be understood as implying the primacy of delight over apprehension. However, elsewhere in his writings the distinction between apprehension and pleasure is not always so sharp, although there too delight is the final *telos*. In his commentary on the Pentateuch, he writes

The purpose of marriage of man and woman is none other than their union, and the purpose of union is impregnation, and the purpose of impregnation is [bearing] offspring, and the purpose of [offspring] is study [i.e., of Torah by the child born], and the purpose of that [study] is apprehension [of the Divine], and its purpose is the continuing maintenance of the one who apprehends with delight gained from his apprehension [*ta'anug hasagato*], and this is the significance of the circle of creation.⁶²

We might describe this approach as “intellectual hedonism,” since the *telos* of the entire creation is the achievement of spiritual delight. In addition to these theoretical expressions dealing with delights of the intellect, there are descriptions of the mystical experience itself and of the sensation of delight accompanying it. According to the quotations just given, it would seem that only the lower intellect enjoys the feeling of delight, because it alone intelligizes the higher intellect. In another instance, we again find an emphasis on the delight of the lower entity. Although it does not use the term *ta'anug*, the following text represents an interesting parallel to the passage quoted earlier:

And you shall feel in yourself an additional spirit arousing you and passing over your entire body and causing you pleasure, and it shall seem to you as if balm has been placed upon you, from your head to your feet, one or more times, and you shall rejoice and enjoy it very much, with gladness and trembling: gladness to your soul and trembling of your body, like one who rides rapidly on a horse, who is happy and joyful, while the horse trembles beneath him.⁶³

⁶¹ See, e.g., Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* III:13, “its object or its final end, which is the most important of the four causes.” Further on, in the immediate vicinity of the passage from *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*, Abulafia writes, “and the purpose is the most elevated of the reasons.”

⁶² *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, fol. 7b (Gross, ed., 12); cf. his *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*, fol. 128a, “and according to the prophet who derives delight in attaining the form of prophecy [i.e., a mystical experience].”

⁶³ *'Otzar Eden Ganuz*, fols. 163b–164a.

The comparison of the soul and the body to a horse and its rider is quite a common one in the Middle Ages.⁶⁴ Abulafia is ready to consider images related to physical pleasure as an appropriate means of expressing feelings that accompany his mystical experience. The ecstatic Kabbalist does not suggest anywhere that this image might be inappropriate to its subject; and on this point Abulafia in fact departs radically from Maimonides' teaching. Following Aristotle,⁶⁵ Maimonides sees the apprehension of the Divine as the highest goal of human activity; the delight which accompanies it is only a side-effect of this activity.⁶⁶ Abandoning Maimonides' approach in this respect, Abulafia crystallized a view—apparently based upon personal experience, and perhaps also influenced by Sufi claims—according to which there is an additional stage, higher than the acquisition of intellectual perfection, consisting of delight derived from the mystical experience. In another discussion found in his *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, the experience of delight accompanies the acceleration of the ritual actions comprising the mystical technique articulated by Abulafia.⁶⁷ The emphasis on delight in a corporeal context is found in R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah Harar's *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, another ecstatic Kabbalistic book written in Messina, where Abulafia's disciple writes about the culmination of his mystical exercises: "behold, I was anointed from head to foot as with the anointing oil, and we were surrounded with great joy, and I do not know how to compare to it any image because of its great spirituality and the sweetness of its delight; all this occurred to your servant at the beginning [of the career as Kabbalist]."⁶⁸ Here we have the very rare case of a first-person confession as to the savorous nature of the mystical experience. A feeling of delight that is much less corporeal than the one depicted in the two preceding passages is found in Abulafia's Commentary on the Pentateuch, written in 1289, in the same city:

⁶⁴ See the medieval material gathered by Malter, "Personifications of Soul and Body," 466–467.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics XII*, 7, f. 1072b; *Ethics*, end of ch. 7, 1174a–1176a; *Hilkhot Teshvah* 8:2; *Haqlamah le-Pereq Heleq* (*Sefer ha-Ma'or*, 121–122) as well as *Guide* III:51. Maimonides took care to emphasize that the pleasure, which accompanies apprehension "does not belong to the genus of bodily pleasures."

⁶⁶ Compare the Andalusian philosopher ibn Bajjah's accusation against Sufis that they are in search of pleasure. Cf. Hawi, *Islamic Naturalism and Mysticism*, 72–73.

⁶⁷ *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, fol. 31a.

⁶⁸ See Idel, *Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar*, 479. For the fuller context of this passage, see the English translation in Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 152.

It is appropriate that the intellect that perfects the soul will do so in all its aspects . . . And the lover and the bride are like the person who desires and the one that is desired and their common denominator is the desire . . . the soul loves the intellect because it is emanating upon it its light, brilliance and splendor, so that it [the soul] is receiving from it a great delight, because it sees by it [by means of the soul] all the existents and that there is nothing among them [i.e. the existences] that is similar, equal, or comparable to it, since all beauty is beneath its beauty, and all degrees are beneath its degree and all delights are beneath its delight. This is why it [the intellect] is to be loved alone, more than any [other] beloved, by the soul, because of itself. Likewise the intellect sees and gazes upon all the creatures but sees none which is more beautiful than it, and worthwhile of a degree and delight [greater] than the perfect soul of man, which knows its degree and beauty and essence, since it [the soul] is the single created form which is connected to this low matter. Those are the paths of love, affection and desire between the intellect and the soul.⁶⁹

Thus the feelings of desire and love are both attributed to the intellect, just as delight was. What is the precise nature of the intellect here is not entirely clear. Is it the individual intellect informing the individual soul? Or the cosmic intellect adorning the individual soul? On the basis of other parallels in Abulafia, the latter option seems to me more plausible, although the first one is not to be excluded. Thus Abulafia is much more open than the philosophers to the possibility that the cosmic intellect, or even God as an intellect, also reacts to the human love and aspirations for union, intellectual though this experience may be. Nevertheless, in his writings one would be hard pressed to discern either theurgical or magical aspects connected to the feeling of delight of the cosmic powers.

In a rather neglected book entitled *Etz Hayyim* written in the first half of the fourteenth century by R. Isaiah ben Joseph, a Byzantine Kabbalist, we encounter a perspective reminiscent of one of the passages adduced above from *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*:

Know that the delight of the indwelling of prophecy, which is the influx of the Agent Intellect known in Arabic as *kif 'aqal fa'al* is similar to the delight derived from intercourse, with the following difference between them: namely, that when a man completes the evil act of intercourse he despises it, but the influence of the intellect is the opposite.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Maftehot*, 6.

⁷⁰ *Etz Hayyim*, 60.

Like Abulafia and some Jewish philosophers, R. Isaiah apparently conceived of sexual intercourse as an explicitly negative activity—an attitude that has few parallels in other forms of Kabbalah. The theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists and the Hasidic authors saw the two forms of delight as part of a continuum, or at least conceived the lower one as positive in principle, although inferior with respect to its counterpart; but in the passage just quoted and in Abulafia, it is evident that the authors are concerned with emphasizing the huge difference between corporeal and intellectual delight and evaluate the two as completely different.⁷¹

The above quotations about intellectual delight, together with others I did not cite here, all stem from a broader literary corpus, in fact a school, known as ecstatic Kabbalah. However, there are also instances to be found in other Kabbalistic schools independent of Abulafia and his students, although presumably drawing from philosophical sources similar to those which nourished the ecstatic Kabbalah. Thus, for example, we find a reference to delight in the context of intellection in a classic of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah that emerged from the school of Nahmanides' followers. The anonymous author of *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohut* explains the significance of “the death by Kiss” in the following words:

The soul of the righteous one will ascend—while he is yet alive—higher and higher, to the place where the souls of the righteous [enjoy their] delight, which is “the cleaving of the mind.” The body will remain motionless, as it is said:⁷² “But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.”⁷³

This is quite an interesting case of the post-mortem experiences of the righteous souls being applied to a mystical experience in the present. We may therefore assume that in other forms of Kabbalah as well a few parallels exist to the main paradigm of ecstatic Kabbalah.

⁷¹ See also Abulafia's text translated in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 204. Compare, however, the homogenizing approach of Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 263.

⁷² Deut. 4:4. Compare also to the interpretation of this verse by R. David ben Zimra's *Metzudat David*, fol. 3c.

⁷³ *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohut*, fol. 98b. See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 44–45.

Renewing Delight in Eighteenth-Century Hasidism

In many eighteenth-century Hasidic sources, we find discussions about the possibility of enjoying delight on a permanent basis.⁷⁴ The precise source of these discussions is not clear, and there are several possible explanations for its emergence. One possibility is that they are indebted to the views of the early fifteenth-century Catalan Jewish philosopher, R. Hasdai Crescas.⁷⁵ The Hasidic masters, however, emphasized the necessity of renewing the delight related to ritual on a daily basis: they were interested in the ritual dimension of their religious life and not so much in the theological debates between Crescas and Maimonides. On the other hand, Yehudah Liebes has suggested a possible Sabbatean source for these Hasidic discussions.⁷⁶ For my part, I would emphasize that in both cases, the philosophical and the Sabbatean, ritual was relatively unimportant; and hence I would rather call attention to the possible continuity between theurgical texts such as those discussed above (section 2) and the delight-oriented understanding of worship in Hasidism.

Let me begin with a discussion handed down in the name of the Besht by his grandson, R. Moshe Hayyim Ephrayyim of Sudytkov:

Just as old age causes weakness in all the limbs of man because the faculties, the humors and the circulation of blood that vivify man, are in decline, so too in the realm of spirituality, an old and aged one [i.e. an old man] does not draw a great delight or vitality, or something new. This is the meaning of the saying⁷⁷ “Every day they should be as new in your eyes,” because [of the verse]:⁷⁸ “They are every morning new, [and] great is your faith” which means that because they are new every morning, namely that you innovate every day the work of creation, by the dint of it, “Your faith is great.” We find, therefore, that the quintessence of every prayer and commandment is faith.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ See Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 218–219; the collection of early Hasidic traditions compiled by Nigal, *Leidat ha-Hasidut*, 159–164 (Hebrew); and Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 229.

⁷⁵ For his views see Berezin “‘Felicity’, ‘Delight’, and ‘Virtue,’” 108, on the dependence of delight on the continuous emergence of apprehension.

⁷⁶ See Liebes, *On Sabbateism and its Kabbalah*, 192, 394 note 134 (Hebrew).

⁷⁷ *Sifrei (Pesiqta’ Z’utarti)*, Deut 6:6. This short statement had a very long career in Hasidism and I address here only very few instances of the interpretations offered by Hasidic masters of this Midrash. See also below notes 86, 93.

⁷⁸ Lamentation 3:23.

⁷⁹ *Degel Mahaneh Efrayyim*, 214. Compare also to the important formulation attributed,

If the attribution of this passage to the Besht is correct—and I see no reason to question it—this means that already at the beginning of Hasidism a significant connection is drawn between the importance of freshness, vitality, and delight, and this in the context of a discussion of religious issues like prayer and faith.

Continuing a rabbinic and some Cordoverian treatments of the concept of *'Ain*⁸⁰—*nihil*—Hasidic masters elaborated on the importance of a theurgy of delight much more than their Kabbalistic predecessors. With the Hasidic masters, self-effacement was conceived of as being part of a continuous process of personal renewal, which could be attained within a larger framework of daily renewal of the creation and of the Torah, as well as continuous renewal within the Deity. This emphasis on the urgency of spiritual renewal also reflects the more general character of Hasidism as a revivalist movement. Indeed, while this discussion has no explicit connection to the Torah, or to the concept of Torah as a gift, such a nexus is found in a book of one of the early Hasidic masters, R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl [1730–1797],⁸¹ a younger student of the Besht. Presumably following the latter, the emphasis on the necessity of a continuously-renewed experience of receiving the Torah as a gift is connected elsewhere by R. Menahem Nahum with a particularly erotic understanding of study and theurgy. After adducing the Midrashic view of the Torah as both a bride and a gift, he writes in a remarkable passage reminiscent of the quote from R. Moshe Hayyim Ephrayim of Sudylkov in the name of the Besht, that

the union between the bridegroom and the bride, the Assembly of Israel⁸² and the Holy One, blessed be He, takes place by means of the Torah... And just as the bridegroom and the bride will delight in joy, so the Holy One, blessed be He and the Assembly of Israel are [enjoying]

correctly in my opinion, by R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy to the Besht, in *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, fol. 83c. For the importance of faith, this time a belief that is interpreted here in both a theurgical and a pantheistic manner, see the Great Maggid of Mezeritch, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, 244–246. For the affinity between delight and vitality—as the divine pantheistic presence in all things—see also *ibid.*, 326.

⁸⁰ See Idel, *Hasidism*, 113. For an approach to Hasidism that almost totally ignores those possible sources found in earlier non-Kabbalistic and Kabbalistic literatures see Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*.

⁸¹ On this author see Green, *Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl*, 1–27.

⁸² *Knesset Yisrael*. This is a cognomen for the last *sefirah*, which is commonly understood as the bride of God, and the union between them is conceived of as the main task of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah.

“like the joy of the bridegroom for/on his bride.”⁸³... He compared us to a bridegroom and a bride, since the permanent delight is not a delight,⁸⁴ only the union of the bridegroom and the bride, which is a new union, because they did not previously have intercourse. In such a manner someone has to unify the Holy One, blessed be He, with a new union every day, as if on this day it has been given, as the sages, blessed be their memory said: “Let the words of the Torah be new etc.”⁸⁵ And the reason [for the renewal of the Torah] is that the Holy One, blessed be He, is renewing the creation of the world [*Ma'aseh Bereshit*] every day, and the Torah is called “creation of the world” because by means of it [namely of the Torah] all the worlds have been created, as is well known. And God is continuously innovating and there is not one [single] day that is similar to the other one, and every day there is a new adherence and coming closer to the Torah, since the day has been created by it in a manner different from “yesterday that passed”.⁸⁶ This is the reason why Israel is called a virgin [*Betullat Yisrael*]... because every day its youth is renewed and the union of that day never existed [beforehand] since the creation of the world, and from this point of view it is called a virgin. Whoever is worshiping in such a manner is always called the walker from one degree [of worship] to another, and from one aspect to another, and every day he unifies a new union... and the Torah is called an aspect of the fiancée [*me'orasah*] that is an aspect of the bride, so that always a new union will be achieved as [that taking place] at the time of the wedding. This is the meaning of [the story about] Moses that he was studying and forgetting, namely that he was forgetting the delight, because ‘a permanent delight is not delight’, until the Torah had been given to him as a bride to a bridegroom, which means that he received the power to go every day from one degree to another,⁸⁷ and every new degree and ascent was for him an aspect of the bride, a new union, and this is the great delight like that of the bridegroom and the bride.⁸⁸

Routine and monosemic understandings of the sacred texts, which induce monotony, or inertia, are conceived here, implicitly, as the main danger for fresh religious experiences. The Torah as a gift is understood as possessing the quality of a bride, which means here a virgin whose

⁸³ Isaiah 62:5.

⁸⁴ R. Menahem Nahum, and his son Mordekhai were both very fond of this formula. Also R. Aharon ha-Kohen of Apta has attributed to the Besht a passage in which the dictum appears; see his book *Ner Mitzvah*, fol. 24b, written at the end of the eighteenth century.

⁸⁵ See above, n. 78.

⁸⁶ Psalm 90:4.

⁸⁷ This demand for a continuous renewal is a topos in Hasidism.

⁸⁸ R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Me'or Einayyim*, 123. See also Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 25. I hope to return to this passage in a study on the Torah as gift, based on Marcel Mauss' approach to the gift.

virginity is daily renewed, this being a metaphor for the perception that every sexual union is unique and different from every other one. It is therefore incumbent on the student of the Torah to obliterate his earlier knowledge, which may become an obstacle to fresh understandings of the Torah. In fact, the study of the Torah is conceived of as novel every day, because God is renewing creation daily by means of the Torah.⁸⁹ Conceived of as a male, God, according to the above text, needs the theurgical study of the Torah by Jews in order for him to enjoy a new kind of union with His female counterpart, the bride or the Assembly of Israel. Clearly we have here an echo of a strongly erotized covenant-theology. Freshness, both on the cosmic and on the scholastic level, is strongly related to the resulting delight, metaphorically connected to an erotic freshness. Thus God cannot renounce the Torah: He needs it in order to recreate the world, and thus also to recreate His own delight on a daily basis. By doing so, He allows for the student to gain a fresh understanding on each and every day of study, as well as creating a new kind of union between the male and female aspects of the divinity induced by this study. The gift of continuously renewed delight is therefore firstly a human experience, and next a divine one. It should be mentioned here that the linkage between study of the Torah, on the one hand, and divine delight in this activity, on the other, is a widespread topic, already found in a Jewish text of late antiquity, apparently glossed in *Midrash Mishlei* chapter X, but belonging to the Heikhalot literature and resonating in Kabbalah long before the emergence of Polish Hasidism.⁹⁰

Let me further address a certain aspect of the long quotation given above, that is, the explicit nature of the reciprocity. The joy is felt as delight not only by the human student, nor only by the divinity as recipient of the theurgical impact. Both enjoy, but the mutuality of their experiences of joy does not obliterate the distinction between them. What takes place is an exchange, rather than a fusion, between the two poles of the erotic event, united though they may be during it.

A view similar to the one here discussed in the example of R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl is presented concisely in a text by R. Abraham Yehoshu'a Heschel of Apta, a late eighteenth-century Hasidic

⁸⁹ To a great extent, this view is influenced by the Lurianic theory that every day the prayer should be a new one. See R. Hayyim Vital, *Peri 'Etz Hayyim*, 17–18 and Idel, *Hasidism*, 334 n. 20.

⁹⁰ For references to this text see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 171–172, 538 n. 32.

master who wrote that “routine and inertia obliterate the amusement and the delight,⁹¹ since permanent delight is no delight. And in the Holy Torah it is written⁹² that ‘In each and every day, lets them be as new in your eyes’”⁹³ In a manner reminiscent of R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, we find in this passage a close connection between delight and renewal, with both authors quoting the same rabbinic proof-text. However, it seems that these two passages are not directly related but reflect the impact of an earlier common source, presumably a passage of the Besht. Elsewhere, the same master distinguishes between an influx provided by the divine as part of the cosmological process and another type of influx which is a free divine gift to man. Moses, who was acquainted with both, preferred the second. However, God, who wanted to enjoy the worship of Israel, preferred to distribute influx only as a response to the performance of the commandments and to the study of the Torah by the Jews, because in this way He would receive delight from them.⁹⁴ This view seems to constitute a rejection of the theory of grace in its Christian forms, that is to say, of grace as freely given without a connection to human activities.

Rabbinic tradition saw the gift of the Torah as an entity descending in its entirety. In contrast with this, the passages adduced in this section are premised on the impossibility of transmitting the inner nature of the Torah in its totality: the Torah is seen not as a primordial entity that may move from one place to another, but rather its “true” nature is conceived of as an ever-changing entity. Hence the general concept of “renewal” is more important than that of “stability.” As seen above, the concept of moving from one degree to another is related in this Hasidic context to an understanding of the true nature of the Torah. Vertical ascensional mobility of the mystic from one rank to another becomes in Hasidism an ideal that is combined with the idea of a daily renewed universe, and to that of the intermittent delight of both God and man. It may well be that this emphasis on mystical ascent, which is very representative of Hasidic thought since its beginning, is connected (in this specific context) with the ascent of Moses to receive the Torah as described in rabbinic legends, where he was given gifts

⁹¹ The Hebrew phrase is *Sha'ash'uim ve-ta'anug*,

⁹² See above, n. 78.

⁹³ See R. Abraham Yehoshu'a Heschel of Apta, *Torat 'Emmet*, fol. 3c and his younger contemporary, R. Abraham Hayyim of Zlotchov, *Peri Hayyim*, fol. 51c.

⁹⁴ See R. Abraham Yehoshu'a Heschel of Apta, *Torat 'Emmet*, fol. 34cd.

other than the tablets. This ongoing ascent should also be understood in relation to another passage by R. Menahem Nahum, where he speaks about another “great gift”, which is the “world-to-come.” The next world consists in a state of “permanent delight,” which is too much to bear if it is experienced all of a sudden; therefore, God created the opportunity of a gradual accommodation towards this state by means of an intermittent experience of delight during the day of Sabbath in this world.⁹⁵

Coming back now to the general concept of “renewal” highlighted above, let me attempt to explain how it is imagined to take place. First and foremost, it is not the very structure of the consonants of the Torah that is renewed. In this respect, R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl differs from the perspective found in many other passages in the textual corpus of Kabbalah and Hasidism, which assume the possibility of a change in the order of the consonants of the biblical words.⁹⁶ Instead, he capitalizes on a concept of transformation derived from an astromagical theory, found already in the Middle Ages and adopted by, among others, R. Moses Cordovero. According to that theory, the written consonants and the sounds are containers or—according to the original terminology—palaces within which the supernal spirituality, the *ruhaniyyut*, is dwelling or into which it is attracted.⁹⁷ This spirituality is referred to by numerous other terms as well, such as light (*’or*), luminosity (*behirut*), or—most frequently—vitality (*hiyyut*). These various words all refer to the divine presence within the letters of the Torah: a concept which I propose to call linguistic immanence and which sometimes has explicit erotic aspects.⁹⁸ According to many Hasidic texts, this spirituality dwells within the letters of the Torah and is part and parcel of its very structure. However, according to numerous other texts, it may be attracted within the consonants by an intense performance of the verbal rituals of prayer or study of the Torah.⁹⁹ This second,

⁹⁵ See R. Menahem Nahum, *Me’or Einayim*, 261.

⁹⁶ See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 377–389.

⁹⁷ On the earlier sources of this term see the seminal studies of Pines, “Shi’ite Terms and Conceptions,” and “On the Term *Ruhaniyyut*,” “*Le Sefer ha-Tamar*.”

⁹⁸ For the erotic aspects of the linguistic immanence see, especially, R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Toledot Ya’aqov Yosef*, fol. 151c; and R. Ze’ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *’Or ha-Me’ir*, fol. 141b. See also Idel, *Hasidism*, 171–188 and especially *Messianic Mystics*, 224–225; and Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 23–24. For the affinity between vitality and delight see above n. 80.

⁹⁹ This view is found in several Jewish medieval and Renaissance sources; see Idel, Introduction to the facsimile edition of R. Joseph Al-Ashqar’s *Tzafnat Pa’aneah*, 43–46 (Hebrew).

more activist theory conceives of the human verbal act as possessing a talismanic feature of the kind that seems to inform our discussions above: here the inner dimensions of the Torah fluctuate according to the special mode of its study.

God as "Delight of All Delights"

Rather than as a recipient of delights generated by human worship as described in many passages above, God is sometimes described in Hasidic literature by formulations such as "the delight of all delights." In such cases we are dealing with a basically Platonic approach, that has been influential in Hasidism and transposes all supreme values to a superior level of reality.¹⁰⁰ Just as human beauty has been envisioned as reflecting the original beauty of the supernal world, with divine feminine power as its ultimate source (as is also the case in some of materials that will be discussed below), likewise God is the highest place where delight is found.

The syntagm "the delight of all delights" should not just be seen as an interesting theological innovation but also as part of what can be called *Gestalt-Coherence* (that is to say, the fact that different terms can be seen as related due to their having a common denominator, resulting in some kind of loose cohesiveness that functions as a system).¹⁰¹ Thus the different forms of delight—the delight of the mystic, the delight generated by him in God, delight as divine presence in the world and as the vitality of all things, and finally, as we shall see below, God as delight—display a kind of *Gestalt-Coherence*.

The Besht is credited with having been the first to use the phrase "the world of delight"¹⁰²—*olam ha-ta'anug*. As already said, this expression is one of the many instances in Hasidism of a transposition of religious values to a supreme level of reality (compare e.g. the reification of human activities in expressions such as "the world of love," "the world of thought," or "the world of speech"). Such reified delight was perhaps meant by the Besht to be identical to God. In the same vein,

¹⁰⁰ See Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 168–178.

¹⁰¹ For the sources of this concept coined by Aron Gurwitsch, and my use of it in the context of Hasidism, see Idel, *Hasidism*, 49, 272 n. 15.

¹⁰² See R. Benjamin of Zalisch, *Ahavat Dodim*, 85. See also *ibid.*, 211. For the phrase "delight of delights"—*ta'anug ha-ta'anugim*—as a description of God see, e.g., R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fol. 102d. On the parallelism between God and delight see already in the *Zohar*, I, fol. 99b (*Midrash ha-ne'elam*).

we read in one of the most important discussions pertinent to our topic that R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy (one of the Besht's leading disciples) confessed that he had learned from his teacher that

there are ten *sefirot* in man, because he is a microcosm and, as has been written in Rabad's [commentary on] *Sefer Yetzirah*,¹⁰³ what is found in the supernal worlds, is found also in the year [that is to say, in time], and in the soul of man¹⁰⁴ . . . And on the lowest rank in man there is pain, poverty and suffering, and similarly to it in the attribute of *Malkhut*, which is the last [lowest] attribute "because her feet descend to death."¹⁰⁵ And the [attributes of] *Netzah* and *Hod* in man are standing pillars,¹⁰⁶ that man believes the faith in the Creator according to His truth. And the attribute of *Yesod* is when he delights in the worship of God, blessed be He, more than in any other of all delights, because "out of my flesh [I shall see God]"¹⁰⁷ since the member of copulation is the best of delights because by means of it, male and female are united. And out of the material [delight] he shall understand the spiritual delight, when he adheres to His Unity, Blessed be He, who is the root of all the delights."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ This is the book of the thirteenth-century Kabbalist R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, attributed mistakenly to the twelfth-century R. Abraham ben David, whose acronym is Rabad. On this important book and its impact on Hasidism see Idel, *Hasidism*, 12.

¹⁰⁴ This is a misreading of *Sefer Yetzirah* 6:1.

¹⁰⁵ Proverbs 5:5.

¹⁰⁶ Namely the two pillars of the temple, called in the Bible *Yachin* and *Bo'az*, which were sometimes understood as corresponding to these two *sefirot*.

¹⁰⁷ Job 19:26. On the medieval interpretations of this verse in Jewish thought see Altmann, "The Delphic Maxim." Though this verse occurs several times in R. Joseph ben Shalom's book, I wonder whether one may find there a phallic interpretation, which occurs, however, several times in R. Moshe Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*. See, e.g., 16:6, continuing, presumably, the position of *Zohar*, I, fol. 94a and of *Tiqunei Zohar*, fols. 41b, 70a. For the strong relation between delight, the phallus, and the movements during prayer see the view found in several sources sometimes in the name of the Besht, e.g. *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, fol. 102d and Liebes, *On Sabbateism and its Kabbalah*, 98–99 and 124–125, where the Job verse occurs in quite a sexual though less phallic context, and see also page 130 there. See also note 113 below; and see the Zoharic phrase *innuga de-kulla*, the delight of all, found in *Zohar* II, fol. 259a (and Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 228–229), which may have a sexual implication.

¹⁰⁸ R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, fol. 16c. It is hard to decide where the words of the Besht end and when does R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy intervene. See, however, another passage found in the same book, fol. 138d, where the interpretation of the Job verse in quite a similar way is attributed to the Besht, as well as on fol. 28d, where Joseph is linked to the delight of *Yesod*, again in a passage that starts with an attribution to the Besht. For the *a fortiori* view that learns from the material delight about the spiritual one see also, e.g., *ibid.*, fol. 16d. On pain and the *Shekhinah* see also the discussion of R. Aharon ha-Kohen of Apta in the name of the Besht in his *Sefer 'Or ha-Ganuz la-Tzaddiqim*, col. 3 fol. 1a.

This fascinating passage is reminiscent of a discussion in the name of the Besht I adduced above from the same book of R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoy. In both cases, the human microcosm and the theocosm are described as corresponding and isomorphic, although in the quote just given the Hasidic master is much more explicit in analyzing the human/divine correspondences. For our purpose here, it suffices to point out that the anatomical parallelism between the corporeal delight related to the human penis, and the delight someone takes in the union with God, is explicit and crucial for the entire passage. It is based upon an interesting interpretation of the biblical word *basar*, the common meaning of which is “flesh”, that is to say “body”, and which more specifically means “phallus” (as understood in various instances in the Bible, as well as in Kabbalistic literature, and certainly in the present text).¹⁰⁹ However, the point is not so much that the specifics of the anatomic structure of the phallus are pertinent to the claim made by the Hasidic master (if indeed they are relevant here at all), although such may be the case in some other Kabbalistic sources.¹¹⁰ Rather, what characterizes the Hasidic imagery here is the double function of the phallus as uniting two entities and inducing feelings of delight. This is only one among many examples of the appropriation of theosophical symbolism—here the *sefirah* of *Yesod* as delight—in a manner that shifts the emphasis from the theosophical meaning to a more anthropocentric one. Of great importance for our point that the Besht is the main source of views about delight found in the writings of his disciples is a lengthy passage found in another book of R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoy, where even a sinner’s delight is understood as being connected to the supernal delight.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ See the way in which the term *basar* is used in Genesis 17:11, Ezekiel 16:26 and 23:20. See also the Beshtian texts adduced by R. Aharon ha-Kohen of Apta, *Keter Shem Tov* I, fol. 3ab. This understanding of *basar* in the verse of Job is found also in a text of R. Tzevi Hirsch of Galina. See above note 109 and below note 124.

¹¹⁰ See, e.g., Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*. Let me point out that though in some cases a strongly phallic understanding of some Kabbalistic texts as proposed by Wolfson is appropriate, his moving of this topic to the center of Kabbalah as a whole seems to me unwarranted in most of the Kabbalistic schools, including some of the texts he adduces in order to demonstrate his point. I cannot deal here with this interesting scholarly problem, and I hope to do so in a more detailed manner elsewhere.

¹¹¹ See *Kutonet Passim*, 240 and the analysis of Piekarz, *The Beginning of Hasidism*, 238–240 (Hebrew). See also Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 227–228. Whether this Hasidic approach has something to do with Sabbateanism is a question that cannot be addressed here. See above n. 109.

However, more Platonically-oriented formulations occur in texts that are relatively early in Hasidism and that may, again, reflect the Besht's view. For example, his grandson writes as follows about the patriarch Joseph remaining faithful to the imperative of knowing God in all his ways:

For example, when a certain delight [stemming] from a [certain] thing reached him, he should put his attention to the [primary] source and root of all the delights, wherefrom all the delights emerge, namely from the Cause of All Causes that vivifies all and gives vitality to all things, and it is from there that delight reaches him. And when he will direct his attention to it and will believe in it in a total manner then all the material delights are obliterated and this is the reason that it is hinted in [the verse] "And God was with Joseph,"¹¹² namely that he was always seeing the Tetragrammaton before his eyes,¹¹³ and he united himself to the inner aspects of all things, and to the root of all roots . . . and he penetrated all things and delights and he found the root and interiority that vitalizes everything, and wherefrom all delights are generated.¹¹⁴

The reference to the figure of the biblical Joseph is vital for understanding some of the resonances of this passage. This patriarch is known in Jewish tradition, and especially in the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, as the paragon of sexual chastity whose refusal of engaging in sexual relations with Potiphar's wife became exemplary.¹¹⁵ According to this passage, he preferred the contemplation of God as divine name over the coarse experience of sexual delight. The contemplation of the divine must therefore be seen as a method of fighting against corporeal desire or withstanding a sexual ordeal. A similar position is found in another early Hasidic book authored by R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl:

The entire quintessence of our worship is to purify the attributes that are within us and elevate them by the fact that by means of them, he worships God, Blessed be He. All this is done when a bad love or bad awe—God forbids—comes, and because of his good contemplation he contemplates, he will tremble and say in his heart: this is but a love fallen from the world of love, the love of the Creator, blessed be He, and it is incumbent on me to elevate it, and how shall I do this bad thing to

¹¹² Genesis 39:21.

¹¹³ Cf. Psalm 16:8. The practice of contemplating the letters of the Tetragrammaton precedes Hasidism but has been widespread in this type of Jewish mysticism. See, especially, R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, *Ma'ayan Hokhmah*, fol. 73b, where the contemplation of the Tetragrammaton serves as an exercise to temper the corporeal delight.

¹¹⁴ *Degel Mahaneh Efrayim*, 51.

¹¹⁵ Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 91; Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 145–146; and Idel, *BEN*, 445.

lower it even more. And I love this bad thing that is a thing created by the Blessed One, and by Torah, by means of which all the creatures have been created, and He is the delight of all the delights, and this is the case of all the other attributes [ways of behavior]. In the moment that one of the attributes arouses [i.e., emerges within him], then he should be in awe and fear, and tremble [not] to use the scepter of king of the world¹¹⁶ in order to provoke Him and act against His will and rebel in front of His eyes. On the contrary, when that attribute arouses [i.e., emerges], and an opening of that attribute opens, then he should elevate the fallen things to their root [by his contemplation], since God, Blessed be He, has no greater delight than this great delight.¹¹⁷

According to this passage, the temptation of engaging in a sexual encounter that is considered illicit or inferior is not just an ordeal but also an opportunity for retrieving the supernal source of delight by elevating the lower to its higher source. Such an elevation combines the Neoplatonic concept of the return to the source (reversion) with a more activist approach that considers it an imperative to purify activities of a lower kind, so that they can be restituted to their source in the divine world. A similar approach is found also in the Great Maggid's treatment of Joseph.¹¹⁸

In the three Hasidic approaches to the possibly sinful relationship as described above, we are not dealing with a simple case of avoiding or escaping such a relation, but mainly with a project of refining the coarse shell that contains within it the divine spark conducive to the source of all delights. Delight is not rejected *per se*, but only in what the Hasidic masters conceived of as its fallen or inferior manifestation. The latter is still envisioned as capable of becoming, ideally, an opportunity for obtaining an even higher delight related to God, depicted as the supreme source of all delights. Only oblivion as to the substantial affinity between the lower and the higher delight may render the feeling of delight here below sinful.

What, then, about the attitude towards corporeal delight in Hasidism against the background of the Platonically-oriented discussions adduced above? Does corporeal delight enjoy some significant status in Hasidism,

¹¹⁶ This is a rabbinic phrase, dealing with the prerogatives of the human king, which has been interpreted by the late thirteenth-century Kabbalist R. Joseph of Hamadan and under his influence by many others, as referring to the divine phallus.

¹¹⁷ R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Me'or Einayim*, 26. See also *ibid.*, 27.

¹¹⁸ Great Maggid, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, 29–30. See also 128–129. And see also Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 200.

or is it seen merely as an obstacle for reaching the divine realm as supreme delight? Are corporeal delight and attachment to the divine as a delightful experience considered incompatible? Or are there merely tensions between them, or indeed are they part of a continuum? These questions are hard to answer, and not in the least place because there is no reason to assume that all Hasidic masters would have agreed in this matter. Here as in many other cases, variety and controversy is integral to Jewish discourse; and indeed, one of the most important scholarly disputes about the nature of Hasidism—that between Gershom Scholem and his students, on the one hand, and Martin Buber, on the other—is grounded in very different ways of understanding the attitudes to the world found in Hasidic literature.¹¹⁹ In what follows, I will attempt to address one of the more explicit Hasidic approaches towards sexuality with which I am acquainted. As will be seen, I see it as reinforcing Buber's assumption that Hasidism had a much more positive attitude towards the material world than his opponents assumed.

Let me first turn to a passage by R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, another disciple of the Great Maggid of Medziretch. Commenting on the biblical recommendation to leave one's parents and adhere to one's wife, the Hasidic author asks:

Prima facie this is astonishing. Does the Torah recommend literally that someone will adhere to his wife and fulfill the passions of his heart? However, this should be interpreted as an advice given to man by the Torah about how to cleave to the Holy One, Blessed be He, and he should learn from the adherence to his material wife. If he sees that from such a delight he has an adherence and a pleasure that is transient and that dissipates after a short while, *a fortiori* he will have an adherence and a delight from the Creator, blessed be He, and he will feel the delight of all delights that is eternal, one that gives him life in the world to come. And this principle is that the aspects of the details of the delights that have descended in this material world, all descend from the Torah. The letters of the Torah are clothed in every thing that is created... and someone

¹¹⁹ Buber, "Interpreting Hasidism"; Scholem, "Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism." This is the expanded version of the article originally printed in *Commentary* 32 (1961), 305–316. On the controversy see Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 6–51; Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Man's Relationship to God and World," and her introduction to her *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 10–18 (Hebrew); and the studies of Oppenheim, "The Meaning of Hasidut"; Kepnes, "A Hermeneutic Approach"; the introduction of Dresner to Heschel, *The Circle of the Ba'al Shem Tov*. Buber's view of Hasidism, and the criticism by Scholem, has been extensively discussed in Schaefer, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, 287–338. On Scholem and Hasidism see Jacobs, "Aspects of Scholem's Study of Hasidism"; and Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Gershom Scholem's Interpretation of Hasidism."

who is wise and understands by his own knowledge how to take a hint of wisdom even from those letters that are found on the lowest level [of reality], then generates delight . . . because this is the essence of the delight of the Blessed One . . . namely that even from a material delight he should take vitality and a hint of wisdom at the adherence to God.¹²⁰

In contrast to some other views in Hasidism, here the lower delights are not considered sinful or demeaning. Material delight is not considered in this passage as a feeling that is antagonistic to the attainment of the supernal one—in contrast, I repeat, to some other Hasidic discussions.¹²¹ On the contrary, a man can extrapolate from the temporary pleasure he enjoys in the sexual relations with his wife, to the even more sublime feeling that he may experience eternally from his adherence to God. The lower delight is not necessarily opposed to the higher experience but constitutes a presence of the spiritual within matter; and hence it is possible to adumbrate the experience of the latter by enjoying the former. It should be pointed out that in the above passages, the affinity between delight and adherence—*devequt*—may imply that there is an erotic overtone to cleaving to God as well. In a way, the Plotinian theory according to which the individual soul is not separated from the cosmic one, adopted widely by Hasidic masters, assumes a continuum between the spiritual and the material world and hence the possibility of reaching the former starting from the latter.¹²²

Moreover, delight is connected in many Hasidic texts with the study of the Torah and even with prayer, since the divinity is present in the entire realm of reality by means of the letters that were part of the creative process. Thus, while in many cases delight may be understood as resulting from the erotic contact between the worshipper and the transcendent divinity, in some other cases, as in the passage of

¹²⁰ R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *Or ha-Me'ir*, fol. 2c. See also *ibid.*, fol. 26b, in a parable explicitly attributed to the Besht. Compare also to the view of the early eighteenth-century Hasidic author R. Menahem Mendel of Rimanov, adduced by his student R. Ezekiel Panet, *Menahem Tz'ion*, 44, who distinguishes also between the transient and the eternal nature of the two kinds of delight.

¹²¹ See, e.g., R. Barukh of Kosov, *Amud ha-'Avodah*, fols. 98a, 99a, and 204d, where the assumption is that the spiritual delight obliterates the material one. Another approach, found several times in Hasidic literature, especially in R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha's *Ma'ayan Hokhmah*, assumes that the supernal delight is found within the lower one as holy sparks within shells, and the former should be freed of their bondage by elevating them, and thus abolishing the shells. This is an interpretation more consonant with Scholem's view.

¹²² See Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 43–44, 51–52.

R. Ze'ev Wolf, this contact is mediated by the act of fathoming linguistic elements found in all the realms of existence. Thus the higher delight does not necessarily require an escapist attitude: it is also possible to penetrate the superficial aspect of reality in order to enjoy a delightful experience here below, that actually represents a higher reality.¹²³ In other words, what we have here is an instance of the eroticization of the entire realm of reality, by means of letters that are imagined to have been instrumental in the creation and the sustaining of reality.

From this point of view we may speak of an inclusive type of Hasidic attitude as compared to the much more exclusive approaches of Hasidei Ashkenaz and Abraham Abulafia. The ecstatic Kabbalist dissociates material from spiritual delight, which is not the case in Hasidism. Although Abulafia was not inclined to asceticism, he nevertheless did not see the very performance of a sexual act as a means to intuit the supernal delight.¹²⁴ In the case of Hasidei Ashkenaz, the relation between corporeal and spiritual delight is less exclusive, but still the two are not parts of a continuum. In the famous early thirteenth-century *Sefer Hasidim*, the major book of Hasidei Ashkenaz, we read:

And that joy [out of love of God] is strong and overwhelms his heart so much, that even a young man who has not gone to a woman for many days, and has great desire, when his seed shoots like an arrow and he has pleasure, this is as naught compared with the strengthening of the power of the joy of the love of God.¹²⁵

While not critical of corporeal delight, the Ashkenazi author does not create a significant nexus between that feeling and the delight someone feels when he loves God.

It should be pointed out that the elevation of corporeal delight is part of a much more general attitude in Hasidism, which also includes

¹²³ See the very interesting passages from the mid eighteenth-century author R. Tzevi Hirsch of Galina, adduced by Piekartz, *Between Ideology and Reality*, 239–245 (Hebrew), where the need to enjoy material delight in order to reach the spiritual is evident. See also the important discussion of R. Aharon Kohen of Apta, *Or ha-Ganuz la-Tzaddiqim*, col. 4, fol. 3ab. See also the later R. Moshe Elyaqim Berī'ah of Kuznitz, *Be'er Moshe*, 185, where he connected the theory of elevation of the lower entities and of delight with that of an immanent presence of the divine everywhere in the world.

¹²⁴ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 204–205.

¹²⁵ *Sefer Hasidim*, par. 300, 240. In R. Eleazar of Worms' *Sefer ha-Malakim*, and under its influence in *Sefer Raziel ha-Malakh*, it is written: "And at the time that a young man engages in intercourse and shoots like an arrow [i.e., ejaculates], that selfsame pleasure is as naught compared with the slightest pleasure of the World to Come." These three sources have already been adduced together in Guedemann, *Ha-Torah weha-Hayyim bi-yemei ha-Benayim*, I, 124, n. 2.

the elevation of mundane forms of beauty to their source, so that the beauty of a nice woman should be understood as reflecting in this world the splendor of the divine presence. The contemplative elevation of beauty to its source is described as causing delight to God—an approach that can be described as theurgy.¹²⁶

Concluding Remarks

One may speak of a continuous ascent in the course of the centuries of the importance of *ta'anug* in the general economy of Jewish mysticism. On the one hand, this development has to do with a general tendency in Jewish mystical literatures of attributing ever greater importance to feelings in general and to erotic imagery in particular; and on the other hand, it has to do with a process of mitigation of the hypostatic thinking that was originally dominant in the main schools of Kabbalah. This mitigation of hypostatic thought is one of the main reasons why delight is so important precisely in ecstatic Kabbalah and in Hasidism, two major schools which were less interested in theosophical structures and much more concerned with experiences.¹²⁷ On the other hand, the ascent of delight in Hasidism is concomitant to the decline—although not the total disappearance—of asceticism in this movement, an important development that has been widely recognized by scholars.

It is in Polish Hasidism, a conglomerate of several mystical approaches, that the variety of earlier themes related to delight was adopted, adapted, and combined in different ways. The most common denominator in those discussions is that delight occurs in the context either of performing a ritual,¹²⁸ or of resorting to a technique in ecstatic Kabbalah—that is to say, it typically accompanies certain types of

¹²⁶ See the important discussion by R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *'Or ha-Me'ir*, fol. 16cd. More on this issue in the context of a more detailed analysis of R. Ze'ev Wolf's passage, in Idel, "Feminine Beauty."

¹²⁷ To a certain extent, the main parallel to *ta'anug* generated by the worshipper as a factor that induces the divine erotic or sexual response is the Kabbalistic expression *mayin nuqbbin*—the female waters—which is the trigger for the arousal of the desire in the supernal male. However, this is again a more organic or physiological component, in comparison to the more emotional one, the delight. On the psychological readings of the sefrotic ontology of theosophical Kabbalah, which is evident already in the thirteenth-century ecstatic Kabbalah and its early Hasidic manifestations see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 146–153; *Hasidism*, 227–238.

¹²⁸ See, e.g., the phrase *ta'anug mitzvah*, the delight of performing a commandment, in *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, fols. 90b, credited to the Besht, and compare to fol. 55a.

religious action. Delight must therefore be seen in the context of religious performance, and as parallel to the idea of adding powers on high (according to the more widespread theurgical interpretation of the ritual) or of drawing supernal blessing or vitality downward (according to the magical one). Furthermore, from a phenomenological point of view, it is quite fascinating to observe in this context descriptions of the divinity as experiencing delight and subsequently, in some cases, as explicitly feminine. Thus an important aspect of the meaningful relationship between the worshipper and God is conceived of as that of transforming one of its aspects into a feminine entity. It is only rarely that an explicit worship of the distinct feminine power, as found in Kabbalah, makes its appearance in Hasidism.¹²⁹ It should be pointed out that we may also encounter a few Hasidic descriptions of worship by means of the intellect that induces delight into divinity. These might be seen as instances of a synthesis between the intellectual aspect of the ecstatic Kabbalah and the theosophical-theurgical one.¹³⁰

In other words, we are dealing with two major and intertwined developments in Jewish mysticism. One of them has been surveyed above, that is, the eroticization of ritual. The other one began already in rabbinic literature but became much more prominent in the main trends of Kabbalah and entails a ritualization of eros and sex.¹³¹ The theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah emphasized the complex structure of divinity consisting of various types of hypostases, and subsequently the sexual affinities between two or more of them attracted attention; from this emerged the core formula according to which the rites intend to unify a divine power, understood as male, and the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence, understood as female.¹³² Hasidism, however, while continuing this approach, shifted the focus of attention from the sexual anatomy of the divine powers and the attempt to influence them by means of rituals to emotional interactions between the worshipper and God.

Within this more general framework, there are two main ways of understanding human religious action: the Platonic ascent that brings the lower delight to its higher source, and the theurgical ascent

¹²⁹ See, *ibid.*, fols. 138d and 152b.

¹³⁰ See, e.g., the Great Maggid, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, 266, where the "world of delight" is described as apprehension, and the description found in R. Aharon ha-Kohen of Apta, *Or ha-Ganuz la-Tzaddiqim*, col. 2 fol. 3a. For another affinity between this book of R. Aharon and ecstatic Kabbalah see Idel, *Hasidism*, 59–60.

¹³¹ See Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 143–144, 234–235, 240–241, 247–250.

¹³² See *ibid.*, 1–3, 233–236.

that causes delight within the divine sphere. Different though these approaches are, they have sometimes been combined in Hasidism. In any case, the increasing importance of delight since the Middle Ages, and its peak in Hasidism, can be better understood against what I consider to be the background of this development, that is, the rabbinic and Kabbalistic forms of Judaism as cultures of eros.¹³³ Thus the Hasidic emphasis on delight as resulting from some kind of erotic relationship between man and God, or man and the *Shekhinah*, is part of a much earlier move, one that took up certain approaches which were originally of secondary importance and moved them to the center. Still, unlike Abulafia's intellectual hedonism (mentioned above), theosophical Kabbalah and Hasidism did not indulge in what may be called carnal hedonism, positive though their attitude toward corporeal delight may sometimes have been.¹³⁴

On a more methodological note, the above discussions assume that Hasidism should be understood against the background of many different developments in medieval and premodern Judaism, the various Kabbalistic and Kabbalistic-ethical literatures being major but not exclusive sources for Hasidic mysticism. A panoramic approach, which in our case perhaps includes Crescas's philosophy too, is a much better way of understanding the various and sometimes conflicting developments in Hasidic thought than seeing it only through the perspective of its relationship to Sabbateanism.¹³⁵ However, broad though the range of sources nourishing Hasidism may have been, the role played by the Besht in shaping the thought of his followers, at least as concerns the case of delight, was paramount.¹³⁶ Still, his new strong emphasis on delight did not reflect only the patrimony of Hasidic masters in the limited sense of this term; as Jonathan Garb has recently shown, significant reverberations of the theurgy of delight may be discerned even in Jewish religious thought in the twentieth century.¹³⁷

¹³³ See *ibid.*, 22–38, 238–246.

¹³⁴ It should be pointed out that a rejection of ancient Greek carnal hedonism, by resorting to this very Greek term transliterated in Hebrew, and of Kant's moral hedonism, is found in an early twentieth-century Hasidic author, R. Menahem Nahum Friedmann of Stefanesti-Itzkani towns in the province of Bukovina), in his commentary on the Rabbinic "Treatise of the Fathers," entitled *Perush ha-Man*, 319–320.

¹³⁵ For a panoramic approach to Hasidism see Idel, *Hasidism*, 9–15.

¹³⁶ For my general opinion as to the dominant role played by the Besht in significantly shaping Hasidic thought in the first generation of his disciples, see Idel, "The Besht as a Prophet and a Talismanic Magician."

¹³⁷ See Garb, "The Chosen will Become Herds," 101, 203–204.

The new emphasis on delight I surveyed above was also part of what I call the search for plenitude of experience in mysticism. By this I mean the assumption that by means of an intensified performance of the normal rituals, or by certain techniques, it is possible, at least in principle, to enjoy in the present a religious experience of the highest kind.¹³⁸ Whether this traditional understanding of Jewish ritual as intended to induce delight in both man and God reflects a state of neurosis (as Sigmund Freud argued in his attempt to explain the emergence of rites) is an interesting question which cannot be addressed here.¹³⁹ In any case, it is fair to say that pondering this type of speculation is itself not without its delightful aspects.

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¹³⁸ On plenitude in Jewish mysticism see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 283–289 and *Absorbing Perfections*, 423–427.

¹³⁹ It may well be that Freud was acquainted with forms of religion in which the performance of the rituals was conceived of as an obsession, not a delight, and he imposed the former on the latter.

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COMPLICATIONS OF EROS:
THE SONG OF SONGS IN JOHN OF MORIGNY'S
LIBER FLORUM CELESTIS DOCTRINE

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The Divine Eros in the Middle Ages: Frame and Paradox

Within the long and varied tradition of medieval Christian commentaries on the Song of Songs, the yearning for the beloved, articulated from both masculine and feminine perspectives, becomes key to a hermeneutic construction illuminating the relation of the divine to the cosmos, the community of believers, and the individual soul. There are specific adumbrations of this tradition in which the virgin Mary is read into the story as the desiring bride. The liturgies for the Marian feast days drew upon the Song (as well as on other passages from the biblical Wisdom literature), and these Marian liturgies in turn necessitated and influenced subsequent commentaries in which Mary is read as the beloved of Christ, often in place of, or alongside, readings which interpreted the feminine beloved as Ecclesia.¹ In the medieval liturgical and commentary traditions, the divine *eros* is essentially polymorphous; heavenly love does not heed the earthly conventions governing erotic contact between genders and family members, and Christ and Mary may be found represented in various configurations of erotic relation to one another.

Beyond the intradivine erotic processes figured in liturgical and exegetical works, it is well known that the Song has deeply informed

¹ A list of the major early commentaries (to 1200) is given at the end of Ann Matter's study, *The Voice of My Beloved*. Translations from many important late medieval commentaries (excluding Bernard) are given in the useful anthology at the end of Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory*. The most influential Marian commentaries on the Song include those of Honorius Augustodunensis and Rupert of Deutz. Honorius wrote two commentaries; one, known as the *Sigillum Beate Marie* [PL 172:495–518] (circa 1103), and a later more elaborate work, the *Expositio in Cantica Canticozum* [PL 172:347–496], some time after 1132. Rupert is responsible for the most extensive early Marian commentary, written ca. 1125: the *Commentaria in Canticum Canticozum (de incarnatione Domini)*. For discussion of these against the background of the Marian liturgies, see Matter, chapter 6. On Honorius, also helpful is Amelia Carr's introduction to her translation of his *Sigillum* or *Seal of the Blessed Mary*.

the ways in which late medieval writers described personal experiences of the divine. Examples can be found in works by affective mystics of both genders, from Beguines like Hadewijch, Gertrude the Great and Mechthild of Magdeburg to the Victorine writers and Richard Rolle. The Song also clearly influenced more theoretical and prescriptive works giving instruction on the leading of a holy life (including works for women, like the *Ancrene Wisse*, or *Guide for Anchoresses*).²

The fact that people dedicated to lives of asceticism and celibacy so often describe—or are instructed to imagine—their relation to the divine through the modality of an experience of erotic passion is a paradox which finds itself directly addressed at some point in most modern secondary works on the experiential and exegetical uses of the Song. In Denys Turner's delicate analysis of the Song commentaries, *Eros and Allegory*, he reiterates the question: why *eros*? Why does *eros* underlie a conception of God's relation to the humanum and vice versa, considering that it does so in commentaries on the Song written in a monastic culture where celibacy is upheld as an ascetic virtue? He directs us into the commentaries by the avenue of the pseudo-Dionysius: God "is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love (*agape*) and by yearning (*eros*) and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide in all things."³ Turner constructs his own theological elaboration of Dionysius' words:

the divine *eros* is a love which creates that other which it loves, for it creates *out of* goodness, not *because of* any supererogatory goodness it can thereby secure. It is out of that "necessity" which is love that God creates; but creation is for that same reason an absolutely free act and we should be entirely lost for the words in which to construe this paradox if we had not the language of *eros* in which to utter it.⁴

² Secondary works on these authors and their relation to the Song are numerous; the mystical tradition has generally been studied more (and its authors have been more frequently edited and translated) than the commentary tradition. English versions of the important mystical texts are available in the "Classics of Western Spirituality" series. Beguines and Victorines are discussed in Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, and more briefly in his pithy essay "The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism." For Rolle's use of the Song see especially Denis Renevey, *Language, Self and Love*. Discussion of the Song particularly as it influenced Middle English writings (including both Rolle and the *Ancrene Wisse*) may be found in Astell's *Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*.

³ From *Divine Names*, 712 B, quoted in Turner, *Eros and Allegory*, 47–48; also 67.

⁴ Turner, *Eros and Allegory*, 67.

We need *eros*, then, in Turner's theology, to avoid being lost for words. To turn this idea around a little bit, it might be said that the paradox of *eros* (as a type of human experience) mirrors the experience of the paradoxes involved in conceptualizing divinity, for even before it is used as a manner of conceptualizing God's action, *eros* already joins the sublime to the ridiculous experientially. Human love itself may baffle the intellect and thus allow the desiring subject a glimpse of something apophatic. The commonality of this aspect of the experience of human desire is precisely what makes *eros* useful as an axis of study, whether or not one sympathizes with the co-option of erotic language as a frame for divine experience. As Bernard McGinn puts it, "erotic language forms a test case for studying the complex relations between common human experience—that is, sexual desire and consummation as mediated through language—and forms of human consciousness (also mediated through language) that claim more."⁵

In this chapter, I would like to take another look at *eros* as a "test case" for the articulation of types of human experience as they are mapped onto ideas of divinity. However I will be focusing on the uses of exegesis of the Song in a text less well known, and less often studied, than any of those I have so far mentioned: the *Liber florum celestis doctrine*, a fourteenth-century ritual text composed by John, a monk of the Benedictine abbey of Morigny.⁶ The book combines visionary autobiography, figures, and prayers compiled from a complex set of liturgical sources and dependent as well on the *Ars notoria* of Solomon,⁷ another

⁵ McGinn, "Language of Love," 226.

⁶ Discoveries of different manuscripts of this text were made independently in the 1990's by Sylvie Barnay in France and Claire Fanger and Nicholas Watson in Canada. For analysis of the text and its Mariology based on Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale G. II. 25, see Sylvie Barnay, "La mariophonie au regard de Jean de Morigny," and "Désir de voir et interdits visionnaires ou la 'mariophonie' selon Jean de Morigny (XIV siècle)." For analyses of John's ritual system, its relation to the *Ars notoria*, and to Jewish mysticism, based primarily on versions in Munich, Bayerische Stadtsbibliothek, Clm 276 and Hamilton, Canada, McMaster University Library MS 107, see articles by Watson, Fanger, and Kieckhefer in Fanger, *Conjuring Spirits*. For an edition of the visionary autobiography which precedes the Prayer Book based on the version in Graz University Library MS 680, see Fanger and Watson, "The Prologue to John of Morigny's *Liber Visionum*." An edition of the complete text based on Graz University Library MS 680 is currently in progress by Fanger and Watson.

⁷ The *Ars Notoria* is a late medieval ritual putatively angelically delivered to Solomon; it also has the goal of obtaining the seven liberal arts, philosophy and theology by infusion from the Holy Spirit with angelic assistance. For a good summary of information about the *Ars Notoria*, see Jean-Patrice Boudet, "*L'ars notoria* au moyen âge: une

late medieval angelic operation for obtaining knowledge of the Arts. In the *Liber florum*, words from the Song of Songs and its commentaries figure in diverse locations both in the prayers and the autobiographical sections of the book. John's uses of the Song are reminiscent of both affective and prescriptive traditions of mystical writing, inasmuch as John is endeavoring not only to describe experiences of divine illumination that he himself has had, but also to create such experiences for subsequent operators. As will be seen, his understanding of the Song remains in all essential ways under the influence of the commentary tradition; however, John's *eros* is principally constituted epistemologically. John differs from many of the late medieval mystical writers in that his stated goal is not apophatic illumination, but the liberal arts and other evidently more secular forms of knowledge.

Some Maps of the Relation between Love and Knowledge

Bernard McGinn articulates a new apprehension of the roles of love and knowledge coming about in mystical writings after the twelfth century, one that depends on Thomas Gallus' reading of the Pseudo-Dionysius onto the Song of Songs.⁸

At the risk of oversimplification, we can say that two broad streams of the interpretation of Dionysius can be found in the later Middle Ages: the speculative Dionysianism initiated by the Dominican master Albert the Great, and what is often referred to as the "affective Dionysianism" first given systematic formulation in the writings of Thomas Gallus.⁹

In general, McGinn goes on to say that the first stream¹⁰ is characterized by that fact that, while love may be valorized as a higher form of

réurgence de la théurgie antique?" Comprehensive information about the background of history and transmission of the *Ars notoria*, as well as editions of the main textual traditions, are to be found in the dissertation by Julien Véronèse, "*L'Ar̄s notoria* au Moyen Âge et à l'époque moderne."

⁸ In line with Paul Rorem and others; McGinn cites Paul Rorem, *Pseudo Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts*, 216–26, for an introduction to the traditions of Pseudo-Dionysian interpretation in the middle ages. The notion of a shift in mystical writing towards a new contemplative prioritization of loving over knowing authored primarily by Thomas Gallus is broadly recognized; Turner e.g. writes of Gallus "his tendency was to ameliorate the intellectualism of his mentor's conception of contemplative activity in favour of a more 'affective' or 'voluntarist' interpretation" (*Eros and Allegory*, 318).

⁹ McGinn, *Flowering*, 79.

¹⁰ In *Flowering*, McGinn quickly drops the subject of the first stream, "speculative

knowing in it, nevertheless love and knowing are continuous pursuits; love implies a form of knowing:

Gregory the Great coined the slogan for this when he said “Love itself is a kind of knowing” (*amor ipse notitia est*). The exact nature of this knowing had been richly explored in the twelfth century, especially by Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry, and Richard of St Victor. These thinkers generally held that the “understanding of love” (*intellectus amoris*) was built on the mystics’ prior efforts to know and love God, and that, consequently, lower forms of knowing God were subsumed and transformed in the higher state. . . . [By contrast] Gallus’s understanding of the relation of knowledge to the higher uniting of love differs from this by emphasizing a separation, or cutting off, of all knowing before the flight into the amorous *unitio deificans*. In other words, love no longer *subsumes* preparatory forms of knowing, however necessary; but *discards* or *rejects* them (some of his followers were to question whether any preparatory knowing was either needed or helpful). Therefore, although Gallus says that the downward influx (*influitio*) from the experience of uniting conveys both love and knowledge to the lower powers of the soul, it is not easy to say in what sense the union itself may be characterized as cognitive. . . . Whatever we make of this downward movement of knowing, it is clear that Gallus has broken the link between knowing and loving on the *upward* path to God.¹¹

While McGinn reads this affective Dionysianism as dominant after Gallus, particularly in Franciscan mysticism, it does not, of course, provide the only way to conceive of access to God in this period even for Franciscans. Certain works of Ramon Llull stand out as exemplars of a different kind of mystical trend:

Llull parts company with the standard Franciscan emphasis on the superiority of *affectus* as the power giving final access to God. Instead, he stresses an intellectualist and universalized understanding of *contemplatio*. . . . The intellect desires knowledge, and when knowledge is attained it produces devotion in the will; there is no *apex affectus* that surpasses intellect.¹²

Dionysianism,” after Albert the Great, which does not get much play presumably because it is essentially philosophical rather than mystical. While the opposition between philosophy and mysticism is a troubled one, it may be said that overall the philosophical stream has less concern with the mimesis of rapture. In this way John of Morigny certainly fits into the category of mystical writers, despite not quite fitting into the “second stream” as described by McGinn.

¹¹ McGinn, *Flowering*, 82; emphasis original.

¹² McGinn, *Flowering*, 135. McGinn is referring in particular to the discursive Latin treatises dealing with contemplation, the *Book of the Ascent and Descent of the Intellect* and *The Contemplation of Raymond*.

Llull may be broadly distinguished from affective mystics in that his primary concern is to enable not simply a personal experience of God, but also an experience of conversion for readers in Jewish and Islamic cultural contexts; this necessarily entailed an involvement of intellect, since it was in intellect that Llull identified the common ground on which his universal pedagogy was based.

John of Morigny's address to intellect also shows a concern with pedagogy and with common ground, but it is of a different sort and serves as an interesting counterpoint to the various experiential and intellectual streams described by McGinn. As I noted earlier, the goal of John's ritual text is the acquisition of the seven liberal arts, philosophy, and theology through direct infusion by the Holy Spirit, with the assistance of the nine orders of angels by means of prayers targeted to different kinds of knowledge. It is evident from John's *First Procedure* that a part of his aim is to close educational gaps between the literate and illiterate, young and old, monks and laypersons.¹³ The attempt to target his book at a number of different classes of age, ability, and profession is partly conditioned by John's view of knowledge as an aspect of the divine that ought to be available to everyone. John opens his *Book of Prayers* with a visionary autobiography, the *Liber visionum* or *Book of Visions*, which forms Part I of the *Liber florum*. At the outset of this book, he describes the work of the ritual in terms largely culled from the *Ars notoria*:

Here begins the book of the blessed Virgin, glorious Mary, which is called the *Flowers of Heavenly Teaching*, for the knowing of all the arts. That which in other books is often in itself grasped with difficulty by native wit, tediously and at excessive length over a long period of time in enormous and fussy volumes of books, is taught in this book by means of a very few easy prayers, conveyed through the revelation of angels and the subtlety of their unheard words,¹⁴ and sometimes, according to the merits of the

¹³ Different instructions for users are found in *First Procedure* for priests and lay operators, 3–5 (Graz University Library, MS 680, fols. 131r1–v1) and for uneducated boys, educated boys, and the aged with failing vision 13 (fol. 135v2).

¹⁴ Making two immediate allusions to the *Ars notoria*, this rubric adapts two passages from near the opening of the third chapter of the first part of the work. The first passage describes one of Solomon's apocryphal sources for the *Ars* in general: "Ipsius orationis exemplar *Librum florum doctrine celestis* Salomon appellauit" (quoted from edition of *Ars notoria A* in the dissertation by Julien Véronèse, "*L'Ars notoria au Moyen Âge*," §38, 696). The second offers a justification of the work's title: "Incipit tertium capitulum de eo quod ars notoria dicitur ars artium quia omnes et que in ceteris artibus longis et grauibis locutionibus, necnon prolixis et fastidiosis librorum uoluminibus per

operator, through the vision, apparition, consolation and help of the undefiled virgin Mary, mother of God, in a short time, subtly, certainly and marvelously, by Him and through Him in whom all things are.¹⁵

These opening sentences identify access to knowledge with access to the divine (in which lies the origin of all knowledge). Knowledge in the world is available through more toilsome and imperfect worldly means (study) but can also be attained through preparation of the soul to make it receptive to the divine by ascetic means including prayer and fasting. John makes clear that ultimately knowledge cannot enter the human soul without the grace and will of God, but if God permits it, prayer and purification allows a more intimate, easier, and ultimately more perfect contact with knowledge at its source than is offered by study.

If, as McGinn says, for Gallus and those affective mystics coming after him, the links between knowing and loving are broken on the *upward* path to God, for John, the divine pathways, both upward and downward, remain continuous. Like the *Ars notoria*, but more systematically, John's ritual imitates the hierarchy of a course of study. After various ritual preliminaries, partly intended to test the strength and faith of the operators (who must be individually approved by the Virgin), the supplicant ascends through given sets of prayers for each of the liberal arts, from grammar to astronomy (each art identified with an angelic order in John's text), before taking philosophy (at the level of the Cherubim) and theology (at the level of the Seraphim, identified, as in Gallus and elsewhere, with ardent love). If the flow of love from God downward to all things passes in successive stages from higher to lower forms of knowledge, so, in John's scheme, it is necessary for the soul to be purified and imbued with knowledge in successive stages

maximi spatium temporis, a quouis ingeniosissime comprehendebantur in ea uerbis paucis scripto paruissimo placidoque diebus perminimis, a quouis imperito et duro mirabili ac inaudita uerborum ac uirtutum angelicarum subtilitate sciantur" (Véronèse dissertation, *Ars notoria* A, §32a, p. 694).

¹⁵ Incipit liber beate Virginis gloriose Marie qui *Liber Florum Celestis Doctrine* appellatur ad omnes artes sciendas. Et que in aliis libris longo tempore et maximis et fastidiosis librorum voluminibus graviter et prolixè vix ingenio multum in se comprehenditur, in hoc libro prepaucis placidisque orationibus, angelorum reuelacione ac inaudita uerborum eorum subtilitate, necnon et intemerate Dei genitricis virginis Marie visione, apparicione, consolacione et procuracione, secundum operantis merita, breui tempore, subtiliter et indubitanter et mirabiliter edocentur, a quo et per quem et in quo sunt omnia. Graz University Library, MS 680, fol. 94r1. This part of the text also available online (Fanger and Watson, "Prologue"). All translations of John of Morigny are from this edition or from the edition of the full text now in preparation by Fanger and Watson.

from lower to higher. These stages are systematically identified with both the angelic orders and the liberal arts, as shown in Table 1 at the end of this chapter. In this schema, knowledge is continuous with love because knowledge is an emanation of Love.

Thus one may approach knowledge in the manner of earth (by applying one's self to books and authors in order to learn what is in them), or, with sufficient preparation of the soul, one may approach knowledge in the manner of heaven (by appealing directly to the Author of all things). For John as for Lull, intellectual knowing cannot be left behind, for all real knowledge is also always knowledge of the divine. The love that marks the theological apex of this journey (at the level of theology) is continuous with the other forms of knowing that necessarily precede it. However, John's text, unlike Lull's, could hardly be described as "intellectualist"; it is not designed to argue, nor to convert, but ritually to enable the personal perfection of the seeker after wisdom. The *Liber florum* reflects an understanding of the delivery of knowledge fundamentally as a sacramental grace.

Ladders of Exegesis: Anagogical Ascent and Ritual Practice

Anagogical routes to the divine are predicated on the idea that a process leading to God must begin with bodily and sensory knowledge, lifting the soul upward from the sensible realm to the higher realm of divine Love. Exegesis of the Song offers several models of anagogical uplifting that John implements in different ways both to explicate and enact the ritual ascent from lower to higher knowledge. If the uses to which John puts the Song are different from those of the better known affective mystics, he is just the same not less dependent on the commentary tradition. Consider the following extract, a catena of phrases from the Song of Songs, which is taken from John of Morigny's second of seven prayers which open his *Book of the Flowers of Heavenly Teaching*:

O fairest among women, most sweet virgin Mary, my beautiful love, sweet, amiable and fair beyond measure, in whose aspect, face, and beauty the lover is glad and rejoices, who has doves' eyes. At whose beauty all human frailty can marvel with vehement admiration, since the sun and moon marvel. Whose shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits. Whose name is oil poured out, and therefore I love you beyond measure. Listen and see how often with labor and trouble I have gone down into my garden to see the fruits of the valley and see whether the vine flourished and the pomegranates budded. And when I saw nothing

of these, I melted, and called my love, and he did not reply to me. I sought and I did not find him. And when I sought him, the city guards came to me and hit me and wounded me and the guards on the walls took away my cloak. And because of this, my kind and most beautiful love, I am made black, but beautiful, like the tents of Kedar, like the pelts of Solomon. Do not look upon me, because I am dark, for the sun has discolored me. But come back, come back, Shunamite, come back so that I may look upon you; and show me, you whom I love, where you feed and where you lie down at noon, lest I begin to wander after the flocks of your companions. And because of this, sweetest virgin Mary, my love, you who are among the daughters like a lily among thorns; and you, O daughters of Jerusalem, tell my beloved that I am sick of love.¹⁶

The speaker of the prayer interweaves sections of the Song involving both masculine and feminine speakers; he addresses the bride (Mary) and the bridegroom (Christ) equally as his beloved, and sometimes refers to himself as if wearing the bride's own skin (black but beautiful). Although this alteration of voices and genders may at first seem disorienting, interpreted through the moral sense provided by the *Glossa ordinaria*¹⁷ the catena contains a narrative of a soul that gets lost, suffers tribulation, is penitent, and cries out for divine restoration: briefly, the cultivation of the vineyard and orchard are to be equated with the cultivation of good actions;¹⁸ the soul, unable to find the flourishing

¹⁶ O pulcherrima mulierum, dulcissima virgo Maria, amica mea pulchra, dulcis, amabilis, et decora nimis, in cuius aspectu, facie et pulchritudine gaudet amans et letatur, cuius oculi columbarum. Cuius pulchritudine omnis humana fragilitas vehementi potest amiracione amirari, cum sol et luna ammirentur. Cuius emissiones Paradisus malorum punicorum cum pomorum fructibus. Cuius nomen oleum effusum et ideo dilexi te nimis. Exaudi et vide quociens cum labore et angustia descendi in ortum meum ut viderem ibi poma conualium et inspicerem si flourissent vinee et germinassent mala punica. Et cum nichil horum vidissem, liquefacta sum, et uocavi dilectum meum, et non respondit mihi. Quesiui et non inveni illum. Et cum quesuissem, invenerunt me custodes ciuitatis, percusserunt me et whnerauerunt me, tulerunt pallium meum custodes murorum. Et propter hoc, amicabile amica mea et pulcherrima, nigra effecta sum, tamen formosa, sicut tabernacula cedar, sicut pellis Salomonis. Noli enim me considerare, quod fusca sim, quia decoloravit me sol. Set revertere, revertere Sunamitis, revertere ut ego intuear te; et indica mihi, quem diligo, ubi pascas, ubi cubes in meridie, ne vagari incipiam post greges sodalium tuorum. Et propter hoc, dulcissima virgo Maria, amica mea, que es sicut lilium inter spinas sic es inter filias; et vos, filie Ierusalem, nunciare dilecto meo quia amore languo. Graz University Library, MS 680, fol. 107r-v.

¹⁷ The *Glossa* is a kind of *florilegium* of the medieval commentary tradition, arranged as glosses around the biblical verses with the intention of facilitating the reading of scripture in all its four senses. There is a useful English translation of the *Glossa ordinaria* on the Song of Songs by Mary Dove which traces sources for all the glosses.

¹⁸ Inspecting vines, Song 6:10; comments in Dove, *Glossa*, 136; see also vineyards in Song 1:5, Dove, *Glossa*, 17.

vine, loses its beloved (Christ), goes out into the city, where it meets the watchmen (penitence, extinguishing worldly things, and removing the cloak, which is the veil of ignorance).¹⁹ Purified, the soul becomes black (with tribulations, or through the shelter of Christ's suffering),²⁰ and seeks the beloved, lest it begin to wander after the flocks of heretics²¹ (I have not attempted here to read the prayer in every dimension a close scrutiny of its relation to the Gloss might provide, but merely to expose the narrative underlying the string of John's associative connections).

This chain of erotic and penitential images drawn from the Song occurs in part three of a prayer that, as John announces in the opening rubric, is particularly effective in combating temptations of the flesh. The prayer is accompanied by a visualization (you are to imagine yourself watching Mary devoutly), and immediately preceding the catena from the Song just quoted, the speaker of the prayer pleads for the extinction of carnal lusts:

And free me from the depraved contemplations of this world, and forcefully squeeze out and extinguish in me the fires of every lust and fornication, and create in me a pure and immaculate heart and a mind pure and immaculate. For I know that there is nothing so depraved in me that it would be impossible to root it out by praying, if it should please you...²²

Following this section of the prayer is a rubric announcing that the catena is "... the third part of the aforesaid prayer, and it is a prayer of the spirit or the blessed soul praying to the blessed Mary, which never ought to be said in a state of mortal sin."²³ It is to be said with another visualization of Mary, this time specifically of Mary in heaven.

The successful realization of the previous part of the prayer (for extinguishing carnal lust) is a necessary prerequisite for the utterance of the third part, which is depicted as occurring in the celestial realm;

¹⁹ Watchmen, Song 5:7; comments in Dove, *Glossa*, 112–113.

²⁰ Black but beautiful, Song 1:4–5; comments in Dove, *Glossa*, 14–16.

²¹ Flocks of your companions Song 1:6; comments in Dove, *Glossa*, 18–19.

²² Et presta nobis tantam virtutem quod contra omnes temptationes malignorum spirituum in virtute sanctorum nominum tuorum predictorum fortiter et viriliter resistere possim, devincere et superare. Et libera me de pravis huius mundi cogitationibus, et incendia omnis libidinis et fornicacionis in me potenter exprime et extingue, et crea in me cor mundum et immaculatum et mentem mundam et immaculatam. Quia scio quod non est aliquid ita prauum in me, si tibi placeat, quod orando abolere non posset. Graz University Library, MS 680, fol. 107r1.

²³ Hec est tercia pars oracionis predicte, et oracio spiritus siue beate anime orantis ad beatam Mariam, que nunquam debet dici in mortali peccato existente. Graz University Library, MS 680, fol. 107v2.

the meditation upon the divine *eros* can only do its work for the soul in which the desire for ordinary sex has been transcended. While this prayer occurs at an early and preparatory stage in John's system, allusions to and quotations from the Song of Songs are scattered throughout the prayers. In addition to its partial and allusive use throughout the prayers, the complete text of the Song occurs as part of the culminating stage of the ritual, in Prayer 30, where as a conclusion to the entire operation for taking the liberal arts, philosophy, and theology, the operator is instructed simply to "recite the entire Canticle" prior to the final *Tē Deum laudamus*.

Exegesis in which the Song itself is read as the culminating part of a system for obtaining knowledge has a long history. From an early period we find the Song construed as a form of divine knowledge suitable only to one near enough to spiritual perfection not to be drawn in or damaged by the dangers of the letter—that is, it can only be apprehended by the fully qualified exegete, experienced at reading the spiritual sense. Origen, one of the Song's most influential early Christian exegetes,²⁴ alludes to the Christian reception of earlier Jewish traditions to this effect in the Prologue to his commentary:

For in the words of Song of Songs there is that food, of which the Apostle says that strong meat is for the perfect... If any man who lives only after the flesh should approach it, to such a one the reading of this Scripture will be the occasion of no small hazard of danger... For they say that with the Hebrews also care is taken to allow no one even to hold this book in his hands who has not reached a full and ripe age. And there is another practice too that we have received from them—namely, that all the Scriptures should be delivered to boys by teachers and wise men, while at the same time the four that they call *deuterōseis*²⁵... should be reserved for study till the last.²⁶

The four parts of Scripture to be reserved for last are: the beginning of Genesis; the first chapters of Ezekiel, which tell about the cherubim; the last chapter of Ezekiel, which describes the building of the

²⁴ Not only because his work was heavily used by Gregory the Great (see Meyvaert, "A New Edition") but also because both of their commentaries were drawn upon as sources for *Glossa Ordinaria*.

²⁵ Usual Greek translation of Hebrew *Mishnah* meaning "to repeat" or "do again," though Lawson queries that Origen is using the word correctly here.

²⁶ Origen, *Song of Songs Commentary*, 24–25. The idea that the Song is prohibited to immature readers is also briefly mentioned in the *Glossa*, though coming through Isidore; see Dove, *Glossa*, 5.

Temple; and the Song of Songs. In the most basic ways, this ranking of the forms of knowledge available through Scripture places the Song in an esoteric tradition of knowledge: along with the other texts to be reserved for last in the study of Scripture, it must be delivered through “teachers and wise men” to a soul appropriately initiated into biblical knowledge; it is not appropriate to one who lives “only after the flesh” but is to be reserved for “the perfect.”

Origen goes on to explicate another system of didactic hierarchies that can be mapped onto the Song and the Solomonic books immediately preceding it:

And let us first investigate the reason why, when the churches of God have adopted three books from Solomon’s pen, the Book of Proverbs has been put first, that which is called Ecclesiastes second, while the Song of Songs is found in the third place . . . The branches of learning by means of which men generally attain to knowledge of things are the three which the Greeks called Ethics, Physics and Enoptics; them we may call respectively moral, natural and inspective.²⁷

Origen defines “enoptics” or “inspective” knowledge as “that by which we go beyond things seen and contemplate somewhat of things divine and heavenly, beholding them with the mind alone, for they are beyond the range of bodily sight.”²⁸ He goes on to say that in fact the Greeks probably got the idea for separating knowledge into these three branches from Solomon, who taught moral science in Proverbs, natural science in Ecclesiastes, and inspective science in the Song of Songs.²⁹ Here, the Song is represented as the crowning work of a three part system, mapped on the biblical books of Wisdom, which surpasses but also includes natural knowledge.

This understanding of the Song as a type of knowledge that cannot safely be approached by anyone mired in earthly thought is recast in microcosm by John’s three-part prayer, where the catena of the song appears as a kind of contemplative culmination: it enacts but also rewards the operator who has managed to transcend the immediate claims of the body. The structure described by Origen, in which the song represents the final stage, knowledge of invisible realities in a system which includes natural knowledge, is recast in the thirty prayers, where

²⁷ Origen, *Song of Songs Commentary*, 39–40, and see Dove, *Glossa*, 4–5.

²⁸ Origen, *Song of Songs Commentary*, 40.

²⁹ Origen, *Song of Songs Commentary*, 40–41.

in the final stage of the system the operator is instructed to “recite the entire Canticle,”³⁰ thus appropriately concluding the prayer cycle with a book of knowledge available only to those purified by earlier stages of prayer (and learning). Other ways of reading the Song as a mode of knowledge, or as part of a system for obtaining knowledge, occur in the commentaries. Gregory, elaborating from Origen’s ideas, insists on the Song as a mode of access to knowledge. He adopts Origen’s reading of the three books (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song) as moral, natural and inspective knowledge respectively, suggesting that they are like a “sort of ladder reaching up to contemplation of God”.³¹ Though Gregory emphasizes more than Origen the distance between the earthly and heavenly, literal and spiritual senses of the text, the mode of knowing allowed by the Song remains rooted in the knowledge that sustains it. For Gregory, allegoresis is understood not just as the necessary way of reading the Song, but is also described as an anagogical activity that lifts the soul up to God: “For allegory supplies the soul separated far from God with a kind of mechanism by which it is raised to God . . . By that which we do know—out of such are allegories made—divine meanings are clothed and through our understanding of external speech we are brought to an inner understanding.”³² The enlightened reader reads upward, toward the sense of the entire text—which is put together not only from the Song, but from the other Wisdom books, using the activity of allegoresis as a ladder. John of Morigny may have been familiar with Gregory’s commentary, at least, since he quotes from one of the passages shared with Origen (a passage also reproduced in the *Glossa Ordinaria*, though at shorter length).³³

There is another system of knowledge that is elaborated as part of the commentary on the “kiss of the mouth,” particularly present in the twelfth-century commentators surrounding St. Bernard of Clairvaux. It is elaborated forcefully in the “Brief Commentary” on the Song by William of St Thierry, who begins by explicating the three stages of the love of God: sensual, rational, and spiritual (or intellectual). Like the

³⁰ Graz University Library, MS 680, fol. 130r2.

³¹ Gregory the Great, “Exposition of the Song of Songs,” from the translation in Turner, *Eros and Allegory*, 224.

³² Gregory in Turner translation, 217.

³³ At the opening of the *Liber figurarum*, Bodleian Library, MS Liturg. 160: “Moyses enim dicit esse quedam non solum sancta, sed etiam Sancta Sanctorum, et alia non solum sabbata sed etiam Sabbata Sabbatorum . . .” fol. 55r. Cf.; Origen, *Hom. In Cant.* I.1, but the same passage is picked up also by Gregory the Great *In Cant.* 6.

systems described by Origen and Gregory, William's system progresses through natural knowledge towards spiritual or intellectual understanding; the movement from lower to higher knowledge is identified with the moment of the incarnation and the sacraments. He states that the purpose of the incarnation was knowledge: "...it was for this reason that God himself was made man for all human beings, so that they, who did not know how to think of God, could, through the man they did know...raise up their rational power of understanding."³⁴ The sacramental moment literally embodied in the incarnation thus mirrors the mental motion stimulated by the act of allegoresis of the Song according to Gregory.

William goes on to identify the sensual, rational, and spiritual knowledge with three types of kiss: "For, corresponding to the three steps of love, there are likewise three kisses of the lover. The first is of those seeking forgiveness or reconciliation; the second of those who have gained some merit; the third of contemplatives. The first is to the feet, the second to the hand, the third to the mouth."³⁵ The kiss of the mouth is the kiss of contemplation, which the bride requests in the first verse of the Song. "We are touched by the kiss," William writes, "when we are filled with love and knowledge."³⁶

The three kisses are also elaborated in the same sense, and at greater length, by Bernard of Clairvaux in the Sermons on the Canticle (particularly sermons three and four) and by another commentator of the same circle, Thomas of Perseigne.³⁷ It is probable that John of Morigny was familiar with one of these glosses on the kiss of the mouth, though it is not clear which (if any) of these writers was his direct source.³⁸ However, he alludes to the motif of the three kisses in the following passage from the Old Compilation version of the *Book of Figures*, a

³⁴ William of St Thierry, "Brief Commentary," from the translation in Turner, *Eros and Allegory*, 281.

³⁵ William, in Turner translation, 282.

³⁶ William, in Turner translation, 284.

³⁷ From translation of Thomas of Perseigne in Turner, *Eros and Allegory*, 311ff.

³⁸ Both Thomas of Perseigne and William of St Thierry use wording that is more abbreviated and concise, hence generally closer to John's, than Bernard, but none can be identified conclusively as John's source. One thing that distinguishes John's use of this motif from the others is that, in the cases of Thomas, William and Bernard, all kisses are addressed to (or delivered by) Christ, not Mary. It is, of course, possible that John appropriated the motif from another source in which Mary was already the addressee of the kisses, but if so I have not found it. Whatever the source may be, it was independent of the *Glossa Ordinaria*, where this motif does not occur.

peroration closing the book with a description of the source of the knowledge that informs his own written work:

Whence if anyone asks how I knew these things and where I received the things I have written, and am about to write... thus do I respond: from the sacred spiritual kiss of the feet of the blessed glorious virgin Mary, which pertains to reconciliation. And of the holy hands of her, which pertains to reward. And of the mouth of her, with its blessed embalmed honeyed scent, and of her son, our Lord Jesus Christ, which pertains to contemplation. And moreover, from that which is worth more, namely the holy fountain of the breast of the selfsame Virgin, on which spiritually I reclined and slept; and from the emanation of the milk of spiritual grace and mercy of her holy breast, with which Christ was nourished, and I spiritually suckled and was comforted. In the strength of this spiritual food I made my way all the way to Horeb, the mountain of God. And thence did I drink the things which I have written and shall write, the sacred flowing words of this book.³⁹

For John, as for the twelfth-century commentators, the three kisses represent sequential stages of a penitential purification leading to the grace of wisdom. However, we need to take note of the particularities of the associations leading John from the three kisses to the mountain of God. The link between the third kiss of contemplation and the Virgin's milk, the spiritual grace by which both John and Christ were nourished, in addition to referring to one of his own visions described just previously, is an association that may originate with the opening verses of the Song itself: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth / because your breasts are better than wine."⁴⁰ In the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the line "your breasts are better than wine," in each of its several occurrences, is read as signifying the milk that is the grace of Christ's teaching:

³⁹ Vnde si quis interrogauerit quomodo ista sciui et vbi accepi que scripsi, et scripturus sum... sic ei respondebo: ex sacro osculo spirituali pedum beatorum virginis Marie gloriose, quod est reconsiliacionis. Et manuum eius sanctarum quod est remuneracionis. Et oris eius, benedicta odore inbalsamati mellito, et eiusdem filii Domini nostri Ihesu Christi, quod est contemplacionis. Et adhuc ex eo quod plus est, scilicet ex sacro fonte pectoris eiusdem Virginis, in quo spiritualiter recubui et dormivi, atque ex emanacione lactis spirituale gracie et misericordie sancte eius mamille, cum quo nutritus est Christus, et ego spiritualiter lactatus et confortatus. In cuius cibi spiritualis fortitudine, perrexi vsque ad montem Dei, Oreb. Et inde que scripsi et scripturus sum, sacra huius libri verba fluenta potaui. Bodleian Library, Liturg. 160 fol. 67r. The Old Compilation (preserved only in this one manuscript, so far as is now known) is John's original draft of the text, completed before 1313; he redrafted and altered significant portions (eliminating this passage) in the New Compilation version, preserved in various forms in all other known manuscripts.

⁴⁰ Dove, *Glossa*, 7.

“I desire a kiss, which was my redemption, because your teachings, the milk and nourishment of your children, are better than other forms of instruction.”⁴¹ The idea of sacred nourishment provides the link to Mount Horeb, for John quotes a passage from 3 Kings 19:8, which tells how Elijah was sustained in the desert by food given him by an angel; on the strength of this food Elijah walked forty days and forty nights to Horeb to speak to God. Through this sequence, John expresses his sense of being a child of Mary, brother of Christ, and successor to the prophets. It is perhaps unsurprising that at this point a metaphorical identity should be established between the flowing spiritual milk of the Virgin and the “sacred flowing words of this book,” equated directly (through the word “fluenta”) to the Virgin’s milk, and indirectly to Elijah’s angelic bread. Thus John’s prayers for acquisition of the arts and sciences are given a role not merely derived from, but furthering spiritual knowledge—the flowing words of his book, the prayers and visions, are also spiritual food, allowing other operators to raise themselves from earthly things into the zone of heavenly knowledge.

Prophecy, Exegesis, and the Appropriation of Scriptural Authority

The verbal nature of John’s illumination, taken together with his reference to Horeb, suggest that John identifies himself with the prophets, a construction he makes explicit elsewhere in his writings particularly in the Old Compilation text. He speaks of himself as having been gifted with the grace of prophecy⁴² and twice mentions a *Book of Prophecies*⁴³

⁴¹ Dove, *Glossa*, 7; see also glosses on Song 1:3 “mindful of your breasts” (Dove, 13) and 4:10, “more beautiful than wine” (Dove, 92).

⁴² O quis crederet quando librum hunc incepti non solum ad predicacionis gratiam immo etiam ad spiritum sanctum propheticie culmen me posse attingisse. (O who would have believed when I began this book that I would attain not only to the grace of preaching, but even unto the height of the holy spirit of prophecy); from the Old Compilation *Book of Figures*, Bodleian Library MS Liturg. 160, fol. 68v.

⁴³ Vnde licet visiones nostre de reuelacione huius libri historie fere omnes dicende sunt et faciende, attamen allegorice aliquid sonant in misterio, quemadmodum in *Libro Prophetiarum*, nisi mors interueniat, proponimus declarare. (Whence, although our visions about the revelation of this book are almost all to be said and done in the literal sense, nevertheless in the allegorical sense they resonate with something of mystery, as we propose to declare in the *Book of Prophecies* if death does not intervene.) Bodleian Library, MS Liturg 160, fol. 65v; and *Prophecias omnium istarum visionum in Libro Propheciarum beate Marie* quere (Seek the prophecies of all these visions in the *Book of Prophecies of the Blessed Mary*), fol. 67r.

that he hopes to write after the present work is completed. We do not know whether John ever attempted such a work, but his view of himself as prophet provides another angle of illumination on John's conception of his enterprise by suggesting that "the words of this book" are in some ways parallel to Scripture.

Another passage suggesting that John's book is equivalent to scripture occurs at the opening of the Old Compilation *Book of Figures*:

For Moses says that some things are not just holy, but indeed Holy of Holies, and others are not just sabbath, but Sabbath of Sabbaths. Thus we say that some things are not just "knowing" but "Knowing of Knowings." And just as he is blessed who enters into the holy, and more blessed he who enters into the Holy of Holies; and blessed he who celebrates the sabbath, and more blessed he who celebrates the Sabbath of Sabbaths; in the same way blessed is he who enters into knowing and wisdom, but much more blessed he who enters into the Knowing of Knowings and Wisdom of Wisdoms, because all good things come along with Knowing and Wisdom, and immeasurable honor through their hands.⁴⁴... [here follows a catena of scriptural quotations mostly from the books of Wisdom] And since human life is brief and not strong enough to attain such great Wisdom or to acquire Knowing, and the arts are too voluminous, and time too swift; and experiments are deceptive in many respects, so that many times their determination is harmful; on this account I, brother John, propose to write the smallest of little books called the *Book of Figures of the Blessed Mary and of the Special Procedure for the Entirety of this her Art*. Through it we can know how we ought to operate through the prayers, figures and visualizations of the whole of this art, in order to be inspired with all Knowing and Wisdom, if God desires that these things should be divinely obtained... Here begins the *Work of Works and Knowing of Knowings*.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Wisdom 7:11.

⁴⁵ Moyses enim dicit esse quedam non solum sancta, sed etiam sancta sanctorum, et alia non solum sabbata sed etiam sabbata sabbatorum. Sic nos dicimus esse quedam non solum 'sciencia' sed etiam 'sciencia scienciarum'. Et sicut ille beatus est qui ingreditur sancta, et beacior ille qui ingreditur sancta sanctorum, et beatus qui sabbatum sabbatizat, et beacior qui sabbata sabbatorum; ita beatus qui scienciam ingreditur et sapienciam, sed multum beacior qui ingreditur scienciam scienciarum et sapienciam sapienciarum, quia omnia bona pariter veniunt cum sciencia et sapiencia, et innumerabilis honestas per manus illarum... Et cum ad tantam sapienciam optinendam siue scienciam adquirendam humana vita sit breuis et debilis, artes vero prolixae tempora autem velociora, experimenta uero fallencia in multis, ita quod inde multociens determinatio molesta; idcirco ego, frater Johannes, propono scribere libellum minimum qui vocatur *Liber Figurarum Beate Marie et Practice Specialis Tocius Artis Eius*, per quam possumus scire qualiter operari debemus per oraciones, figuras, et ymacinaciones tocius huius artis, ad omnis sciencie et sapiencie inspiracionem, si Deus voluerit diuinitus optinenda... Incipit *Opus Operum ac Sciencia Scienciarum*... Bodleian Library,

The first sentences of the above passage derive ultimately from Origen's *Homilies on the Canticle* (I.1) but are also picked up by Gregory the Great in his commentary on the Canticle (6), which may be John's source. The same idea also appears, though in a slightly different and abbreviated form, in the *Glossa Ordinaria* on the Song.⁴⁶ The comment concerns the form of the title (why it is called "Song of Songs"): implicitly, then, John's work, as *scientia scienciarum*, stands at a pinnacle of knowledge in a way equivalent to the Song of Songs.

Like the Song, too, the *Liber florum* is constituted of prophecy; but beyond this it is a methodology enabling an experience of prophecy for those fit to receive it. In the *Book of Prayers* John uses verses from the Song instrumentally, with the goal of obtaining knowledge of all kinds. But John's instrumental use of these verses is nevertheless founded on an understanding of the Song derived from existing exegesis. Gregory characterized allegoresis as an activity that is "like a ladder" leading to God; John, too, uses a ladder to ascend towards God in the *Book of Prayers*, and though its most prominent rungs may be the seven liberal arts, we have seen that its larger pattern is not less exegetically derived.

The *Book of Prayers* ends as well on an exegetical note, since the twenty-ninth prayer (for the taking of Theology) beseeches God for delivery, through the Seraphim, of the four senses of Scripture: historical, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. Each sense of scripture, in addition to being associated with wisdom of a certain type, corresponds to one of the four directions and one or more of the seven gifts of the holy spirit, so that, for example, part four of this prayer requests of God:

that through your Holy Spirit of Wisdom, blowing from the south, through whom alone we contemplate God, in whose heat we catch fire, I may be able fully and perfectly to taste, understand, discern and know in the science of theology by the tropological arts the invisible things of God the father through the anagogic sense, and through it begin heavenly contemplation, and have in my power the treasury of celestial wisdom.⁴⁷

MS Liturg. 160, 55r–v. The titles "Opus operum" and "Scientia scienciarum" in fact derives from a work associated with the *Ars Notoria*, which John goes on to quote; see Véronèse, "L'*Ars notoria* au Moyen Âge," 743ff.

⁴⁶ See Dove, *Glossa*, 4.

⁴⁷ ut per Spiritum tuum Sanctum Sapiencie perflantem a meridie per quem solum Deum contemplamur, cuius calore accendimur, possim plenarie et perfecte sapere, intelligere, discernere et scire in scientia theologie, operibus tropoloycis, invisibilia Dei patris per sensum anagoicum et per ipsum celestem contemplacionem inchoare, et thesaurum celestis sapiencie possidere. Graz University Library MS 680, fol. 127v1.

Here, where the Seraphim dwell in perfect love and continuous contemplation of God, love, wisdom, and knowledge seem to be perfectly dissolved in one another, existing in the divine without distinction and flowing out as gifts of the same superabundant grace. For John of Morigny, it is not only (as Gregory put it) that love is a form of knowledge, but also, emphatically, that knowledge is a form of love; the arts and sciences may thus become part of a ladder that leads to God because of the ways in which these forms of knowledge are actually *like* God, part of the effusion of the divine love into the embodied world. While the structure of John's prayers make it clear that exegetical knowledge is the highest form of love, the secret of John's system as a whole is that there is no form of knowledge that can be other than a reflection of divine love when the initiate looks upon it with purified intellect. From the top of the ladder to the bottom, love and knowledge are all one thing.

John lays claim to an authoritative status comparable to that of the prophets through the fact that he has imbibed in a vision the holy milk of the Virgin. Like Moses or Elijah, he has spoken with God on Mount Horeb; like Solomon, the presumed author of the Song, he has written a text that stands at the apex of Knowing, an epiphany of Wisdom. Like Solomon's Song, John's work is fundamentally an initiation into the mystery of a Wisdom that is figured by *eros*, a delivery of hidden knowledge in the guise of something known. For in a way that is occulted (from the non-initiate) by that very representation of the experience of love, the Song of Songs offers itself as a *source* of esoteric knowledge—a knowledge that is veiled by, but also delivered by, the words of the text ritually used and exegetically understood.

For John, it is not really a question of finding divine love through intellectual process (as, perhaps, for Lull); nor yet of loving the divine to the exclusion or casting away of intellectual process (as, perhaps, for Gallus); nor yet of the kind of spiritual rumination on divine love that breaks the verses of the Song down into their constituent allegorical morphemes, as is offered by Bernard of Clairvaux. For John, the words of the Song become part of a set of spiritual tools by which the operator is led to a state of Adamic purity in which earthly knowledge also may be redeemed. But the Song does more than lift the operator's soul to God through its implementation in John's prayers; it becomes part of John's appropriation of scriptural authority as well. By framing his text with the creative deployment of allegorical understandings of the Song (and in fact by having visions imbued at their very origin by exegesis of the Song) John can manifest himself as an initiate into its mystery.

TABLE I: CORRESPONDENCES IN JOHN OF MORIGNY'S PRAYERS

Prayer #	Art or Discipline	Celestial Beings	Miracles
21	<i>Grammar</i> Ordering of speech Assignment of rules Eloquence in grammar	<i>Angels</i>	Christ's conception Star leading magi Miracle at Cana Creation 1st day
22	<i>Dialectic</i> Industry in responding Eloquence in dialectic	<i>Archangels</i>	Christ's undoing fall on cross Redemption of souls from hell Division of waters 2nd day
23	<i>Rhetoric</i> Discernment Ordering parts of speech Eloquence in rhetoric Ordering structure of writing	<i>Thrones</i> Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Evan- gelists	Dividing light/dark 1st day Harrowing of Hell Raising of dead Appearance to Mary Magdalen Emergence of land & water, & germina- tion of seeds 3rd day
24	<i>Arithmetic</i> Eloquence in Arithmetic	<i>Powers</i>	Division of bread before disciples at Emmaus after resur- rection Arrangement of sun, moon, & stars 4th day
25	<i>Music</i> Eloquence in Music	<i>Virtues</i>	Arrival via locked doors before dis- ciples at Emmaus Creation fish & birds 5th day
26	<i>Geometry</i> Specifics of Geom- etry	<i>Dominations</i>	Saving Peter when he could not walk on water Creation of animals & humans 6th day
27	<i>Astronomy/Astrology</i> Specifics of Astronomy	<i>Principalities</i> Martyrs, Con- fessors, Widows Continentes, Holy Monks & Hermits	Eclipse at passion God's rest 7th day

Table (cont.)

Prayer #	Art or Discipline	Celestial Beings	Miracles
28	<i>Philosophy</i> Natural philosophy Moral philosophy Economical/ Political Eloquence in Philosophy	<i>Cherubim</i>	Christ's ascent to heaven (for all subdivisions of philosophy)
29	<i>Theology/</i> <i>Contemplative</i> <i>Philosophy</i> Historical, Topo- logical, Analogical, Allegorical senses Eloquence in Theology	<i>Seraphim</i> Holy spirit of West, North, East, South Virgin Martyrs	Imagery from Apocalypse Pentecost (for all senses of scripture)

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UNDER THE MANTLE OF LOVE:
THE MYSTICAL EROTICISMS OF MARSILIO FICINO
AND GIORDANO BRUNO*

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...when a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

The literary and philosophical phenomenon of the Renaissance *trattati d'amore* began with the publication in 1484 of Marsilio Ficino's highly influential *De Amore* (first manuscript version 1469) and found an impressive culmination in Giordano Bruno's *De gli eroici furori* published in 1585. Many greater or lesser authors contributed to the development of the genre during the intervening century,¹ resulting in an extensive corpus of treatises devoted to "Renaissance love theory."² John Charles Nelson, in one of many scholarly studies that have been devoted to the subject, emphasizes that these writers

chose to treat love "Platonically" as an intellectual, nonsexual, or even anti-sexual phenomenon... [they] profess in regard to sexual love a severe contempt which is tempered by an almost grudging admission

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¹ The central Italian authors between Ficino and Bruno are Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (Commentary on Benivieni's *Canzone d'amore*, 1486), Mario Equicola (*Libro di natura d'amore*, 1495), Leone Ebreo (*Dialoghi d'amore*, ca. 1502), Pietro Bembo (*Asolani*, 1505), Francesco Diacceto (*Tre libri d'Amore* and *Panegirico all'Amore*, 1508), Baldassare Castiglione (*Il libro del Cortegiano*, 1518), Sperone Speroni (*Dialogo di Amore*, 1542), Giuseppe Betussi (*Il Raverta*, 1544), Francesco Sansovino (*Ragionamento*, 1545), Bartolomeo Gottifredi (*Specchio d'amore*, 1547), Tullia d'Aragona (*Della Infinità di amore*, 1547), Benedetto Varchi (e.g. *Le lezioni*, 1553), Pompeo della Barba (*Spositione d'un sonetto platonico*, 1554), Flaminio Nobili (*Trattato dell'amore humano*, 1567), Torquato Tasso (e.g. *Conclusioni amorose*, 1570, *Il forestiero napoletano*, 1585), Francesco de' Vieri (*Lezzione*, 1581), Niccola Vito de Gozze de Raguse (*Dialoghi della bellezza*, 1581), Annibale Romei (*Discorsi*, 1585). Cf. the even longer list in Marcel, "Introduction," 121–122.

² The scholarly literature is extensive. Some useful overviews are Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love*; Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, ch. VI, "The 'trattato d'amore'"; Meylan, "L'évolution de la notion d'amour platonique."

of the necessity of sexual intercourse in order to propagate the human race... Sexual activity in itself is identified with ugliness and bestiality. Yet, discussion of the philosophical problems of “divine” and “Platonic” love often lapses into a consideration of “doubts” (*dubbi*) concerning “practical” questions of “human” or “vulgar” love.³

Given this fact, any contemporary scholar who wishes to make sense of Renaissance love theory has to make a basic methodological choice. A first option—which has been chosen by the overwhelming majority of specialists—is to restrict oneself to analysis of the *emic* level (i.e. the “author’s point of view”): one tries to explain as faithfully as possible what the author is trying to say in his text, places that text in a historical framework, points out philosophical or literary backgrounds and influences, and so on. In the case of Renaissance love theory, this means that one chooses to take the author at his word when he says that love is essentially “intellectual, non-sexual, even anti-sexual,” and then proceeds to explain and contextualize that opinion. The second option—which I will choose in this article—is to try and develop an additional *etic* perspective as well, i.e. a scholarly one that may be very different (as regards terminology and theoretical assumptions) from the author’s point of view, but that might help us make more sense of what we are studying.⁴ This implies that the author is not regarded as the final authority regarding his own text: he may well tell us that love is “intellectual, non-sexual, even anti-sexual,” but we want to know *why* he thinks so and what it means that he seeks to convince us of such a thing. Scholars who restrict themselves to the first approach function

³ Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love*, 70.

⁴ The *emic/etic* distinction was originally introduced by Kenneth Pike (*Language in Relation to a Unified Theory*, 38–39) and Marvin Harris (*Cultural Materialism*, ch. 2), but has come to be understood in new ways in the contexts of cultural anthropology and the study of religion (see e.g. Platvoet, *Comparing Religions*, 4–5, 21, 29; Snoek, *Initiations*, 4–8 and *passim*). Contrary to some current understandings (or misunderstandings) of the distinction, “*emic*” as understood in this article has nothing to do with taking the “author’s point of view” as normative or with “going native,” and “*etic*” has nothing to do with reductionist agendas or naïve beliefs about “objectivity.” My perspective can best be explained by an example. If one watches a group of children playing in a park, and asks one of them (or its parents) what they are doing, the answer is likely to be “we are playing.” This “*emic*” response is indeed quite correct as a description of the children’s activity. However, if one asks a child psychologist what the children are doing, one is likely to get an answer like, e.g., “they are engaged in a learning process in which they acquire important social skills.” This “*etic*” response may be underpinned by complex social and psychological theories using technical language that would not be understandable (and not necessarily very interesting) to the children or their parents, but which make it possible for academics to gain new insights and ask relevant questions that help us better understand child behavior.

essentially as exegetes or “caretakers” of what they study; those who choose for the second take, rather, a “critical” approach to analysis and hermeneutics⁵

We should recognize right at the outset that in the case of Renaissance love theory, almost any such contemporary *etic* perspective is bound to collide headlong with the very opinions *emically* defended by authors such as Marsilio Ficino or Giordano Bruno. For Renaissance platonists it is axiomatic that the intellect is at the top and the body at the bottom of the ontological hierarchy or great chain of being, and that whatever is lower in the hierarchy can only be understood with reference to what is higher; hence it would be wholly absurd to suggest that the body and what pertains to the body could be the basis and starting point for understanding things that pertain to the soul or the intellect—in fact, the latter are guaranteed to be *misunderstood* from such a perspective. That very “absurdity,” however, is essential not only to Freudian psychoanalysis, but to practically all twentieth-century approaches to sexuality and eroticism that have developed in its wake. We assume as axiomatic that men and women are inherently sexual beings, who are known to be capable of sublimating their basic sexual drives into “idealized” versions such as “Platonic love.” Renaissance thinkers in the tradition of Ficino, on the contrary, assumed that men—for women the case is more complicated, as will be seen—are inherently spiritual beings, who are known to be capable of allowing themselves to be “drawn down” by the body’s sexual appetites so that they end up functioning on a “bestial” level.

So we must be clear about the fact that any interpretation of Renaissance love theorists from a perspective of “idealization” or “sublimation” goes entirely against the grain of their own most cherished convictions and would have been rejected by them as perverse. To prevent misunderstandings: I do not intend—nor would I have the competence—to “psychoanalyze” Ficino and Bruno and their theories of love; and in fact, given the scarcity of relevant biographical information, I would be extremely skeptical of any attempt in that direction. All I intend to do in what follows is look at their work from the perspective of sexuality, in the—no doubt perverse—hope that this will help us better understand the role of love in their thinking.

⁵ I am alluding to McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers*. McCutcheon’s perspective tends towards “reductionism” whereas mine is empirical/historical, but in my opinion a “critical” approach is basic to both, as distinct from “religionist” approaches (on these distinctions see Hanegraaff, “Empirical Method”).

Ficino's De Amore

In 1468 Marsilio Ficino was thirty-five years old and had just completed his translation of Plato's complete works from Greek into Latin. Throughout his life he had been subject to melancholy moods, and he again found himself in a state of severe mental depression. It appears that his young friend Giovanni Cavalcanti (1444?–1509), to whose significance we will return, suggested that writing a commentary on Plato's *Symposium* might help him deal with this affliction.⁶ Somehow, therefore, Ficino's melancholy must have been linked to the problem of love, and the commentary was at least partly an attempt at self-therapy. Originally written in Latin, and dedicated to Cavalcanti, this *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis* was later translated by Ficino into Italian and is usually referred to as *De Amore*.⁷ On November 7, 1468, Ficino and his friends took part in a banquet in his villa in Careggi to celebrate Plato's birthday.⁸ *De Amore*, finished in July 1469, is presented as an account of the same banquet; like Plato's text, it consists of seven speeches about love in the form of commentaries on the speeches of the *Symposium*.⁹ Only a very extensive summary and commentary can do justice to its thematic richness and conceptual complexity; here I will provide only the barest general outlines that are necessary to understand Ficino's views on the relation between love and sexuality.

Ficino's doctrine of love must be understood within the framework of a neoplatonic metaphysics and cosmology based notably upon

⁶ See Ficino's contemporary biographer J. Corsi, *De Platonicae Philosophiae... sive Marsilii Ficini vita...* VIII, 245, par. VII–VIII; the passage is quoted in full in Marcel, *Marsile Ficin*, 16–17.

⁷ Both the Latin original and the Italian translation, which contains some additions mainly concerned with astrology, were originally circulated only in manuscript. The first published Latin edition appeared in 1484 in Ficino's *Platonis Opera*, and the Italian version was not published until 1544. See Devereux, "The Textual History of Ficino's *De Amore*." A. della Torre's influential thesis (in *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze*) that Ficino wrote two versions, of which only the second one was preserved, was definitely deconstructed by Marcel in his "Introduction" of 1956.

⁸ On the historicity of this banquet, see Marcel, "Introduction," 28–36, and Gentile, "Per la storia."

⁹ The speeches are as follows: (1) Giovanni Cavalcanti comments on Phaedrus' speech, (2) Giovanni Cavalcanti (stepping in for Antonio degli Agli, Bishop of Fiesole, who has to leave) comments on Pausanias' speech, (3) Giovanni Cavalcanti (stepping in for Ficino's father, who also has to leave) comments on Erixymachus' speech, (4) Cristoforo Landino comments on Aristophanes' speech, (5) Carlo Marsuppini comments on Agathon's speech, (6) Tommaso Benci comments on Socrates' speech, and (7) Cristoforo Marsuppini comments on Alcibiades' speech.

Plotinus, Proclus, and Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. God has created three “worlds,” referred to as the Angelic Mind, the World Soul, and the World Body.¹⁰ The resulting hierarchy, with a descending order that goes from Mind to Soul to Body, gets slightly complicated by a circular imagery used elsewhere: God or the Good is presented as an indivisible point in the center, and Beauty as the divine splendor that emanates from him in *four* circles: Mind, Soul, Nature, and Matter.¹¹ The divine ray called Beauty creates the species of all things in each of the four circles: Ideas in the Mind, Reasons in the Soul, Seeds in Nature, and Forms in Matter. Occasionally Ficino also refers to other hierarchies, notably that of twelve spheres,¹² but in the *De Amore* as a whole these play a minor role and can be disregarded here.

Human souls are born from God, and then literally fall from the Milky Way through the astrological house of Cancer into materiality. In this process they first receive a special kind of transparent “astral body,” which is described as “coarser than the soul, but purer and finer than the body”; only after having been wrapped up in this protective covering are they ready for being enclosed in an earthly—and therefore impure—body.¹³ This strong polarity of pure versus impure is of central importance for understanding Ficino’s approach to love and sexuality.

We have seen that all the four circles that emanate from God/the Good—that is to say, the whole of created reality—are actually manifestations of “Beauty,” which is defined as a divine ray or splendor. This Beauty excites desire in us, and this desire is what we call Love: hence Love is defined, as in Plato’s *Symposium*, as “the desire for Beauty.”¹⁴ Although Beauty is thus manifest in the entire universe (and Love is likewise universal),¹⁵ it is nevertheless evident that in *De Amore* Ficino is

¹⁰ *De Amore* I, 3; III, 1; V, 4.

¹¹ *De Amore* II, 3; V, 4; VI, 15, 17.

¹² *De Amore* VI, 3–4.

¹³ *De Amore* VI, 4, 6. The doctrine of the astral body derives from Proclus; see Dodds, “The Astral Body in Neo-Platonism.”

¹⁴ *De Amore* I, 4.

¹⁵ Hence the equation between love, nature and magic, as in *De Amore* VI, 10: “But why do we think that Love is a *magician*? Because the whole power of magic consists in love. The work of magic is the attraction of one thing by another because of a certain affinity of nature. . . . And all nature, because of mutual love, is called a magician.” Here love is equated with the universal force of “sympathy” (and in III, 4, Ficino claims that “antipathy” is only a manifestation of it: “No part of the world hates another part,” it is only and exclusively “love that makes the world go around”).

thinking primarily of *human* beauty. He does not go into such broader domains as aesthetics or art theory, or expound upon the beauty of the cosmos, the heavens, nature, and so on; instead, his discussion is focused on the beauty of the human soul or body that evokes erotic desire.

The divine beauty that is manifested in human beings is threefold: a beauty of souls, of visible bodies, and of audible sounds. The beauty of souls is perceived through the intellect, that of bodies through the eyes, and that of sounds through the ears (i.e., amorous conversation between lovers). These three organs of perception have in common that they are able to perceive a “harmony of different parts,” which for Ficino—at least in this context¹⁶—is part of the definition of beauty. He argues that the “lower” senses of smell, taste, and touch perceive only “simple forms” (odors, flavors, heat, cold, softness, hardness, etc.), which therefore do not have beauty. Accordingly, the appetite that follows these senses is not called Love, but “lust or madness.”¹⁷

Of particular importance is Ficino’s interpretation of the Platonic notion of the “two Aphrodites,” or Venuses, defended by Pausanias in the second speech of the *Symposium*.¹⁸ The first or “heavenly Venus” is located in the Angelic Mind; she is said to have been born without a mother, which means that she is a stranger to matter. The second or “vulgar Venus” is located in the World Soul, in which resides the power of procreation. Accordingly, the first Venus “is entranced by an innate love for understanding the Beauty of God,” whereas the second Venus “is entranced by her love for procreating that same beauty in bodies”; the first Venus “embraces the splendor of divinity in herself,” whereas the second Venus “transfers sparks of that splendor into the Matter of the world.”¹⁹ It is very important to understand that, for Ficino,

¹⁶ There is a sharp contradiction between *De Amore* I, 4, where Ficino adopts the Platonic and generally Greek concept of beauty as resulting from harmony and proportion among the parts of a thing, and V, 3, where he follows Plotinus in rejecting that concept. See discussion in Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love*, 80–81.

¹⁷ *De Amore* I, 4. Cf. previous footnote: *De Amore* V, 3 would seem to undermine this argument for the inferiority of smell, taste and touch.

¹⁸ Note that in *De Amore* VI, 5, Ficino obscures the theory by introducing a third kind of “Venerae daemon,” that comes in three variants according to whether they belong to the element of fire, of the “purest air” or of “thicker and cloudy air.” He does not develop this notion further.

¹⁹ *De Amore* II, 7; cf. VI, 5, 7. This duality is basic to neoplatonic theory as it developed in Christian culture, as demonstrated e.g. by Arthur O. Lovejoy’s classic *Great Chain of Being*: the divine was conceptualized on the one hand as “the Absolute of otherworldliness” to which the contemplative mind aspires, and on the other as “a God whose prime attribute was generativeness” (315).

both Venuses are “virtuous and praiseworthy” because both “follow a divine image.”²⁰ Sexual procreation may be a less laudable pursuit than the contemplation of divine beauty, but it is not in itself rejected as evil; on the contrary, in its most positive manifestation the “love of men” dominated by the “vulgar Venus” is praised as “the desire for procreation with a beautiful object [a woman, supposedly] in order to make eternal life available to mortal things.”²¹

Ficino repeatedly emphasizes that the second Venus is called “vulgar” (elsewhere, a *kakodaemon* or evil daemon)²² not because it is really evil, but because “on account of our abuse, it often disturbs us and powerfully diverts the soul from its chief good, which consists in the contemplation of truth, and twists it to baser purposes.”²³ Sexuality, in our terms, is therefore censured only if it is immoderate, or against the order of nature (i.e. sodomy, on which more below), or if it leads us to prefer the beauty of the body to the beauty of the soul and thus leads us downwards instead of upwards.²⁴ Along the famous Platonic “scale of perfection” that Socrates in the *Symposium* claims to have learned from Diotima, we are supposed, rather, to climb up step by step from the love of beautiful bodies to the love of beautiful souls, and from there to the final contemplative vision, as famously described by Plato:

Whoever has been initiated so far in the mysteries of Love and has viewed all these aspects of the beautiful in due succession, is at last drawing near the final revelation. And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other.

Nor will his vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is—but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of it in such sort that, however much the parts may wax and wane, it will be neither more nor less, but still the same inviolable whole.²⁵

²⁰ *De Amore* II, 7; VI, 8, 11.

²¹ *De Amore* VI, 11.

²² *De Amore* VI, 8.

²³ *De Amore* VI, 8.

²⁴ *De Amore* II, 7.

²⁵ Plato, *Symposium* 210e–211b (transl. Michael Joyce, in Hamilton & Cairns [eds.], *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 562).

It is the very nature of Love that induces us to make this ascent. Since Love is the desire for timeless and immortal Beauty, in the long run no earthly beauty will be able to satisfy it:

the passion of a lover is not extinguished by the sight or touch of any body. For he does not desire this or that body, but he admires, desires and is amazed by the splendor of the celestial majesty shining through bodies. For this reason lovers do not know what they desire or seek, for they do not know God himself, whose secret flavor infuses a certain very sweet perfume of Himself into His works... Since, therefore, attracted by the manifest perfume, we desire the hidden flavor, we rightly do not know what we are desiring and suffering.²⁶

As long as we are making the ascent, Love makes us suffer, because it can drive us mad with desire but never grants us the release of perfect and lasting satisfaction—except, of course, when we finally attain the ultimate revelation of everlasting divine beauty. The tortured frenzies of lovers are discussed in some detail by Ficino²⁷ and will play a central role in Giordano Bruno, as will be seen. Ultimately, they result from “forgetfulness” and self-alienation:

God is certainly never so deceived as to love the shadow of His own beauty in the Angel and neglect His own true Beauty. Nor is the Angel so taken by the beauty of the Soul, which is its shadow, that it becomes preoccupied with its shadow and forsakes its own beauty. But our soul does. This is greatly to be lamented, for this is the origin of all our woe. Only our soul, I say, is so captivated by the charms of corporeal beauty that it neglects its own beauty, and forgetting itself, runs after the beauty of the body, which is a mere shadow of its own beauty.

Hence the tragic fate of Narcissus... Hence the pitiable calamity of men... the soul admires in the body, which is unstable and in flux, like water, a beauty which is the shadow of the soul itself. He abandons his own beauty, but he never reaches the reflection. That is, the soul, in pursuing the body, neglects itself, but finds no gratification in its use of the body. For it does not really desire the body itself; rather... it desires its own beauty. And since it never notices the fact that, while it is desiring one thing, it is pursuing another, it never satisfies its desire. For this reason, melted into tears, he is destroyed; that is, when the soul is located outside itself, in this way, and has sunken into the body, it is racked by terrible passions and, stained by the filths of the body, it dies, as it were, since it now seems to be a body rather than a soul.²⁸

²⁶ *De Amore* II, 6.

²⁷ *De Amore* II, 6, 8; VI, 9, 17; VII, 3, 11, 14.

²⁸ *De Amore* VI, 17.

An expression like “the filth of the body” is no exception in *De Amore*.²⁹ The beauty of human bodies may be admired, and the procreation of new bodies may be duly praised as “virtuous and praiseworthy,” but in fact there seems to be a strong conflict in Ficino’s mind between his theoretical acceptance of procreation and what seems to be a deep-seated abhorrence of “touching”—a term that can be taken here as practically synonymous with “sexual activity.” The pleasures of touch “remove the intellect from its proper state and perturb the man,” and the “desire for coitus” is in fact the opposite of Love.³⁰ It seems that Ficino’s rejection of “touching” grew even stronger as he got older: in his *De Vita* (1489) he no longer described the second Venus as “virtuous and praiseworthy” but as a machiavellian enemy masquerading as a friend but intent only on stealing our vital energy in the interest of procreation, and as a prostitute who seduces the young by promising (rather than giving) them the “lethal” pleasures of touch.

Venus endowed you with only one pleasure, and that harmful, with which she harms you but profits those to come, little by little draining you as it were through a secret pipe, filling and procreating another thing with your fluid, and leaving you finally as if you were an old skin of a cicada drained upon the ground, while she looks after the fresh cicada. . . . She steals from you . . . the youth, life, and sense, from your whole body . . . through pleasure of the whole body, that she may from thence make a whole body. . . . Venus comes before your face as a friend, secretly as an enemy. . . . She promises (rather than gives) you at last barely two pleasures, and these indeed lethal. . . . The greater the delight experienced in touching and tasting, the graver damage frequently befalls. . . . [therefore] shun deceitful Venus in her blandishments of touching and tasting. . . . and restrain with the continual reins of prudence the lust . . . for procreation.³¹

²⁹ Cf. *De Amore* VI, 10 about “those who debase themselves in the excrements of the body.” For discussions of the body (usually as a “mere shadow,” and as the force that “draws down” the soul), see also *De Amore* I, 4; II, 4, 9; IV, 3–5; V, 3–6; VI, 10, 17; VII, 12, 15.

³⁰ *De Amore* I, 4; cf. II, 9. See also e.g. Ficino in a letter to Cavalcanti: “. . . it is not love when the appetite of the other senses drives us rather towards matter, mass, weight and the deformity that is the opposite of beauty or love, but a stupid, gross and ugly lust.” (*The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, I, 63 [letter 47, no date])

³¹ *De Vita* II, 15 (transl. Kaske & Clark). This attitude eventually earned him the criticism of Agostino Nifo, a leading Aristotelian philosopher, who argued that the sense of touch is capable of transmitting beauty to the soul, and who even anticipates Freud in arguing that there is no human love without sexual desire and carnal lust (see Krayer, “Ficino in the Firing Line,” 384–385). To leave no ambiguity in this regard, Nifo wrote that even “a father cannot enjoy the beauty of his daughters, nor can heroic and saintly men or philosophers enjoy the beauty of young women and men without sexual desire being aroused” (Nifo, *Libri duo*, Lyons 1549, 106, as quoted in Krayer).

The Nature of "Socratic Love"

As the above overview hopefully demonstrates, it is quite possible to describe Ficino's basic ideal of "Socratic love"³² in abstract and general terms, without ever needing to ask oneself what the actual practice of such love would look like. And in fact almost all scholarly commentaries and analyses of *De amore* have taken such an approach, with the effect of marginalizing or altogether ignoring one of the most striking facts about the text: its explicit and consistent homoerotic orientation.³³ Throughout *De amore*, love is described as a desire that is excited in the minds of men when they behold the beauty of other men. Women are completely and utterly absent.³⁴ If female beauty is mentioned at all—but it very

³² The term "Platonic love" was first used by Ficino, in his commentary on the *Phaedrus*, ch. 1 (see text and translation in Allen, *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Chariteer*, 72–73; and see also Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino*, esp. chs. 7 and 8) He speaks of "Platonic and Socratic Love," and later again speaks of "Socratic Love" only; apparently he does not intend to differentiate between the two terms but uses them as synonyms.

³³ In his major biography of Ficino, Marcel apparently believed that all he needed to do was exonerate Ficino from any "suspicion": referring to Ficino's amorous letters to Cavalcanti (see text), he writes "Actually the tone of this correspondence surprises us somewhat, and if nowadays it causes some people to smile, others have found it suspect. Alas, the return to Antiquity had not caused only its virtues to revive, but fortunately we know that Ficino never failed to denounce and condemn the depravities of his century, and that in this domain he always remained above any suspicion" (Marcel, *Marsilio Ficino*, 343–344). Such a passage may be merely amusing to us, as reflecting a pre-sexual revolution perspective. More surprising is that the homoeroticism of *De Amore* is likewise silently passed over in recent editions such as the German translation by Blum (*Über die Liebe*, 1984), Jayne (*Commentary*, 1985; on 19 he merely says that the work "had been written for and about men"), and Laurens (*Marsilio Ficino: Commentaire*, 2002; on XLII he merely mentions the "exclusion of woman, inherited from Plato himself" as one of the text's "implicit limitations"). In contrast, in the wake of a pioneering article by Giovanni Dall'Orto ("Socratic Love," 1989) Ficino has been claimed for the history of homosexuality in most of that discipline's recent reference works, including the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (1990; Dall'Orto, "Ficino, Marsilio"), *Gay Histories and Cultures* (2000; Maggi, 'Renaissance Neoplatonism'), or *Who's Who in Gay & Lesbian History* (2001; Dall'Orto, "Ficino, Marsilio"). Among mainstream Ficino specialists, as far as I am aware only Krays ("The Transformation of Platonic Love" and "Ficino in the Firing Line") discusses the homoeroticism at any length. The lacuna is also noted in a recent article by Marc Schachter ("Louis Le Roy's *Sympose de Platon*," 409).

³⁴ That Ficino lived in a man's world where women played no role of any significance is quite clear. I do not know how much credence, if any, should be lent to the offensive vulgarity with which he had supposedly spoken about women according to Angelo Poliziano's *Detti piacevoli* 185: "Messer Marsilio dice che si vuole usare le donne come gl'ornali, che, come l'uomo v'ha pisciato drentro, si nascondono e ripongono" ("Messer Marsilio says that women should be used as urinals, which, when a man has pissed in them, are hidden and put away").

rarely seems to occur to Ficino that women might be beautiful—its only function is to get men to procreate “handsome offspring,”³⁵ that is to say, it belongs to the domain of the “vulgar Venus.” The superior spiritual love under the reign of the “heavenly Venus” is, in spite of that goddess’ female identity, the exclusive preserve of men.

Obviously this homoerotic orientation finds its origin in the fact that Plato’s *Symposium* itself likewise concentrates entirely on love between men. However, this is not sufficient to account for Ficino’s surprisingly open and non-apologetic approach. Contrary to him, Leonardo Bruni, the first author to try his hand at translating Plato, had felt obliged to bowdlerize his Latin translations from the *Phaedrus* (1424) and the *Symposium* (1435): thus Alcibiades’ notorious attempt to seduce Socrates “is high-handedly converted into a story of how Alcibiades pursued Socrates for his wisdom, and all other references to homosexuality, fluteplaying and paganism are systematically expunged.”³⁶ Bruni’s contemporary Ambrogio Traversari translated the homoerotic love poems attributed to Plato in Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of the Philosophers* (III, 23), but crossed them through in the manuscript and omitted them from the published version of 1433 (interestingly though, in Ficino’s copy of the latter, the poems had again been added in the margin, apparently copied from Traversari’s manuscript).³⁷ The poet Antonio Panormita quoted Plato in support of his pornographic *Hermaphroditus* (1425), dedicated to Cosimo de’ Medici, but that book was publicly burned and readers were threatened with excommunication by Pope Eugene IV in the early 1430s.³⁸ And in 1455 the Byzantine Aristotelian George of Trebizond, who hated Plato, notoriously accused him of perverting the minds of princes and leading them to sodomy: “O slothful

³⁵ If I’m not mistaken, the very first mention of female beauty occurs as late in *De Amore* as VI, 11 (spetiosa femina).

³⁶ Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 80 (the term “homosexuality” is problematic in this context and should better be replaced by “homoeroticism”). Jayne (“Introduction,” 9) is therefore mistaken in suggesting that Bruni was attracted to the passage for pornographic reasons, and that he translated only this part of the *Symposium* because he found to his disappointment that “the dialogue as a whole did not live up to its bawdy reputation.”

³⁷ Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 81 n. 120. Again, the poems are more properly described as “homoerotic,” even though they contain a notorious passage on Plato actually kissing Agathon (“While kissing Agathon, my soul did rise, / And hover’d o’er my lips; wishing perchance, / O’er anxious that it was, to migrate to him”). It sometimes happened that Renaissance authors heterosexualized the poems, e.g. by changing the boy Aster into “puella Stella” (Hankins, 131 n. 48).

³⁸ Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 81, 131.

minds... of the powerful friends of Plato, locked up most shamefully within the thighs of boys!...if only they [would] despise Plato and leave the buttocks alone."³⁹

Ficino knew all this and was therefore perfectly aware that "Socratic love" was often interpreted as involving sexual intercourse between men.⁴⁰ But rather than being embarrassed, he seems to have considered it completely obvious that philosophers of such an exalted stature as Socrates and Plato could not possibly have confused love and sex. On the contrary, it is their detractors who, in doing so, reveal their "dirty minds." Critics like George of Trebizond should be ashamed of themselves:

the desire for coitus (that is, for copulation) and love are shown to be not only not the same motions, but opposite.... No name which is suitable for God is common with sinful things. Therefore anyone who is of sound mind ought to be careful lest he heedlessly apply the term love, a divine name, to foolish perturbations. Let Dicaearchus blush, and anyone else who dares to slander the Platonic majesty, on the ground that he indulged too much in love. For we can never indulge too much, or even enough, in passions which are decorous, virtuous, and divine.⁴¹

We have no reason to doubt that Ficino was sincere. But by no means does that imply (as most specialists seem to have assumed) that the homoeroticism of *De amore*, or its relationship to what we nowadays would call "homosexuality,"⁴² is a non-issue that can be dismissed as irrelevant to the question of what Ficino means by "love."

³⁹ *In comparationes Aristotelis et Platonis* III, 17, according to the Latin quoted in Dall'Orto, "'Socratic Love,'" 40; a chapter earlier, George deplored how Eastern monks have lapsed into venereal love "just from reading Plato." Cf. Kraye, "The Transformation of Platonic Love," 77, and Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 165–192 and 236–263.

⁴⁰ Cf. also Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Commento* to Girolamo Benivieni's *Dell'amore celeste e divino*, ch. 3, 83–84, who refutes the belief shared by "many people" that Socrates performed "filthy actions" with their beloved ones.

⁴¹ *De Amore* I, 4. The reference to Dicaearchus of Messene, a pupil of Aristotle, is probably based on a statement in Cicero, *Tusc.* 4.34.71. But indirectly the passage is directed against George of Trebizond, who quotes Dicaearchus as an authority for his accusations regarding Plato's immorality (Jayne, *Commentary*, 44 n. 28).

⁴² See Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 10–16 and Dall'Orto, "'Socratic Love,'" passim, for the problematics of applying this modern concept to early modern contexts. I agree with Dall'Orto's conclusion that, contrary to post-Foucaultian orthodoxy in the history of sexuality, "the Italian Cinquecento not only saw the connection between homosexuality and homoeroticism, but could see it so clearly that it could not distinguish

That there is more to the homoeroticism of *De Amore* than mere faithfulness to the Platonic model becomes clear when we look at Ficino's relation to his younger friend Giovanni Cavalcanti. It was Cavalcanti who first suggested the idea of the *Symposium* commentary, Ficino dedicated it to him, and he plays a disproportionately important role in it by having no less than three of the seven speeches attributed to him.⁴³ The short dedication of *De Amore* to Cavalcanti should here be quoted in full:

Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Cavalcanti, his unique friend. Good luck! Since a long time, my sweetest Giovanni, had I learned from Orpheus that love existed and that he possessed the keys of the universe. Next, Plato had revealed to me the definition and the nature of this love. But that this god love possessed such power was concealed from me for thirty-four years. Then a hero,⁴⁴ a man who was already divine, looked favorably upon me with his heavenly eyes,⁴⁵ with a wonderful bending of his head towards me, he showed me the extent of love's power. Afterwards, therefore, I composed this book on love, assuming I had now been instructed to the full in matters of love. And since I wrote it in my own hand, I decided to dedicate it to you before all others, and so to give back to you what belongs to you.⁴⁶

The "hero" whose heavenly gaze taught Ficino the power of love was Cavalcanti himself. In addition to this preface, we have a substantial number of amorous letters from Ficino to Cavalcanti, which convey a remarkable picture of their relationship. Already in Plato there is a

homoeroticism (as theorized by Socratic love) from sodomy" ("Socratic Love," 62). This does not need to imply that modern concepts of a homosexual or gay *identity* can be transposed back to the fifteenth century. On this problematic, cf. Halperin, *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, esp. the chapter "Forgetting Foucault").

⁴³ Ficino also dedicated his *De Raptu Pauli*, and his translations of Alcinoüs, Speusippus and Pythagoras to Cavalcanti (Marcel, *Marsile Ficini*, 34 n. 1). On Cavalcanti's contribution to the argument of *De Amore*, see the detailed analysis in Allen, "Cosmogony and Love."

⁴⁴ The term "hero" is important in Renaissance love literature. Ficino often referred to Cavalcanti as a divine "hero" (*De Amore* I, 1, and many letters), he used the same term for the "third order" of daemons associated with the planet Venus, and linked the term etymologically with the Greek "eros" (*De Amore* VI, 5; and see explanation in Allen, "Cosmogony and Love," 134 n. 13). Giordano Bruno's concept of "heroic" frenzies adds even more complexity to the term.

⁴⁵ See *De Amore* VII, 4 for a detailed discussion of how the eye of the younger man shoots out "rays" by which the older man is "bewitched."

⁴⁶ See facs. in Marcel, *Marsile Ficini: Commentaire*, 135; and transcription with translation of all but the first two sentences in Allen, "Cosmogony and Love," 135 n. 18.

hierarchical relation between the older man, who plays the role of the lover, and the young boy, who plays the role of the beloved: while both partners are “learning” from the experience, the former loves and the latter is being loved. As Ficino puts it:

A man enjoys the beauty of a beloved youth with his eyes. The youth enjoys the beauty of the man with his Intellect. . . . Truly this is a wonderful exchange. Virtuous, useful, and pleasant to both. The virtue certainly is equal to both. For it is equally virtuous to learn and to teach. The pleasure is greater in the older man, who is pleased in both sight and intellect. But in the younger man the usefulness is greater.⁴⁷

Ficino clearly idealized his relationship with Cavalcanti along such Platonic lines,⁴⁸ for in fact the latter appears to have been considerably less enthusiastic.⁴⁹ As a result, while Ficino was supposedly in the superior position, in fact his letters show him pleading for Cavalcanti’s attention to a humiliating extent.⁵⁰ He calls Cavalcanti “his own heart,” “his eye,” and “his salvation”; he admits that without him, life loses all joy and complains that “not even heavenly things have any value without you”;⁵¹ and he constantly asks him for advice or even permission in all matters.⁵² Admittedly the “amatory letter” was a literary genre in

⁴⁷ *De Amore* II, 9. Cf. in this respect the amazing passage in a letter to Cavalcanti dated 29 January 1476 (*The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* II, 56): “It is well known with what pleasure all men, even little men, admire their own image in mirrors. But a friend sees deep in a friend not merely his own image, but his very self. For even though I certainly seem beautiful within, in stature I am a little man, thin and short. Yet in the human mirror descended from God, whence I have loved, I have seen myself these twenty-five years as first manifest: the first among men and not a dwarf.” Note that, in context, the “mirror descended from God” is no one else but Cavalcanti.

⁴⁸ See e.g. undated Letter 51 (in *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* I, 68–70), where he writes that all of the great ancient theologians (Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Plato) “have always thought it necessary to have God as their guide, and a man as companion,” and concluded that “I hold the friendship of Giovanni Cavalcanti and Marsilio Ficino worthy of being numbered among those I have just mentioned.”

⁴⁹ Dall’Orto, “Socratic Love,” 41.

⁵⁰ *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* contain abundant evidence: e.g. “Come back, my hero! Hurry! Fly to me, I beg you” (I, 43 [letter 30]), “how is it that you don’t write?” (I, 46 [letter 34]), “. . . what shall I do? Shall I be the first to write? Or shall I wait for a letter from you?” (I, 48 [letter 36]), “You alone are my care Giovanni. You alone are my solace. Comfort your Marsilio, I beg, with your letters” (II, 11 [letter 4]), and (when Cavalcanti expresses some irritation at being “overwhelmed”), “My hero, what is it that you are saying so politely about our correspondence? . . . Why does the number of my letters disturb you?” (IV, 13 [letter 8]), “why do you now not reply to so many of my letters?” (IV, 20 [letter 14]).

⁵¹ *The Letters* I, 61 (letter 45).

⁵² Marcel, *Marsilio Ficino*, 343.

this period, and not any expression of “love” needs to be taken at face value;⁵³ but even taking such conventions into account, it is impossible to read the entire collection of Ficino’s letters to Cavalcanti (and the occasional responses by the latter) without being convinced that, in our terms, Ficino was head over heels in love with Cavalcanti.

Ficino always spoke of his special affection for Cavalcanti in the terms of Socratic love, modeled after the relation of Socrates to his younger pupils such as Phaedrus or Alcibiades; and although he would have readily described the relation as “erotic,” he was concerned to play down the implicit sexual connotations which would make us recognize such a relationship as “homoerotic.” Yet, Ficino was well aware of the connection, as we have already seen, and he occasionally made it explicit. One of the most revealing statements is found in a letter, where he writes to Cavalcanti that “Marsilio is closer to your thoughts than are your tongue and hand. That is why between your mind and mine the ministry of tongue and hand cannot intervene.”⁵⁴ Of course, apart from the explicit reference to French kissing, tongue and hand stand here for the two rejected senses of taste and touch.

To put such statements in context, we must realize that precisely Florence, of all places, had a longstanding international reputation as the city of sodomy—the closest contemporary equivalent (although not a synonym) of our modern concept of homosexuality.⁵⁵ This was true even to such an extent that in German *florenzen* meant “to sodomize” and sodomites were called *Florenzer*.⁵⁶ Furthermore, as pointed out by

⁵³ Compare in this regard Ficino’s correspondence with Lorenzo de’ Medici, which was equally an “experiment in Platonic friendship” (see Wadsworth, “Lorenzo de’ Medici and Marsilio Ficino”).

⁵⁴ *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* IV, 21 (letter 14, undated). Cf. also passages such as VI, 10, that reflect a conflict with which Ficino must have been personally familiar: “Sometimes a desire for caressing arises, but sometimes a chaste desire for heavenly beauty, and now that and now this conquers and leads him.”

⁵⁵ As pointed out by Rocke, “People of the Middle Ages and early modern period lacked the words to convey the precise equivalents of the current ‘homosexuality’ as a distinct category of erotic experience or ‘homosexual’ as a person or a sexual identity” (*Forbidden Friendships*, 11). Sodomy was not strictly synonymous with our “homosexuality,” for it referred to acts “contrary to nature” that could be performed between men and women. Nevertheless, in practice, when Florentines used the term, they were thinking of male-male relations, because these were most common and aroused the greatest public concern (*Forbidden Friendships*, 12).

⁵⁶ Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 3, with reference to Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze* 7, 612. Rocke also calls attention to a dialogue (written in the 1560s) about “masculine love” by the art theorist and critic Gian Paolo Lomazzo, in which no one less than Leonardo da Vinci is asked about his sexual relationship with his young favorite Salai: “Did you

Rocke on the basis of thorough study of the archival sources, sodomy between males almost always “assumed a hierarchical form that would now be called ‘pederasty’”: sex between mature men was in fact the exception.⁵⁷ The remarkable reputation of Florence can be partly explained from local marriage patterns: men usually married late, and fiscal censuses show that about three quarters of the male population between eighteen and thirty-two were bachelors. This group seems frequently to have found sexual solace in homosexual relationships with boys, although even married men occasionally kept up the practice.⁵⁸ But widespread though it was, sodomy was always illegal. Laws had been in place since the early fourteenth century, and these were strongly enforced in Florence from 1432 to 1502 by a special judiciary magistracy called the *Ufficiali di notte* (Office of the Night). Its systematic persecution of sodomy resulted in an abundance of trial records, which show that in this small city of ca. 40,000 inhabitants, during the last four decades of the fifteenth century, each year an average of 400 people were implicated and 55 to 60 condemned for sodomy; over the whole period during which the Office of the Night was active, at least 17,000 individuals were incriminated and around 3000 convicted.⁵⁹

Surprisingly, in Rocke’s exhaustive study of Florentine homosexual culture, Ficino is not mentioned even once. Ficino clearly (and unsurprisingly) shared the official rejection of sodomy and discusses it in *De Amore* only after having excused himself for touching upon the subject:

Shall I say what follows, chaste gentlemen, or shall I rather omit it? I shall certainly say it, since the subject requires it, even if it seems out of place to say. For who can say offensive things inoffensively? The great transformation which occurs in an older man who is inclined towards the likeness of a younger causes him to want to transfer his whole body into the youth, and to draw the whole of the youth into himself . . . Hence they are driven to do many sinful things together. For since the genital semen flows down from the whole body, they believe that merely by ejaculating or receiving this, they can give or receive the whole body.⁶⁰

play the game from behind, which the Florentines love so much?”; and to Antonio Beccadelli’s *Hermaphroditus* (ca. 1425), which mentions the sexual tastes of the Tuscans: “You’re a Tuscan, and Tuscans love cock” (see Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 255 n. 4).

⁵⁷ Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 12–13. Masculine identity depended on whether a man took the “active” or the “passive” role, not on whether he had sex with men or women. Hence sexual relations with a boy did not call into question a man’s masculinity, but taking a passive role would be considered “feminine” and dishonorable (13).

⁵⁸ Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 14–15.

⁵⁹ Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 4.

⁶⁰ *De Amore* VII, 6.

Interestingly, he does not continue to condemn sodomy outright in this chapter; but such condemnation is implicit in an earlier passage:

But since the reproductive drive of the soul, being without cognition, makes no distinction between the sexes, nevertheless, it is naturally aroused for copulation whenever we judge any body to be beautiful; and it often happens that those who associate with males, in order to satisfy the demands of the genital part, copulate with them.... But it should have been noticed that the purpose of erections of the genital part is not the useless act of ejaculation, but the function of fertilizing and procreating; the part should have been redirected from males to females. We think that it is was by some error of this kind that that wicked crime arose which Plato in his *Laws* roundly curses as a form of murder.⁶¹ Certainly a person who snatches away a man about to be born must be considered a murderer...⁶²

These are the only two passages in *De Amore* that explicitly discuss sodomy. Interestingly, they both suggest that Ficino rejected the practice primarily because it implied a “waste of semen,” that is thus robbed of its chance to produce offspring.⁶³

I repeat that we have no reason for imagining Ficino as actively engaged in Florence’s flourishing homosexual underground culture. But he must have been well aware of its existence; and he knew that “Socratic love” had been associated with sodomy for quite some time, so that we cannot assume he was simply naive in describing love as a purely non-sexual “desire for beauty.” Moreover, some passages of *De Amore* reflect an anguish and conflict that can hardly be read as other than autobiographical. Notably in the long and important tenth chapter of Speech VI, Ficino discusses the temptation of “touching,” the “rays” that shoot from the eyes of a young man, and the magical and even daemonic power of love; and he even foreshadows modern perspectives on sexual sublimation by stating that it is in fact “that continuous ardor of concupiscence” which “impels some to the study of letters, others to music, or painting, others to virtue of conduct, or the religious life,

⁶¹ *Laws* 1.636b–d, 8.836b–838c, 841d. Jayne (*Commentary*, 151 n. 108) correctly gives these references, but mistakenly assumes that Ficino’s subject of discussion is abortion (as also noted by Schachter, “Louis Le Roy’s *Sympose de Platon*,” 412 n. 14).

⁶² *De Amore* VI, 14.

⁶³ Here we must take into account early modern ideas of sexual generation, which often assumed that human beings develop directly out of the male semen only, with the female womb only playing the role of a vessel. Hence the possibility of considering the alchemical production of a homunculus in an artificial womb (on this subject, see Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, ch. 4).

others to honors, some to making money, many to the pleasures of the stomach and of Venus, and others to other things.” The chapter culminates in a particularly emotional passage, which must reflect his ambivalent feelings about Cavalcanti:

...neither animal nor human love can ever exist without hate. Who would not hate one who took his soul away from him? For as liberty is more pleasant than anything else, so servitude is more unpleasant. And so you hate and love beautiful men at the same time; you hate them as thieves and murderers; you are also forced to love and revere them as mirrors sparkling with the heavenly glow. What can you do, O wretch? Where to turn, you do not know; alas, O lost soul, you do not know. You would not want to be with this murderer of yourself, but you would not want to live without his blessed sight. You cannot be with this man who destroys you, who tortures you. You cannot live without him, who, with wonderful enticements, steals you from yourself, who claims all of you for himself. You want to flee him... You also want to cling to him... You seek yourself outside yourself, O wretch, and you cling to your captor in order that you may sometime ransom your captive self.⁶⁴

Against the background of such passages, some conclusions about *De Amore* impose themselves. In 1956 Raymond Marcel devoted some pages to Ficino’s “crisis” of 1468, as a “cure” for which Cavalcanti suggested that he write a commentary on Plato’s *Symposium*.⁶⁵ Marcel concluded that the crisis was possibly of a religious nature (the conflict between Christianity and the pagan Greek and Latin philosophers), or a philosophical one (the conflict between Aristotle and Plato), or that it could have been inspired by political events (Pope Paul II’s campaign against humanistic learning, with the suppression of the Roman Academy in February 1468).⁶⁶ He did not consider, however, what would seem to be by far the most natural explanation: that Ficino wrote *De Amore* to deal with a personal crisis of love.

Temperamental inclinations apart, the melancholy moods and states of depression that had plagued Ficino throughout his adult life can plausibly be explained as having a background in the sexual frustration common among unmarried Florentines of his generation. Many of his male contemporaries who found themselves in a similar situation were probably not, in our modern terms, “homosexuals”; they simply needed

⁶⁴ *De Amore* VI, 10.

⁶⁵ Marcel, “Introduction,” 16–22; see also the discussion in Allen, *Marsilio Ficino: The Philebus Commentary*, 10–11.

⁶⁶ Marcel, *Marsilio Ficino*, 335–353.

an outlet for their sexual energies and found it both in female prostitution and in sodomy.⁶⁷ Ficino, however, was probably homosexually inclined to begin with, so that the former option held no attraction to him; the latter, however, he seems to have severely rejected on moral and religious grounds. Thus no other option was open to him but suppression and sublimation of his sexuality. Then two things happened. First, at thirty-four, he fell in love with Giovanni Cavalcanti; and this naturally rekindled in him a strong desire for “touching.” And second, this happened at a time when there was quite some publicity about Pope Paul II’s suppression of the Roman Academy. In mentioning this as a “political” background to Ficino’s crisis, Raymond Marcel did not mention that sodomy was among the main charges against the Academy’s members and their “neo-pagan” activities.⁶⁸ It is not difficult to understand how these two developments would have affected Ficino and could have induced the “crisis”: Paul II’s condemnation amounted to an attack on the kind of humanistic culture represented by people like Ficino himself, it highlighted the possible connection between that culture and homosexual activity, and this at a time when the temptation of giving in to his sexual desire must have haunted Ficino’s fantasies in the very concrete person of Cavalcanti. *De Amore* did two things for him: it allowed him not only to sum up the essence of the Platonic philosophy to which he had been devoting himself during the previous years of translating Plato’s complete dialogues, but also to “process” his personal experience with love and desire by means of a philosophical synthesis that finally succeeded in resolving his inner conflict. The doctrine of *De Amore* explained the anguish he felt, and thus in a way legitimated it as something natural, while at the same time leaving no doubt about the direction he should take: that of transcending his bodily desires and allowing love itself to direct him upwards toward the divine. This is the path he took. A few years later, in December

⁶⁷ Roche, *Forbidden Friendships*, 125, 160 found that Florentines apparently saw nothing strange in pursuing both.

⁶⁸ See Dall’Orto about the Roman Academy’s leader Pomponio Leto, who was charged with sodomy for being too attached to two boys, whose beauty he had praised in Latin writings. Leto admitted to having praised the boys’ beauty, but in defending himself he referred to Socrates as his model (see passages from Leto’s *defensio* in Carini, *La “difesa” di Pomponio Leto*, 36–37, as quoted in Dall’Orto “‘Socratic Love,’” 45). Since he apparently believed this comparison would work in his favor, he must have considered it beyond dispute (like Ficino, but contrary to e.g. George of Trebizond) that Socrates could not have practiced anything but “chaste” love.

1473, Ficino was ordained into the priesthood, and we are told that after *De Amore* he did find the peace of mind that had eluded him in his younger years.

*From Socratic to Platonic Love:
The Heterosexualization of Eros*

Of course, the Renaissance tradition of love theory was not inspired by Plato alone, and the ideal that eventually came to be known as “Platonic love” did not emerge only from the homoerotic perspective of Ficino’s *De Amore*. The development of love theory from the middle ages through the Renaissance has been described by many authors and will here be summarized only in its bare outlines.⁶⁹ The spiritual love for God, or *caritas*, had been seen as something entirely different from mere sensual love, or *cupiditas*, through most of the middle ages; but these two concepts began to mingle in the chivalric ideal of courtly love that we know from an abundance of literary sources since the twelfth century. Here, the sensual love between men and women was sublimated into a new spiritualized concept, where the male poet is entirely devoted to his idealized lady. Robb summarizes the code of correct behavior that governed such relations: “the lady... was regarded as a feudal superior who received from her lover the same honour and service as were given by a true knight to his liege-lord[, and] in return she was expected to be gracious to him and to encourage him in all courtesy and valour.”⁷⁰ More than that, in what would nowadays be recognized as a sadomasochistic erotic relation with the male in the voluntarily submissive role, the woman was idealized as an unattainable being of more than earthly perfection who could be contemplated and adored but never touched. The lover suffers terribly, because his desire remains forever unsatisfied, but he is happy to make this sacrifice for his lady’s sake. In fact, it is by means of this very suffering that he is purified and lifted up to the higher spiritual state that she represents.

⁶⁹ See e.g. Pflaum, *Die Idee der Liebe Leone Ebreo*, ch. I: “Die Idee der Liebe in ihrem Wandel vom Mittelalter zur Renaissance”; Festugière, *La philosophie de l’amour de Marsile Ficin*, ch. 1: “L’amour courtois”; de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*; Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, ch. VI: “The Trattato d’Amore”; Meylan, “L’évolution de la notion d’amour platonique”; Krays, “The Transformation of Platonic Love”; Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love*.

⁷⁰ Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, 177.

In the *Dolce Stil Nuovo*, with Dante as its greatest representative, the spiritualization of heterosexual love reached its logical conclusion and culmination. The courtly ideal is intensely erotic (in a modern sense) because of its very emphasis on permanently unsatisfied desire; its bliss lies in the suffering that results from the unresolved conflict between body and spirit. Dante's Beatrice, in contrast, is no longer an object of erotic desire. She becomes a saintly and angelic being who has far transcended all sensuality: as such, she represents an ascetic spiritual ideal that can only be attained by overcoming the world and its temptations.

This idea that a beautiful woman can represent the divine ideal is likewise strongly present in Petrarch (1304–1374), but he described the corporeal beauty of Laura much more concretely, with plenty of attention to physical details. And most important, for him Laura was simultaneously a spiritual ideal *and* his dream partner for making love:

May I be with her when the sun departs,
and seen by no one but the stars,
for one sole night, and may there be no dawn:
and may she not be changed to green woodland,
issuing from my arms, as on the day
when Apollo pursued her down here on earth.⁷¹

While the medieval courtly poets idealized the suffering of unsatisfied desire, Petrarch dreamt of satisfying his desire; and as a result, he was tormented not only by sexual frustration, but by moral qualms about his "sinful" erotic imagination as well.⁷² In a different way, the same can be said about Petrarch's contemporary Boccaccio (1313–1375). Known, of course, for his erotic masterpiece *Decamerone*, in the early 1360s he experienced a crisis of faith after which he not only devoted himself to spiritual pursuits, but also turned into an extreme misogynist.⁷³ Again we encounter the conflict between sensuality and spirituality as basic to medieval concepts of love.

While these traditions are all of great importance to Giordano Bruno's masterpiece *De gli eroici furori*, for Ficino their role seems to have been quite minor. It was only in the wake of *De Amore* that a confluence

⁷¹ Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, 22 (Con lei foss'io da che si parte il sole, / et non ci vedess'altri che le stelle, / sol una nocte, et mai non fosse l'alba; / et non se trasformasse in verde selva / per uscirmi di braccia, come il giorno / ch'Apollò la seguia qua giù per terra). Cf. also *Canzoniere*, 237.

⁷² See the longer analysis in Pflaum, *Die Idee der Liebe*, 4–8.

⁷³ See Boccaccio's *Corbaccio* (1365).

seems to have taken place of his homoerotic and Platonic theory of love with the heteroerotic currents referred to above, resulting in a heterosexualization of Ficino's "Socratic love." Although Ficino himself seems to have used the terms as synonyms, the resulting doctrine may conveniently be referred to as "Platonic love." What happened has been summarized by Giovanni Dall'Orto:

Amor Socraticus had a strange destiny. As soon as it learned to walk by itself, and escaped from Ficino's "Academy", it marched faster and faster toward unification with sodomitical behavior.⁷⁴ But, before merging with the concept of "sodomy", it gave birth to a heterosexual form of "Platonic love", that was par excellence the dominant style of courtly love in the Cinquecento.⁷⁵

All specialists agree in assigning to Cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) a central role in this transformation, which eventually led to a veritable cult of the "religion of beauty in woman."⁷⁶ Described by one author as "the great prototype of the courtly Neoplatonic treatise,"⁷⁷ his *Gli Asolani* (1505) presents Ficino's theories in an unambiguously heterosexual framework that abounds in Dantean, Petrarchan, and Boccaccian elements. Almost contemporary with Bembo's text, Leone Ebreo (ca. 1465–15[?]) wrote his remarkably popular *Dialoghi d'Amore* (ca. 1502), again heavily based upon Ficino but focused on female beauty. A third central text, the *Cortegiano* of Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529), was written about a decade later (publ. in 1528). It exalts the chaste love of mature men for beautiful women, in a manner that makes it a model case of "Platonic love," including all its stereotypes. As with Ficino, love is based upon sight and hearing: the lover is admonished to

enjoy with his eyes the radiance, the grace, the loving ardour, the smiles, the mannerisms and all the other agreeable adornments of the woman he loves [and to] use his hearing to enjoy the sweetness of her voice, the modulation of her words and, if she is a musician, the music she plays.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Robb (*Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, 181) discusses "heroic friendships" such as those between Ficino and Cavalcanti, and comments "Unfortunately, in the society that surrounded them, the most shameful depravity came sometimes to be qualified as 'amor socratico.'" Dall'Orto ("Socratic Love," 59) reminds us that Voltaire in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) discussed sex among men under the heading "amour nommé socratique."

⁷⁵ Dall'Orto, "Socratic Love," 59.

⁷⁶ Fletcher, *The Religion of Beauty in Woman*.

⁷⁷ Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, 184.

⁷⁸ Castiglione, *Il libro del cortegiano* (ed. V. Cian, Florence 1947), 486, as quoted in Kraye, "The Transformation of Platonic Love," 83.

He may even go as far as kissing her, but for purely spiritual reasons only:

the rational lover knows that, though the mouth is indeed part of the body, none the less it is through it that we give egress to words, which are the interpreters of the soul, and to that indwelling breath that is called soul also; and for this cause he delights to unite his mouth in a kiss with that of the beloved lady, not in order to provoke in himself any lewd desire, but because he feels that that union opens up a passage for their souls...whence a kiss may be called a union of souls rather than of bodies.⁷⁹

In short: the body remained the problem. Love is something of the soul, and must never be confused with sexual desire.

Bruno's Heroic Frenzies

While Ficino's *De Amore* was a highly original and profound work, the same could hardly be said about most of the Italian *trattati d'amore* that followed in its wake. Specialists agree that most of them are purely conventional and derivative and deplore the "horrible didacticism" that crept into them, particularly due to the moralizing influences of the Counter-Reformation.⁸⁰ It is only with Bruno's *De gli eroici furori* that, a century after Ficino, the genre produced another work of genius.⁸¹

We have seen that the foundational text of Renaissance love literature was written by a man who was addressing other men and in whose life and thought women seem to have been virtually non-existent. Most of his successors, in contrast, were inspired by courtly and Petrarchan traditions and applied his theories to women, whose physical and moral beauty was exalted by them as a reflection of the divine. From the very first lines of his treatise on love, Bruno distances himself from *both* perspectives by taking a position that is clearly heterosexual but also shockingly misogynist. Not only Petrarch and his successors, but virtually all representatives of love literature, and last but not least

⁷⁹ Castiglione, *Cortigiano* (ed. Cian), 424, as quoted in Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, 207.

⁸⁰ Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, 180.

⁸¹ Bruno's *Eroici furori* is readily available in various modern Italian editions. The translated passages quoted in the rest of this article are indebted both to Paul Eugene Memmo's translation of 1964 and to the forthcoming new translation by Ingrid Rowland. I am grateful to Prof. Rowland for sharing her unpublished translation with me, and to Dr. Marco Pasi for his invaluable help in solving a number of difficult translation problems.

their objects of desire—women—are the target of an extraordinary avalanche of invectives:

It is truly . . . the work of a low, animal, filthy nature to have made oneself the constant admirer, and to have fixed a solicitous attachment upon or around the beauty of a woman's body. Good God! What more vile and ignoble sight . . . than a man, brooding, afflicted, tormented, sorry, melancholy; who waxes now cold, now hot, now boiling, now trembling, now pale, now blushing, now in a pose of perplexity, now in the act of decisiveness . . . What tragicomedy, what act, I say, more deserving of pity and laughter . . . than these subjugated men rendered pensive, contemplative, constant, steadfast, faithful, lovers, devotees, adorers and slaves of a thing without faith, bereft of all constancy, destitute of all intelligence, empty of all merit, void of any acknowledgement or gratitude, where no more sense, intellect or goodness are to be obtained than might be found in a statue or an image painted on a wall? [behold all the things men do] for those eyes, for those cheeks, for that bosom, for that white, for that crimson, for that tongue, for that tooth, for that lip, that hair, that dress, that mantle, that glove, that little shoe, that slipper, that avarice, that giggle, that scorn, that empty window, that eclipsed sun, that torment, that disgust, that stench, that sepulcher, that cesspit, that menstruation, that carrion, that quartan fever, that uttermost insult and lapse of nature, which, with a surface, a shadow, a phantasm, a dream, a Circean enchantment plied in the service of reproduction, deceives under the guise of beauty; which simultaneously comes and goes, is born and dies, flourishes and rots, and may be somewhat beautiful on the outside, but truly and constantly contains within a shipload, a workshop, a customs-house, a marketplace of every foulness, toxin and poison that our stepmother nature has managed to produce: and once the seed she requires has been paid out, she often repays it with a stench, a remorse, a sadness, a weakness, a headache, a lassitude, and many more distempers known to all the world, so that it sorely aches where it itched so sweetly before.⁸²

Having poured his scorn over women in general as “things” and “monsters,” and over their male admirers as pathetic fools and idiots, Bruno hastens to defend himself against those who might think he means to censor sexual pleasure or procreation. Never, he says, would the desire enter his mind “to castrate myself or become a eunuch”, and he does not want to be second to anyone “who worthily breaks bread in the service of nature and the blessed God.” In other words, neither is there anything wrong with sexual intercourse, “nor do I believe myself to be frigid, for I do not think that the snows of Mt. Caucasus or Ripheus

⁸² Bruno, *Eroici Furori*, Introduction.

would suffice to cool my heat.” Bruno simply means to say that “what belongs to Caesar should be rendered unto Caesar, and what belongs to God should be rendered unto God.” In other words, one may appreciate the minor virtues that women possess by nature (and without which, Bruno adds, they would be more useless than a poisonous toadstool); but they should certainly not be made into an object of worship and treated as if they are divine.⁸³

Clearly, then, the *Eroici Furori* is not a conventional love treatise. It neither develops a philosophical metaphysics of love (as in the case of Ficino), nor does it use such a framework for exalting objects of beauty (i.e. the female body). Bruno’s concern is, rather, with what would nowadays be called the psychology of love. His goal is to uncover the real nature of the “frenzies” or “madnesses” (*furores*) by which male lovers are tormented and which seem to render them irrational and out of control. The true lover is not foolishly tormented by a passion for a woman, but by a “heroic” passion for the divine. Bruno’s usage of the word “heroic” here is extremely interesting and significant, for it reflects not only Ficino’s association of “hero” with “eros” (see above), but also refers to a medical/psychological condition traditionally known as *amor hereos*:⁸⁴ the love-sickness or love-madness whose symptoms Bruno describes in the first lines of the *Eroici Furori*, quoted above. We have seen that Bruno pours scorn on those who allow something so insignificant as a woman to get them into such a condition. But as we are about to see, the sufferings and torments of the “heroic lover” are appropriate and indeed inevitable if caused by the only *true* and worthy object of desire. To confuse them with the frenzies of physical love would be as

⁸³ All these quotations occur in Bruno, *Eroici Furori*, Introduction, which also states that a living woman is considered hardly “worthy of being loved naturally even in that instant when her beauty is in flower.” While women in general are treated with the utmost contempt, Bruno quite hypocritically makes an exception for “those ladies who have been worthily praised and who are praiseworthy: and those, especially, who may and do reside in this British land, to whom we owe the love and fidelity of the guest.” The English women, and Queen Elizabeth most of all, “are not females, they are not women but, in the guise of women, they are nymphs, they are goddesses and of celestial substance.” At the end of his introduction Bruno even appends a poem addressed to these “most glorious and virtuous ladies” of England, which repeats that they are not women but nymphs and goddesses. Bruno abhors only “the ordinary genus”; and he is sure that any “chaste and honest” woman will agree with him that venereal love between men and women is a dishonorable thing.

⁸⁴ See the fascinating article on the philological backgrounds and historical development of the term “heroes,” by Lowes, “The Loveres Maladye of Hereos.”

bizarre, Bruno writes, as seeing “dolphins...in the trees of the forest, or wild boars beneath the sea cliffs.”⁸⁵

Apart from the introductory Argument, the *Eroici Furori* consists of two main parts, each of them consisting of five dialogues. This subdivision, however, is artificial and misleading, for actually the ten chapters of the work naturally fall into three parts: chapters 1–4 contain the basic argument in the form of commentaries on a series of sonnets, chapters 5–7 consist of a long series of commentaries on emblems (which, unfortunately, were never printed with the text) and their accompanying devices, and chapters 8–10 are three “allegorical fictions” in the form of a dialogue between the eyes and the heart, a story of nine blind men, and finally a conversation between two women who speak about the final fate of those blind men.

Bruno’s text is an extraordinary mixture of esoteric, mystical, and philosophical, but also poetic and artistic elements. From a variety of different perspectives, the text consistently emphasizes the hopeless suffering and torment of the heroic soul, whose metaphysical thirst can only be quenched by attaining the one “object,” “beauty,” or “fire” of the divinity itself,⁸⁶ which however seems to remain forever out of reach as long as he lives in this world of the senses. Of central importance in Bruno’s symbolic universe is the “cruel and beautiful” goddess Diana, for she is responsible for the “sweet pain” of the lover, who is forever driven on by the passion—in the double sense of the word—of his never-satisfied love: “although the soul does not attain the end desired and is consumed by so much zeal, it is enough that it burns in so noble a fire.”⁸⁷ Again and again, one is struck by passages

⁸⁵ Note that Bruno originally planned to call his book *Canticle*, in reference to the Song of Songs, which likewise “under the guise of lovers and ordinary passions contains similarly divine and heroic frenzies” (for the importance of the Song of Songs to Bruno, see Tirinnanzi, “Il *Cantico dei Cantici* tra il *De umbris Idearum* e gli *Eroici Furori*”). Bruno emphasizes the allegorical and metaphorical nature of both the Song of Songs and his own *Eroici Furori*, but his admission that some readers will suspect the latter to have a more mundane autobiographical background (i.e., that the work was born out of its author’s rejection by a lover, and had only afterwards “borrowed wings for itself and become heroic”) indicates that he is aware that the former could be so interpreted as well. That Bruno’s work did have its origin in an unhappy romance was argued in 1920 by Antonio Sarno (“La genesi degli ‘Eroici Furori’”). For an excellent analysis of the Song of Songs as steamy erotic literature, see Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*.

⁸⁶ Bruno, *Eroici Furori* I:1 (“un oggetto...una beltà sola...un sol fuoco”).

⁸⁷ Bruno, *Eroici Furori* I:3 (lit.: “that it is so nobly aflame” [ch sia sì nobilment’accesa]).

about burning that almost read like predictions of Bruno's "heroic" death by burning, in 1600.⁸⁸

In the present context it is important to emphasize first of all that—his misogynism notwithstanding—Bruno's mystical eroticism is unquestionably heterosexual. While God himself remains a dark an inaccessible mystery, all his manifestations are female: most notable here are not only the goddess Diana, but also the sorceress Circe and the English "nymphs" headed by Queen Elizabeth, who dominate the final part of the *Eroici Furori*. More specifically, from a modern perspective we would have to speak of a sadomasochistic eroticism, as shown by frequent statements such as this one: "Why do you fix your gaze upon an object whose contemplation consumes you? Why are you so smitten by that flame? Because this torment contents me more than any other pleasure."⁸⁹ Bruno's attitude towards sex is extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, sexual frustration as such seems—in line with the courtly ideal—to be a central dimension of "heroic suffering," even to such an extent that one might describe it as a necessary mystical "technique." On the other hand, the ascent from the pursuit of earthly beauty to divine truth is—in line with the Platonic concept—possible only *by means of* contemplating the earthly beauty of the (female) body; and Bruno repeatedly hints that this spiritual ideal is compatible with sexual activity:

Alas, he will say, if a shadowy, cloudy, elusive beauty painted upon the surface of corporeal matter pleases me so much and so incites my affection...so captivates me and so sweetly binds me and draws me to it, that I find my senses offer nothing so agreeable to me, what would be

⁸⁸ It seems reasonable to speculate (although it can obviously never be proven) that Bruno's convictions about heroic love may have played a significant role in his decision not to revoke his heresies, and thus suffer the consequences of death at the stake. For someone who believed as passionately as Bruno did in this doctrine of mystical "love-death," which can only be attained by pursuing a path of heroic suffering to the very end, giving in to the fear of death would mean a fatal betrayal of the very core beliefs to which he had devoted his life: for isn't it only in death itself that the mystical goal can be attained? And for someone who believed as deeply as Bruno did in the truth of symbols as corresponding to divine realities, being consumed by fire would be the only logical end for a person, who had lived his life "burning with passion" for the divine mystery. Chilling though such speculation may be, I believe that if one takes Bruno seriously, one has to concede that in the final years before his execution he cannot possibly have overlooked the remarkable "match" between his theory of mystical death and the reality of the death that awaited him.

⁸⁹ Bruno, *Eroici Furori* II:1 (second emblem).

the effect upon me of that which is the substantial, original, and primal beauty? . . . Therefore, the contemplation of this vestige of light must lead me by the purgation of my soul to an imitation, a conformity, and participation in that most worthy and most lofty light into which I am transformed and with which I am united. For I am sure that nature, having put this [corporeal] beauty before my eyes . . . wishes that from here below I become elevated . . . Nor do I believe that my true divinity, inasmuch as it is shown to me in its vestige and image, would be offended if I happened to honor it in its vestige and image and to offer sacrifices to it, provided that the impulse of my heart remained ordered and my affection remained intent upon what is higher.⁹⁰

It is hard not to read such “sacrifices” offered to a woman as the vestige and image of the divine and the “honor” done to her as coded references to sexual practice. Bruno leaves his reader in no doubt that he is greatly “pleased,” “incited to affection,” “captivated,” “sweetly bound,” and “drawn” by female beauty, and that in this world there is nothing more “agreeable to the senses”; and he convinces himself that giving in to the lure of that beauty is no sin, as long as it does not throw the “impulse of his heart” into disorder and his true affection remains focused not on the woman in question but upon her transcendent archetype. In short, he may make love to the woman as long as he does not fall in love with her.

Central to Bruno’s text is the myth of Actaeon, the hunter who in the depths of the woods chances upon the naked goddess Diana while she is taking her bath. While he gazes upon her beauty, his own dogs turn against him and devour him: the hunter becomes prey and the prey becomes hunter. Bruno impressively explains the myth as an allegory for the “love-death” of the heroic lover: he is killed by his own passions but in his very death he is transformed into the object of his desire. Diana is the shadow of the inaccessible and wholly mysterious God: she is “the world, the universe, the nature which is in things, the light shining through the obscurity of matter.”⁹¹ In an amazing passage—reminiscent of modern neopagan and neo-shamanic nature-mysticism—Bruno describes how Actaeon, the prototype of the heroic lover, has moved beyond this world and yet remains in it:

⁹⁰ Bruno, *Eroici Furori* II:1 (second emblem).

⁹¹ Bruno, *Eroici Furori* II:2 (thirteenth emblem).

From the vulgar, ordinary, civil, and common man he was, he becomes as free⁹² as a deer, and an inhabitant of the wilderness; he lives like a god beneath the towering forest, in the natural⁹³ rooms of the cavernous mountains, where he contemplates the sources of the great rivers, vigorous as a plant, intact and pure, free of ordinary lusts, and converses most freely with the divinity, to which so many men have aspired, who in their desire to taste the celestial life on earth have cried with one voice: "Lo, I have gone far off flying away; and I remained in the wilderness."⁹⁴

Bruno's text is dominated by the symbolism of fire and water, connected with the heart and the eyes. The burning passion of the lover's heart is increased to ever greater heights by means of the images of beauty that reach him through the eyes; but the eyes are crying all the time, because of the suffering that is caused by the heart's unsatisfied fiery passion. Hence the "dialogues" between the burning heart and the crying eyes that take up the third dialogue of Part II.

Bruno's final two dialogues are about nine blind men: allegories of the lover who wanders around this earth tormented by his inability to perceive the divine. The lovers have been blinded for nine reasons: by being born blind, by jealousy, by a too sudden exposure to light, by overexposure to light, by too much weeping, by having the body dried up, by having been burned up, by having been blinded by love, and by lack of confidence and humility of spirit. In the final dialogue we learn how the enchantress Circe has given them a vase of water that she is unable to open herself, but which she says will perhaps be opened one day by one who has "lofty wisdom and noble chastity and beauty together." If and when that ever happens, the blind men will behold "the two most beautiful stars of the world," compared to which all other lights pale into insignificance, and their long search will be over. After long wanderings the blind men finally reach England and meet the "beautiful and gracious nymphs of Father Thames," but by this time they no longer have any hope left. They have long come to believe that Circe with her prophecy merely intended to increase their torment: "this enchantress, for our greater woe, strives to keep us in eternal expectation. For she believes that no lady of so many accomplishments can be seen beneath the cloak of heaven." However, the nymphs pass

⁹² Orig.: "salvatico," i.e. wild, untamed, undomesticated.

⁹³ Orig.: "non artificiose," i.e. non-artificial.

⁹⁴ Bruno, *Eroici Furori* II:2 (thirteenth emblem). The final quotation is from Psalm 54:8.

the vase around, and finally one of them, “not so much from a desire to demonstrate her glory, but through pity and the desire to come to the rescue of these unfortunate men,” almost effortlessly opens the vase and thus restores sight to them:

Do you imagine I can express the excessive joy of the nine blind men, who, having heard that the vase was opened, felt themselves sprinkled with the longed for water, opened their eyes, saw the twin suns and found that they had a two-fold felicity, that of having recovered the light formerly lost and that of having newly discovered the other light which alone could show them the image of the supreme good on earth?⁹⁵

Undoubtedly this nymph is Queen Elizabeth herself, and the “twin suns” or “most beautiful stars in the world” are her eyes.⁹⁶ Thus, having persisted in their quest and accepted their suffering even though all hope had long been left behind, the lovers are finally graced with beholding the beauty of the “eternal feminine” who perfectly reflects the divine light.

The End of Desire

It is a long way from the homoerotic mysticism of Ficino to the heteroerotic frenzies of Giordano Bruno, but what remains constant is the connection between eros and suffering. Eros is the desire for a perfect, divine, eternal beauty which can never be satisfied in this world; that is why it keeps us forever restless, hungry and thirsty, suspended between hope and despair, like a cruel mistress who promises release but never gives it and perhaps never will. Ficino and Bruno tell us that it is possible for erotic desire to attain its goal, but only at the very limits of this world, for it belong to the very essence of love that it can never be consummated within the domain of the senses, corporeality, and time. Only in the ultimate transcendence of the body and “at the end of desire” is the lover finally united with beauty itself. He must pass through suffering and death in order to enter a domain where eternal beauty resides and nothing remains to be desired, *and yet* it is desire itself that has caused him to search for that domain in the first place, and has pushed him to the limit of this world. In other words, nothing

⁹⁵ Bruno, *Eroici Furori* II:5.

⁹⁶ Elsewhere in the *Eroici Furori* too, “twin suns” always refer to the eyes.

could be further from Ficino's and Bruno's perspectives than a belief that in order to find peace, one must first seek to subjugate the passions and kill desire. On the contrary, although it is true that desire causes suffering, it is also the very force that impels us to climb upwards on the scale of perfection; and according to Bruno it is only in and through the very fire of passion, which burns and tortures body and soul, that the heroic lover may hope to attain the "end of desire."

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REVEALING ANALOGIES:
THE DESCRIPTIVE AND DECEPTIVE ROLES OF
SEXUALITY AND GENDER IN LATIN ALCHEMY

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Sexual and erotic language and imagery is extremely common in alchemy. Its most visible form occurs in oft-reproduced alchemical emblemata that routinely contain graphic depictions of gendered entities and copulating couples. Alchemical texts regularly employ erotic language as well, often describing extended allegorical sequences that occasionally involve sexual intercourse of various kinds or at least employ highly gendered imagery. Even at the most basic level, alchemists frequently speak of their substances as gendered—some as female, some as male, and some, rather famously, as hermaphroditic. Among modern commentators, the presence of such imagery has engendered a variety of explanations—of divergent plausibility and historical sensibility—for its origin, purpose, and meaning. This chapter addresses fundamental questions about such imagery: What do these erotic or gendered images really *mean*? What purposes do they serve in texts? How and why are they constructed by their authors? Why should gendered and sexual language and images be so widespread in alchemy? And how integral in fact is sexual language and thought to alchemical aims and practices?

The wide diversity of writers, practices, aims, theories, and cultural contexts present in the long history of alchemy means that exhaustive answers to these questions would extend far beyond the bounds of this chapter. Nonetheless, if we limit ourselves to the epoch of alchemy for which sufficient textual resources for broad scholarship currently exist—namely, the Latin West from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century—then an examination of some representative sources and their contexts should provide at least an outline of answers. A contextualized examination of these sources promises to correct various facile misconceptions that remain widespread. Indeed, while the subject of sexuality in alchemy has long been a subject of study, much of the writing on this topic—as is the case for alchemical imagery more generally—gives unnecessarily contrived readings or attempts to explain

obscura per obscuriorem. In contrast, this chapter strives to present more historically contextualized and more plausible origins and roles for the gendered and sexual language of alchemy.

It seems useful to begin with a short inventory of some of the sexual themes found in alchemical imagery and the various forms in which this imagery occurs. The most striking examples are those cast into pictorial form, whether printed engravings and woodcuts or manuscript drawings and illuminations. Such images first appeared in the context of alchemy in the fourteenth century; by the seventeenth century, entire books of such illustrations were being produced.¹ In some cases, as in the 1599 *Von den grossen Stein der uhralten Weisen* (better known as the *Twelve Keys*) of “Basil Valentine,” the emblems were clearly subordinate to the written text. This secondary status is witnessed by the much greater amount of space accorded to text, and by the fact that the emblems appeared for the first time only in the 1602 second edition of the work.² In others, like Lambspringk’s *De lapide philosophorum*, the emblems carry a much greater proportion of the message of the book, being accompanied only by short texts in verse. As an extreme case, the famous *Mutus liber* contains a long series of pictorial engravings and only a single line of text urging the reader to “pray, read, read, and reread the work and you will find it.”³ There are also collections of emblems with the character of florilegia, where elements of the imagery—and in some cases, entire emblems—can be traced to multiple earlier sources. A well-known example is the 1617 *Atalanta fugiens* of Michael Maier with its fifty beautiful copperplate emblems.⁴ But a more extreme example is the *Chymisches Lustgärtlein* and Johann Daniel Mylius’ *Philosophia reformata*, both of which amass and co-opt a wide miscellany of emblems from quite diverse (and often easily identifiable) sources.⁵ Thus there exists a range of deployments for alchemical emblems, placing greater or lesser reliance on pictorial representation, showing greater or lesser originality and coherence, and directed to a variety of purposes and audiences.

¹ See in particular Obrist, *Les débuts de l’imagerie alchimique*.

² Basil Valentine, *Von den grossen Stein der uhralten Weisen*. On Valentine see Priesner, “Johann Thoele und die Schriften des Basilius Valentinus,” and on contemporaneous interpretations of his emblems see Principe, “Apparatus and Reproducibility in Alchemy,” esp. 59–62.

³ Lambspringk, *De lapide philosophorum; Mutus liber*.

⁴ Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*; for an analysis of the origins of elements of the emblems, see de Jong, *Michael Maier’s Atalanta fugiens*.

⁵ Stoltzius von Stoltzenberg, *Chymisches Lustgärtlein*; Mylius, *Philosophia reformata*.

Purely textual sources can also employ a highly imaged language, describing in words what the pictures display in visual format. Indeed, the pictorial formats of alchemy are, in general, derived from earlier purely textual sources. For example, the beautiful so-called “Ripley Scrolls” draw at least some of their images from the earlier writings of the authentic fifteenth century alchemical author George Ripley.⁶ Written sources can use imagery in various ways—the very simplest (and oldest) being the widely prevalent deployment of *Decknamen* (cover names) for chemical substances or operations, such as eagle, dragon, or lion, or, to provide examples more germane to the present discussion, red man, white wife, and hermaphrodite—to encode alchemical texts, investing them with the secrecy inseparable from so much of alchemy. Such usages date to some of the earliest chrysopoetic texts, notably the Late Classical writings of Zosimus.⁷ It is worth pointing out however, that the early productions of Latin alchemy, such as the thirteenth-century *Summa perfectionis* of Geber, are free of such disguised names. These *Decknamen* are frequently woven into extended allegories or parables that recount the (often bizarre) transactions of a host of creatures. Sometimes these conceits are written and labelled explicitly as “parabolae;” sometimes they are cast as dream sequences, or as travels to exotic locales, and so forth.

By far the most common of the specifically sexual images is the conjugal pair, depicted either as merely being joined in marriage (Figure 1), or more graphically in the act of procreation (Figure 2). The language of male and female and of sexual generation is pervasive in alchemical texts. Another common image is that of the hermaphrodite, frequently depicted not merely with anomalous pelvic anatomy but often as bicephalous or bicorporal (Figure 3).

Other sexual oddities also appear in alchemical contexts, and Greek mythology provided a *locus classicus* for almost any imaginable combination of sexes and number of participants leading to generation. For example, Orion is considered to have had three fathers and no mother, and this myth is adapted to alchemical purposes in one emblem of

⁶ On the Ripley Scrolls see Linden, “The Ripley Scrolls and *The Compound of Alchemy*.”

⁷ For *Decknamen* in Zosimus, see Zosimus, *Mémoires authentiques*; in Islamic alchemy, see Ruska and Wiedemann, “Alchemistische Decknamen,” and Siggel, *Decknamen in der arabischen alchemistischen Literatur*.

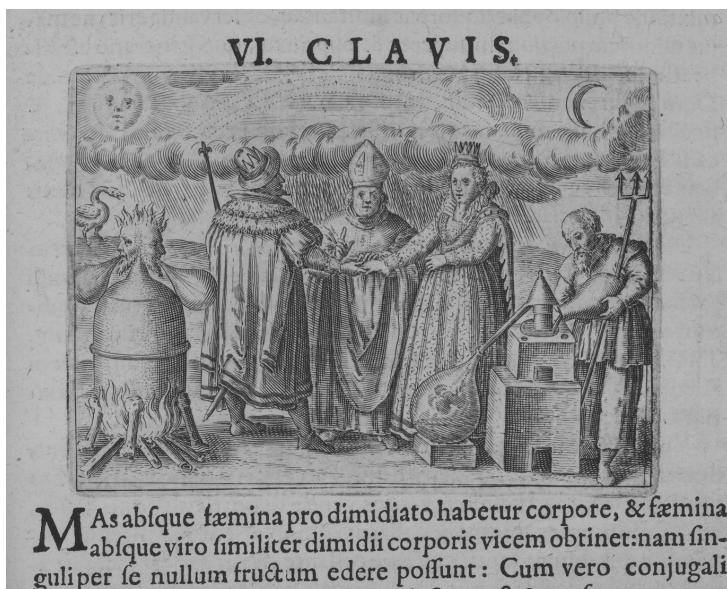


Fig. 1. A marriage, from Basil Valentine, *Practica de lapide philosophorum*, in *Musaeum hermeticum* (Frankfurt, 1678), 405.
Roy G. Neville Historical Chemical Library, Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.

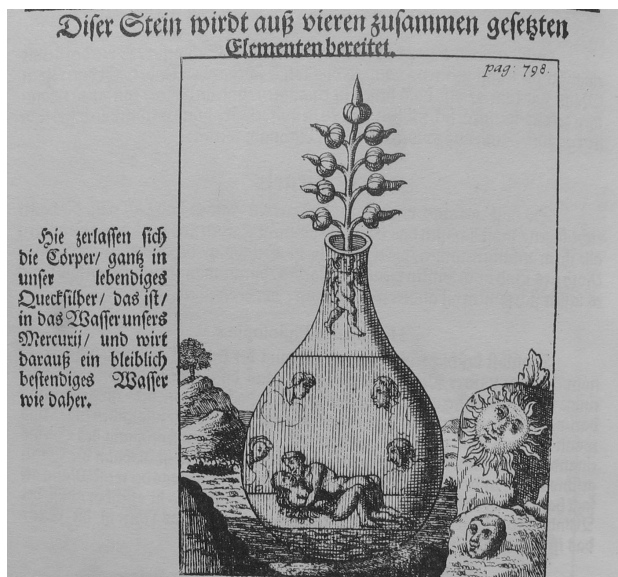


Fig. 2. Copulating pair in a flask, from *Spiegel der Philosophie*, in *Eröffnete Geheimnisse der Stein der Weisen* (Hamburg, 1718), 798.

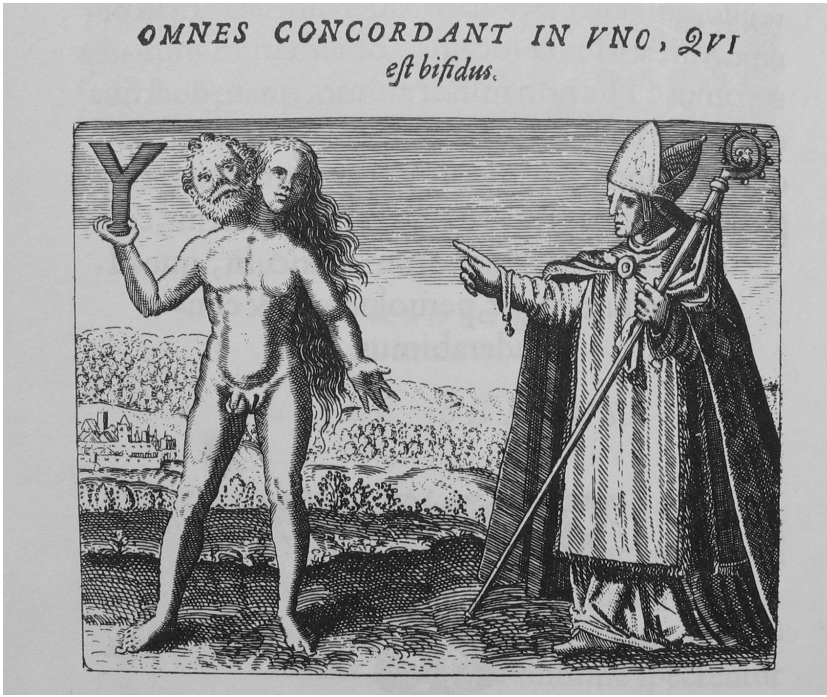


Fig. 3. A bicephalous hermaphrodite as depicted in Michael Maier, *Symbolae aureae mensae duodecim nationum* (Frankfurt, 1617), 238. The figure on the right is St. Albert the Great.

Michael Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*. Here (Figure 4) in graphic depiction are Orion's three fathers, Mercury, Apollo, and Vulcan depositing their semen into a bull's hide—in this image, Vulcan is caught in the act while Apollo and Mercury helpfully steady the receptacle. The mature Orion—who will emerge as an infant from the bull's hide in due course—is depicted on the far right. The epigram notes that the Philosophers' Stone (*infans philosophicus* or *sobol sophiae*), like Orion, has three fathers—the Sun, probably representing gold in this context and symbolized by Apollo, fire (of the alchemical digesting furnace) symbolized by Vulcan, and art (*techne*, or alchemical know-how) symbolized by the god Mercury.

Now what are we to make of the use of such imagery? I propose that the use of sexual imagery in alchemy results, paradoxically, from two opposing desires on the part of its creators: the desire to *explain* and the desire to *conceal*. In the balance of this chapter I shall present evidence from various sources to show (1) that alchemical writers consciously created their terms and images with both of these goals



Fig. 4. The three fathers of Orion, from Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, (Oppenheim, 1618), 205.
 Roy G. Neville Historical Chemical Library, Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.

in mind, (2) that alchemical authors were aware of the metaphorical nature of their language and imagery, (3) that sexual imagery arises uncomplicatedly from common experience and fundamental ways of looking at the world, and (4) that such ways of describing, or rather emblemizing, the world are not unique to secretive chrysopoetic (gold-making) alchemy.

Alchemical writers needed to expound and explain natural and artificial processes; for example, the formation of minerals and metals

in the earth and the (often remarkable) transformations of these substances in their furnaces. Thus they had to develop theories of matter and change, that is to say, expositions of processes which by definition occurred fundamentally below the level of direct sense perception and thus of direct experience. Alchemists of the Middle Ages and early modern period dealt with these issues using a language of *minimae partes*, substantial forms, corpuscles, or other theoretical constructs, drawn from Aristotelian and other natural philosophical traditions.⁸ Given any subject whose explanatory principles lie outside of direct sense perception, it is natural—indeed unavoidable—to turn to analogy for explanation and clarification, that is, to explain the unknown by means of the known, the unfamiliar by means of the familiar. Scientists today are familiar with this technique, even if they are not always as aware as they might be of the degree of implicitly metaphorical usage in their daily thought and work.⁹ It is no more than a truism to note that in creating descriptive analogical language, one draws most helpfully and most readily upon common experience. And there is hardly a more common human experience than that of gender and sexuality.

Higher animals, including human beings, are most obviously divided into two groups on the basis of biological sex. Thus the binary of male/female provides an ever-ready means of labeling or classifying anything that falls into two subcategories (and sometimes three, with the inclusion of neuter). Such a scheme is most obvious in languages where grammarians chose to classify nouns by “gender.”¹⁰ Minerals as well have been classified as male and female; for example, stibnite, an antimony ore, was once classified by miners as male-antimony and female-antimony depending on whether or not it displayed golden

⁸ On the matter theories used and developed by chrysopeitic alchemists, see Newman, “Experimental Corpuscular Theory”; *Gehennical Fire*, 151–164 and 228–239; and Principe, “Diversity in Alchemy,” 181–200.

⁹ For example, every structural chemical formula is essentially analogical—a representation distant from the reality of the subject but nonetheless tightly linked to it by means of conventions. Pedagogically it is nearly impossible to speak of chemical explanations without the constant recourse to similes.

¹⁰ In passing I shall point out that it seems predominantly anglophones, whose language has almost no vestiges of grammatical gender, who tend to confect extravagant notions regarding gender and language owing to their failure to realize that the “gender” of nouns in other languages is merely a classification system of grammarians rather than a system of gendered values: a completely unlettered Frenchman never fails to say *la maison blanche* and *le vin blanc* without ever knowing that grammarians classify the former as feminine and the latter as masculine. On related issues in terms of nature, see Osler, “The Gender of Nature and the Nature of Gender.”

veins.¹¹ Some folk knowledge routinely classifies many non-gendered objects such as fruits, vegetables, and plants into male and female.¹² In each case, the application of a “gender” facilitates description and differentiation between sub-types.

Alchemists likewise divided metals into groups of male and female, and did so by drawing upon various sources, particularly astrological and mythological correspondences. Thus they tended to consider gold, mercury, iron, tin, and lead as masculine, since these metals are represented respectively by the gods/planets the Sun (Apollo), Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Silver and copper on the other hand are named as female, since they are connected to goddesses: the Moon (Diana) and Venus.

The connection to generation or procreation is a central facet of sexual images. This is particularly important in alchemy, since so much of its effort is directed towards the *production* of new substances and the explanation of their origins. Indeed, the production of alchemical precious metals was often described as a multiplication or propagation—a small quantity of gold or silver could be “multiplied” into a larger quantity by the successful alchemist. Thus, once the metals were theorized to arise from the combination of two primordial constituents, called Mercury and Sulphur, it was easy enough to represent this binary by the male/female binary, and then to represent their combination to form metals as a “procreation.”¹³ Which constituent received which gender flowed naturally from an alignment with other important, well-entrenched Aristotelian and Hippocratic dualities. That is, since Sulphur was considered in the context of alchemy as the carrier of the qualities of dry and hot (think of the burning of brimstone), it was therefore the male by analogy with animals, where males are hot and dry. Since Mercury was considered the carrier of wet and cold (think of the cold feel of liquid mercury in the hands), it was considered female by the same process. The observable experimental fact—well-known

¹¹ See Boerhaave, *New Method of Chemistry*, 302.

¹² Anecdotally, I recall my Southern Italian grandmother explaining to me how to tell a male eggplant from a female one based on the shape of the blossom scar, and also an argument between her and my father as to whether chicories that bolted in their first year were male or female (my father maintained they were *femminile* because they produced seeds, my grandmother claimed *maschile* because of their erect shape).

¹³ The development of the Mercury-Sulphur theory of the metals dates to the Islamic period and is connected particularly to the Jabirian corpus of the ninth to tenth centuries; it draws its ultimate origins from Aristotle’s *Meteorologica* III (378a18–378b4).

by the Islamic Middle Ages—that common sulphur coagulates liquid mercury into solid cinnabar, was transferred by analogy to the natural production of metals, where Sulphur coagulates Mercury into a metal. This idea further rigorizes the male/female label for Sulphur/Mercury, since it parallels Classical medical ideas of the coagulation of female menstrual blood by male semen into a fetus.

The point to be made at this juncture is that the attachment of gender to alchemical laboratory substances served at one level as a further means of describing their inherent qualities (hot, cold, etc.) or their mutual reactivities by a process of analogy. Such a system was, of course, prone to both complication and ambiguity as classifications based on partly overlapping systems and analogies interacted. For example, one (presumably) unintentional consequence of the overlap of the various classification systems within alchemy was that mercury could be female in some contexts (e.g., in relation to sulphur) and male in others (in relation to copper and silver). These potential ambiguities were not a drawback for alchemical purposes, but were in fact an asset given the specific needs of alchemical writers—particularly, the need for secrecy.

Alchemists, unlike most modern chemists, were subject to a powerful need for secrecy. The desire to keep the specifics of alchemical knowledge secret has several roots. One of the most basic is the pre-modern notion that the highest types of knowledge—to which class alchemists considered theirs to belong—are not to be divulged freely to the uninitiated or the unworthy. This idea was exemplified by accounts of the ancient Pythagoreans and recapitulated in alchemical contexts by the widespread assertion that the Philosophers' Stone—the eagerly sought material agent of metallic transmutation—was so difficult to prepare that success was to be considered a *donum Dei*, a particular grace from the Almighty. But in addition, one should not underestimate more mundane legal and economic pressures. By the fourteenth century, laws forbidding transmutation began to be put in place, largely out of concern about the debasement of coinage and the protection of the value of the precious metals upon which economic systems were based. The fear was that a successful but unscrupulous alchemist could easily upset the stability of society.¹⁴ Alchemical knowledge was potentially as dangerous then as

¹⁴ “For this Science must ever secret be/The Cause wherof is his as ye may see/If one evill man had hereof all his will/All Christian Pease he might hostile spill,/and

the knowledge of nuclear weapons is today. Thus, while metaphorical and gendered language was useful for explaining, conceptualizing, and classifying, it could be equally useful for *concealing*.

By drawing on an ever-expanding web of transumptive relationships, alchemical writers could disguise the identities of chemical substances with a host of *Decknamen*. Thus animals, plants, and people could “stand in” metaphorically for substances, and by simple extension the mutual reactions of those chemical substances could be represented by transactions between animate beings, which of course includes sexual intercourse. Dissolution could be envisioned as one creature devouring another, and two substances of different qualities combining to produce a third could be seen as parents producing offspring.

A key question is to what extent the alchemists were consciously aware of where the literal and the metaphorical met. To what extent did alchemists think that their descriptors—including those of male-female, of biological procreation and copulation—were *literally* true? This is an important point for understanding the mental processes of the alchemists, and it bears upon some commonly-held views of alchemy.

The most widely disseminated interpretation of alchemical imagery in general, and of its sexual images in particular, originated in the writings of Herbert Silberer but was developed more extensively by Carl Gustav Jung. Jung claimed that alchemy deals not primarily with material substances but rather with psychic states of the practitioner, and that alchemical imagery is a manifestation of a supposed “collective unconscious” populated by “archetypal images.” Such views were echoed through the twentieth century by a dynasty of acolytes and devotees. This interpretation depends upon the supposedly *unconscious* nature of alchemical imagery. Another view, propounded by the historian of religions Mircea Eliade, takes alchemical imagery quite literally, reading from it an expression of an animistic, organic, “primitive” world-view where inorganic substances like metals do actually live, grow, and reproduce.

The unsound foundations of these interpretations have been revealed at length elsewhere.¹⁵ Jungian views, based ultimately on Victorian

with his Pride he might pull downe/Rightfull *Kings* and *Princes* of renowne:” Norton, *Ordinall of Alchimy*, 14.

¹⁵ Principe and Newman, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”; Obrist, *Débuts*, esp. 11–21 and 33–36; Merkur, “Methodology and the Study of Western Spiritual Alchemy,” 53–70.

occultism, have proven especially pernicious. For those following his models, alchemical imagery has provided little more than a stage upon which to strut their own psychoanalytic constructions, thereby adding further obfuscation to an already difficult issue and pushing a solid historical understanding of alchemy further from our grasp. Now let us turn to a closer analysis of alchemical sexual imagery to see what Medieval and early-modern alchemists themselves thought about it.

The famous image of the hermaphrodite provides an illuminating starting point. Figure 3 shows a bicephalous hermaphrodite, pointed out to the viewer by St. Albert the Great. What is the connection to the *doctor universalis*? As it turns out, St. Albert was one of the first to deploy the language of hermaphrodites in an alchemical context, specifically when speaking of the formation of metals. Most helpfully, the Universal Doctor actually explains *why* he is using the term and also makes highly revealing comments about gendered terminology in alchemy. Albert first recounts the Mercury-Sulphur theory of metallic composition, and says that these constituents of metals are

like father and mother, as alchemical authors say speaking metaphorically. For sulphur is like the father and mercury like the mother, although it is more aptly to be expressed that the sulphur in the commixture of metals is like the substance of the paternal seed, and the mercury like the menstrual blood which is coagulated into the substance of embryos.¹⁶

Albert here notes explicitly that alchemical authors speak “metaphorically” [*metaphorice*] and immediately strips down some of the metaphor by replacing the sentient agencies of father and mother with the specific material substances that directly produce the offspring. When Albert describes the properties of sulphur, he notes that “it is to be observed that some hot-dry is joined to a wet-cold in the same complexion, and this complexion is hermaphroditic.”¹⁷ Thus for Albert the term hermaphroditic merely expresses a mixed nature where the “male” complexion of hot-dry coexists with the “female” complexion of wet-cold;

¹⁶ Albert the Great, *Mineralia*, bk. 4, c. 1; in *Opera omnia*, 5:83: “tangemus primo de his quae quasi universalialia metallorum sunt sicut pater et mater, sicut dicunt metaphorice loquentes auctores alchimiae: sulphur enim est quasi pater, et argentum vivum mater: quod convenientius dicitur si sulphur dicatur esse in commixtione metallorum quasi substantia seminis paterni, et argentum vivum sicut menstruum quod coagulatur in substantiam embryonum.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84: “Sed observandum est quoddam calidum siccum esse conjunctum humido frigido in eadem complexionem, et haec complexio est hermaphrodita.” Obrist traces the origin of this usage to the pseudo-Aristotelian *De plantis* (817a30), see *Débuts*, 158.

what might be interpreted as a bizarre term redolent of sex is actually quite pedestrian. Indeed, Albert elsewhere clearly notes that the names for matter can be either *proper*—e.g., *hyle*, *origo*, *massa*—or *transumptive*—e.g. *sylva*, *mater*, *femina*—and he laments the fact that because there do not exist “proper terms” for talking specifically about the generation and virtues of material substances (particularly minerals), we have no choice but to discuss them “per similia.”¹⁸

Such a clear acknowledgement of the metaphorical nature of names and terms in alchemy is by no means restricted to St. Albert. Petrus Bonus, whose massive alchemical work *Margarita preciosa novella*, written about 1330 and incorporating an extensive use of *Decknamen*, echoes Albert’s ideas. Similarly, the Scholastic chrysopoeian of the late sixteenth century, Gaston Duclo, is at pains to emphasize that descriptions of alchemical processes use the language of male and female, of seeds, of agriculture and animal husbandry purely “metaphoricè,” and are not to be taken to mean that the metals have either life or sexuality.¹⁹

A stunning example of how gendered *Decknamen* were consciously and carefully constructed by alchemical writers in order to “conceal and reveal” is provided by George Starkey (1628–1665). Starkey, born in Bermuda and educated at a young Harvard College (he earned the degree of A.B. in 1646), began the study of chymistry and chemical medicine while in New England. After relocating to London in late 1650, he became a friend and informal chymistry tutor of Robert Boyle (1627–1691) and a member of the circle gathered around the intelligencer Samuel Hartlib. Starkey told this circle of an alchemical adept in New England who possessed both the red and white Philosophers’ Stones (i.e. for turning base metals into gold and silver, respectively) and who had shown him transmutation. This anonymous adept, known only by the name Eirenaeus Philalethes (“Peaceful Lover of Truth”), had written several treatises on making the Stone that he entrusted to the young Starkey in order to help guide him to the successful preparation of the transmuting Stones. Starkey shared some of these writings with the eager Hartlibians. We now know that Starkey was himself the author of these “Philalethes” treatises, even though the Hartlibians—including Starkey’s close friend Boyle—never realized

¹⁸ Albert, *Physica*, bk. 1, tr. 3, c. 12; *Opera*, 3:72; *Mineralia*, bk. I, tr. 1, ch. 5, “quia propria nomina hujus virtutis non habemus, ideo per similia oportet declarare quae sit illa virtus.” See also Obrist, *Débuts*, 31–33.

¹⁹ Principe, “Diversity in Alchemy.”

the truth.²⁰ The Philalethes manuscripts, published after Starkey's early death, became some of the most influential and widely-read chrysopoeitic treatises of the seventeenth century, and, owing to their lavish use of extravagant imagery, provided fundamental sources for Jung and other twentieth-century interpreters of alchemy.

During Starkey's years in London he was a busy experimentalist, and he kept meticulous notebooks of his laboratory operations.²¹ Recently, a long-lost Starkey notebook was discovered in the archives of the Royal Society of London.²² This notebook contains previously unknown chymical treatises akin to those that comprise the Philalethes corpus. Excitingly, the three treatises it contains were left in various stages of completion, allowing the historian to witness their process of composition. For our present purposes, the insight they provide on the choice of sexually-charged *Decknamen* is particularly valuable.

Starkey left the second of the three treatises, entitled *Clavis totius scientiae* (*Key to the Whole Science*) and dated 1656, in a rough state; in fact, there are so many insertions, deletions, and rewritings that the text is sometimes difficult to read.²³ The tract deals with the first crucial part of making the Philosophers' Stone, namely, the preparation of the philosophical mercury, a prized secret that is allusively encoded throughout the published Philalethes corpus. The key to this process is to find the proper "medium" which, once joined with common mercury, will transform that common mercury into a "Philosophical Mercury" allowing it to combine inseparably with gold. The combined philosophical mercury and gold can then be heated in a sealed flask for a long period of time, eventually producing the Philosophers' Stone.²⁴

Revealingly, the manuscript of *Clavis totius scientiae* contains a set of coherent alterations to the text that clearly display both the evolution of Starkey's chymical thought and how his *Decknamen* had to respond to these changes. At first, Starkey-Philalethes wrote that the philosophical mercury is to be made using our "Hermaphroditic Body [*corpus Hermaphroditicum*]." The chemical substance covered by this *Deckname* can

²⁰ On Starkey, see Newman, *Gehennical Fire*.

²¹ Starkey, *Alchemical Laboratory Notebooks and Correspondence*, and Newman and Principe, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*.

²² Principe, "Newly-Discovered Boyle Documents."

²³ Photos and transcriptions of the pages described here from *Clavis totius scientiae* are reproduced in Starkey, *Laboratory Notebooks*, 225 and 238–245.

²⁴ On this process see Principe, *Aspiring Adept*, 153–55ff.; Newman and Principe, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*, 119–28.

be revealed from Starkey's more plaintext writings in the notebooks as the "martial regulus of antimony." This *Deckname* appears not only here in the notebooks but also in the *Introitus apertus* and other works eventually published under the name of Philalethes.²⁵ The martial regulus of antimony is a form of the semi-metal antimony prepared by the reduction of the native ore stibnite, an antimony sulphide, with metallic iron. In this process, described in great detail in several places in Starkey's laboratory notebooks, nine parts of the native ore are fused in a crucible with four parts of iron. This operation produces a bright button of metal at the bottom of the crucible; this is the "martial regulus of antimony," sometimes called the "star-regulus" because of the stellate crystalline pattern that often appears on its surface. It was believed to be a product containing both a part of the iron and the "purer" part of the antimony. Now, given that the metal iron was traditionally linked to the planet Mars, the god of war, it can be thought of by correspondence as a "male" substance. Antimony, on the other hand, because of its "tender" nature—that is, its volatility, reactivity, brittleness, and easy fusion—is traditionally thought of as a "female" substance. Therefore, the regulus of antimony, as a combination of the male iron and the female antimony, can rightly be called a "hermaphroditic body." Just as the union of antimony and iron provide the martial regulus, so the union of female and male provide a hermaphrodite. Thus we can see that the name is neither arbitrary nor "unconscious" but instead *descriptive*—it is made both to conceal and to reveal. It conceals the plain-text name of the substance, but reveals something of its nature and origin.

But even more illuminating is how Starkey later had to change the *Decknamen* he employed in the *Clavis scientiae* as his thoughts about the process developed. These alterations give a "behind the scenes" glimpse of both the *decoding* and the *encoding* of alchemical imagery. The same notebook contains an account, written about a month after the *Clavis scientiae*, of Starkey's struggles to "decode" a bizarre parable contained within a classic work on chrysopoeia written by the pseudo-Bernard of Trier. This extended allegorical conceit begins with Bernard relaxing after a disputation by taking a walk in the open fields. He comes upon

²⁵ The hermaphrodite appears as a *Deckname* for the martial regulus of antimony in Eirenaeus Philalethes, *Introitus apertus ad oclusum regis palatium*, 647–99, in *Musaeum hermeticum*, 658.

a beautiful fountain and meets an old man there who tells him that the fountain's only use is as a bath for the king, and that it is tended by a porter who warms it for him. Bernard asks the old man many questions about the king and his odd bathing practices and about the nature of the fountain. Eventually Bernard grows sleepy, and accidentally drops a golden book (the prize from his disputation) into the fountain, drains the fountain to retrieve the book, and is thrown into prison. After his release, Bernard returns to the fountain to find it covered in clouds. Bernard concludes by writing that "in this my parable the entire work [of making the Stone] is contained, in practice, days, colors, regimens, methods, managements, and connections."²⁶

Starkey sets about interpreting Bernard's "parable," presumably because his laboratory practices were not responding to his expectations—i.e., his experiments failed to produce the Philosophers' Stone—and he needed more guidance from authoritative texts. Starkey notes that the king must certainly be gold, the *rex metallorum*, and his "bathing" must be the gold's dissolution in philosophical mercury. Starkey then notes that Bernard says that when the king comes to bathe, he leaves "behind him al his servants (which are the mettalls)," being accompanied only by a porter. Thus it seems here that iron, which Starkey had been using to form the martial regulus—one of the lesser metals and thus one of the king's servants—must be "left behind," that is, not used in the process. But Starkey, unsatisfied with a single reason, continues interpreting. He examines the porter that accompanies the king to his bath, whom he interprets as the necessary medium between gold and mercury (i.e., the king and his bath) that must be incorporated into the philosophical mercury. This porter is thus, according to Starkey's previous theory, the martial regulus of antimony. But now Starkey notes that Bernard affirms "this Porter . . . to be most simple of al things in the world whose office is nothing but day by day to warme the bath (that is by making al fluid) now if it were compounded it could not be sayd to be so simple, which is uncompounded." Here Starkey interprets Bernard's use of the word "simple," which in the context of the parable means that the porter is unsophisticated or naïve ("homo valde simplex, imo simplicissimus hominum") to mean *compositionally*

²⁶ Trevisan, *De secretissimo philosophorum opere chemico*, in *Bibliotheca chemica curiosa*, 2:388–399; the parable is on 397–99; "Nam in hac mea parabola totum opus continetur in practica, diebus, coloribus, regiminibus, viis, dispositionibus, & continuationibus . . ."

simple, that is, uncompounded, implying that pure “simple” antimony regulus should be used, not a martial regulus containing iron. Still not satisfied, Starkey seeks more verification. He next notes that Bernard asked the old man whether any of the king’s servants went into the bath with him, and the “answer is returned not one, & if not one,” Starkey concludes, “then not iron.”²⁷ Thus Starkey decides now that he should use a regulus of antimony made *without* iron (by reducing the ore with salts instead).

But once Starkey rejects the addition of iron to the regulus, the *Deckname* “Hermaphroditical body” is no longer applicable; there is no longer a “male” element present. As a result, Starkey returns to his previously written *Clavis totius scientiae* and systematically deletes every use of the term *corpus hermaphroditicum*, replacing each with the symbol for Venus. Venus, although most commonly used in alchemical texts for copper, is now a proper *Deckname* for the simple regulus made without iron because the regulus without iron would be purely feminine, like the goddess Venus. Looking at it another way, the male “Herm” has been removed from the Hermaphrodite, leaving only Aphrodite, who is, of course, the Greeks’ Venus.

Thus Starkey’s notebooks provide compelling evidence for exactly how sexual imagery in alchemy was constructed. The terms are neither arbitrary nor merely picturesque, nor do they manifest a “primitive” vitalistic mentality, nor, needless to say, are they “irruptions of the unconscious.” Instead, they are carefully chosen metaphors, simultaneously descriptive and deceptive, meant to be interpretable by the adroit. Simply stated, alchemical imagery—sexual and otherwise—was intelligently designed both to conceal and to reveal.

Further insight into the use of sexual images in alchemy can be gained if we visit a text lying outside the ambit of traditional transmutational alchemy. This is Otto Tachenius’ *Hippocrates chymicus* published in 1666, and the companion *Clavis* of 1669. Tachenius was a German by birth, but after an apprenticeship as an apothecary, he went to Italy where he received a medical degree at Padua in 1652 and finally settled in Venice.²⁸ Much of his support came from the sale of a saline medicament prepared from snakes, called the *sal viperinum*. His *Hippocrates chymicus* takes its rise from a defense of this medicine, and continues

²⁷ Starkey, *Notebooks and Correspondence*, 251.

²⁸ On Tachenius, see Take, *Otto Tachenius, 1610–1680*; for an older summary, see Partington, *A History of Chemistry*, II, 291–96.

with the exposition of Tachenius' chemical theory of acid and alkali. There is nothing here of chrysopoeia (transmutatory alchemy), or of emblemata, or of allusive discourse, or even of any overt secrecy. Nonetheless, Tachenius' text is full of sexual imagery, much of it similar to that found in texts on the Philosophers' Stone. Tachenius' text provides a contemporaneous example of sexual language outside the usual chrysopoetic canon and thus provides a valuable point of comparison. Moreover, given its freedom from intentional secrecy, Tachenius' *Hippocrates* provides a more straightforward glimpse of the actual role such language was called upon to serve as a means of *explication*.

Tachenius' chemical theory maintains that everything in the world is composed of acid and alkali. This conception is partly dependent upon the medico-chymical writings of Joan Baptista Van Helmont and would be widely discussed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in both chemical and medical contexts.²⁹ When acid and alkali combine, a salt is formed, and it is their mutual reactivity that explains chemical and physiological phenomena. But Tachenius' chymical system, despite its modern sound, is suffused with sexual imagery in many forms. The simplest is the denomination of alkali as female and acid as male. Here again is an example of the use of the obvious male-female duality to illustrate a less obvious natural duality that is productive of new entities by their combination. But the comparison goes further and links Tachenius' thought to the popular mechanical philosophy of the seventeenth century. For Tachenius tries to prove by experiment that alkalis are "empty and inanus bodies," or "vacuous and empty," "and therefore, being impatient of such inanition, [the alkali] desires to be saturated with the Acid into Salt, that it may fulfill the course of Nature."³⁰ He explains further that "if the Alcaly receives, putrefies and cherishes the Acid...it must necessarily perform the office of Mother, and so must be vacuous."³¹ This explanation is clearly dependent upon the model of male-female copulation, where the alkali's empty spaces are likened to a womb, ready to receive the acid, and indeed Tachenius calls this process (that we would call neutralization) an "impregnation." Likewise, the acids for Tachenius are phallically-shaped bodies able to penetrate the vacuities of the alkalies.³²

²⁹ On the acid and alkali theory, see Hall, "Acid and Alkali in Seventeenth-century Chemistry," and Debus, *Chemistry and Medical Debate*.

³⁰ Tachenius, *Hippocrates chemicus*, 87 and 89; *Clavis*, 13.

³¹ Tachenius, *Clavis*, 18.

³² Tachenius, *Hippocrates*, 7.

Tachenius' system resembles—and very possibly forms the crucial source for—the mechanical corpuscularian images popularized for chemistry in the 1670's by Nicolas Lemery. According to Lemery's system, alkalis are porous, spongy bodies, and acids hard and pointed; neutralization (formation of a salt) occurs when the acid's points fill the pores of the alkali.³³ Thus Tachenius' denomination of alkali as female includes the obviously sexual notion of a vacuity to be filled by the (acidic) male counterpart, leading to the production of a new substance. It bears repeating that this occurs outside the context of secretive chrysopoeia, and thus exemplifies the use of sexual imagery to explain, clarify, and conceptualize, not to conceal.

Tachenius uses sexual imagery in other contexts as well. For example, he states that “Cyprian Vitriol is truly hermaphroditical.”³⁴ What on earth does he mean? He goes on to show by means of analytical tests that this native vitriol from Cyprus contains both iron and copper. Iron, as noted above, is traditionally related to the planet Mars, and thus clearly male, while copper is related to Venus, and thus female. Therefore, a salt containing both iron and copper is “truly hermaphroditical.” In another place, Tachenius tells of a particular salt brought from Egypt and called Sal-kali (a kind of soda), and he refers to it as a virgin “said by the Ancients to have three fathers”—a lineage reminiscent of Orion and the Philosophers' Stone as we saw it depicted in *Atalanta fugiens*. But here there is no mystery, for once he describes how it is prepared artificially by burning a naturally occurring material, he names the three fathers as “nature, fire, and the philosopher”—i.e., the native source, the processing with fire, and the know-how of the artisan.³⁵ Interestingly enough, these three fathers of Sal-kali according to Tachenius are the same as those for the Philosophers' Stone in Maier—only that the natural starting material is a native salt for one and gold (Apollo) for the other. Thus it is clear that for Tachenius, sexually-charged language is used as a source of further definition and more vivid description.

The examples presented in this chapter indicate quite clearly that alchemical imagery, including that of a gendered, sexual, or erotic nature, is the careful construction of alchemical authors pressured

³³ Nicolas Lemery, *Cours de chymie*, 14–15.

³⁴ Tachenius, *Hippocrates*, 59.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

by the opposing desires to conceal and to reveal. The complex set of analogies that personified the substances used by alchemists made it easy for them to transfer genders and anthropomorphic activities to the substances reacting in their flasks and crucibles. Sexually-charged images arise from the familiar and ubiquitous binary of biological sexes, from the commonality of the sexual experience, and from the inherently productive nature of alchemical practice. It is true that some sexual groupings found in alchemical texts lie outside the scope of “mainstream” sexual experiences—for example, incest, menages-à-trois, same-sex couplings, etc. But these sexual groupings are logical outgrowths of the simpler, more “mainstream” sexual imagery. That is, conventional sexual dualities (husband/wife) were expanded by alchemical writers into less conventional forms—hermaphrodites, incest, gender swapping—as they found it necessary to encode/describe the expanding repertoire of material combinations and operations they encountered in their laboratories and their theories.

This chapter has been able to present only a small selection of alchemical examples, and therefore it limits itself to making claims about the *majority* of alchemical writers in the Latin West. But the large number of alchemical writers who declare quite clearly that their language is metaphorical, and that the things signified in sexual terms are actually physical materials and chemical changes leads one to wonder how faulty psychological or psychosexual interpretations of alchemical imagery gained and maintained such currency. One cause becomes obvious if one inspects treatments of alchemy that embrace these misguided interpretations: many display an almost total disconnect between text and image. Decontextualized images appear prominently, but original accompanying texts or accurate summaries of them are often wholly absent. Thus many twentieth-century authors felt quite free to attach their own captions, descriptions, and interpretations of these emblems with little or no regard for the original context or the very words of the original authors. The causes for such negligence are open to debate—ignorance of Latin or other original languages, unwillingness to engage meaningfully with the difficulty and obscurity of alchemical speech, an ill-conceived dismissal of historical methodology, and so forth. But in the final analysis, this only impresses upon us yet more forcefully the need for the properly contextualized analysis of historical documents if we hope to understand the thought, worldview, and mind-set of their creators.

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PROBING WOMEN AND PENETRATING WITCHCRAFT IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

ALLISON P. COUDERT

Throughout western history knowledge has been conceived of as a commodity controlled and rationed by those in authority. Kant's *sapere aude* (dare to know) would have made no sense if it had not been preceded by centuries of admonitions about the dangers of knowledge and especially of curiosity. A condemnation of curiosity runs like a leitmotif through the medieval and early modern periods, persisting among social, intellectual, and religious conservatives to this very day.¹ For example, Roger Shattuck's relatively recent book *Forbidden Knowledge* offers a modern version of the very old critique of the impious nature of seeking out the unknown.

But while curiosity was condemned, this condemnation was directed more towards women than men. In fact, while a certain amount of curiosity was encouraged and expected in males, it was an anathema in females. When it came to knowledge in general, however, there was more at stake for women than curiosity and the dangers of impiety. If one examines the verbs, nouns, and adjectives connected with the process of acquiring knowledge, their erotic, often violently erotic, connotations are striking. The investigator peers, pierces, and finally penetrates to "the heart" of the matter. He dissects, dismembers, dismantles, denudes, all with the goal of uncovering, discovering, revealing, laying bare, or unmasking the naked, unvarnished, unveiled, and unalloyed truth.

What is equally striking is the gendered nature of this kind of discourse. Inasmuch as activity is associated with males and passivity with females, the one who probes and penetrates is male and the one penetrated is female. In this respect, it is no coincidence that the Latin verb *probare* means to probe, try, or test as well as to torture. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore the reasons why these ancient, widespread, and gendered associations between knowledge, sex, and

¹ Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom*, Chap. 1.

violence became intensified to such a point in early modern Europe and America that a wholly new stereotype emerged of a witch as a sexually insatiable, castrating, phallic female.

As Sigrid Brauner and many other scholars have argued, the new witch was invented in the early modern period as the perfect foil for the ideal woman and wife. She spoke and scolded when she should be silent. She was assertive and aggressive when she should be submissive and obedient. She visited and gossiped when she should have stayed at home. But most distressing to male witch theorists, demonologists, theologians, and judges was the fact that witches were charged with prying into forbidden, especially sexual, matters. They were women whose curiosity had led them to become sexual deviants, and their deviancy threatened the rigid gender hierarchy that defined what was seen as the divinely ordained, patriarchal social order.

The norms of every period in western history include strictures as to what could and could not be known, and these strictures were applied differently in terms of gender, class, and race. Any group that attempted to exceed the parameters of knowledge set for it was denounced in a variety of ways, but a paramount charge was invariably that of sexual deviancy. This was especially true of individuals and groups who claimed to possess esoteric knowledge. By contesting prevailing wisdom and claiming access to a higher truth, they constituted a potential threat to the established institutions of both church and state, and they were routinely denounced as dangerously subversive, sexual perverts. Such charges were a standard rhetorical strategy on the part of any group whose authority was challenged—one has only to think of Pentheus' fervid musings about the activities of the Bacchae, the Roman denunciation of Christians as incestuous sodomites, and the routine association of sexual deviancy with any group denounced today as a "cult."² Regardless of their polemical character, there is a certain amount of truth to such charges inasmuch as sexual antinomianism has been one possible consequence of claims to esoteric knowledge. But when it comes to female witches, we find ourselves in a fantastic world where the perverse sexual knowledge ascribed to them was actually possessed by the theologians, inquisitors, and demonologists by whom they were charged, tried, and executed.

² For example, James Jones, David Koresh, and Reverend Moon. See Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones."

Even stranger is the fact that the curiosity motivating male authorities to undertake their investigations of deviant female witches in the first place was displaced onto the women themselves, who ended up paying dearly for it as their bodies were probed for devil marks, penetrated for signs of unnatural intercourse, and destroyed in a sacrifice to appease an angry god. The question for us is, what led male demonologists, inquisitors, and judges in the early modern period to project their own sexual curiosity and erotic fantasies onto women and to consider some 29,000 of them threatening enough to justify their torture and execution?³ As several scholars have asked, if women did not actually do something to make them seem so dangerous, how can we explain the misogynist conclusions reached by so many intelligent, educated men?

Witchcraft and the World Turned Upside Down

Historians have described the atmosphere of pessimism and gloom that marked the Reformation and Counter-Reformation periods. The bitter religious warfare endemic to the period combined with severe famines, peasant unrest, and the economic dislocations accompanying the emergence of proto-capitalism contributed to the sense that the world was in an irreparable state of decay and encouraged people to think they were experiencing the period of violence and anarchy preceding the millennium. The collapse of religious consensus was paralleled by the breakdown of traditional intellectual and scientific systems. The flood of new information that came from both the rediscovery of classical texts and the discovery of the new world undermined traditional philosophical and scientific frameworks and classificatory systems, leaving many adrift on uncharted intellectual seas.⁴ The fascination with

³ Estimates of the number of people accused and executed for witchcraft have been vastly reduced from an initial figure of nine million. Even Brian Levack's much smaller estimate of 110,000 trials and some 60,000 executions has been further cut by a third. Because many judicial records have been destroyed or are missing for much of western, southern, and eastern Europe, it is impossible to arrive at exact figures, but it is now thought that approximately 35,000 witches were executed, 29,000 of whom were women. See Monter, "Witch Trials in Continental Europe."

⁴ The instability created by the constant barrage of "news" (a word that first appeared in our modern sense in the fifteenth century) in all fields is compellingly described by Gabriel Harvey: "All inquisitive after Newes, new Books, newe Fashions, newe Lawes, newe Offices, and some after newe Elements, some after newe Heavens, and Helles to. . . [A]s of olde Bookes, so of aunciente Vertue, Honestie, Fidelitie, Equitie, newe Abridgements: every day, freshe span newe Opinions: Heresie, in manners, grounded

prodigies, apparitions, comets, monsters, amazons, hermaphrodites, and witches—in short, with everything “unnatural” and “abnormal”—was indicative of the profound anxiety caused by the destruction of existing categories.⁵ In the face of so much confusion and uncertainty a new and unprecedented concern with order and orthodoxy arose.⁶ Nowhere was this more true than in the area of sexuality and gender identity.

The fact that the most intense period of witch hunting occurred during the early modern period, between 1570 and 1680, suggests that the “querelle des femmes” (the quarrel about women), a largely playful literary theme throughout the Middle Ages, had taken on a more sinister dimension. Unlike Stuart Clark who has argued that it is “a question mal posé to ask why women were the main objects of witch persecutions,”⁷ it seems to me that this is and always has been the crucial question. Clark dismisses it as tautological on the grounds that the polarity between the genders was so firmly in place during the period of the witch hunts that witches were by definition women, and demonologists had “no choice” but to define them as such.⁸ It is certainly true that a polarized view of the sexes was a part of Europe’s inheritance from classical sources, particularly Aristotle; but it was only in the early modern period that this polarity became firmly entrenched in learned discourse. Clark seems to recognize this. As he says, “In the case of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one is struck forcibly by the profusion—almost a promiscuity—of indigenous styles

much upon hearsay: Doctors contemned: The Text knowen of Mosis, understood of fewe; magnified of all: practiced of none: the Divell not so hated, as the Pope: many Invenctives, small amendment.” Cited in Hayden, *The Counter-Renaissance*, 13.

⁵ Daston & Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*.

⁶ Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability*; Slaughter, *Universal Language and Scientific Taxonomy*.

⁷ Clark, “The ‘Gendering’ of Witchcraft,” 427–428.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 432: “. . . a collective representational logic . . . required them to write as they did and may well account for the failure of their views to accord with the actual gender breakdown of some French witchcraft trials. . . . ‘Male’ and ‘female’ meant what they did to these authors not because of mere difference, but because they were thought of as polar opposites and were linked by analogy to other polar opposites within a broad symbolic system. Separated for the purposes of modern analysis but in fact always acting simultaneously, opposition and analogy were the formal constituents of the notions of gender that were intellectually dominant in early modern France—and indeed in witch-hunting Europe generally. Together, they ensured that demonologists had no choice where to assign women in relation to, for example, the moral polarity of good (God) and evil (the Devil), or the socio-political political polarity of superiority and inferiority. Nor was there any choice where to assign witchcraft in relation to the gender polarity itself.”

of oppositional thought and writing, and by a delight in listing and exploring the binary aspects of experience.”⁹ Clark makes the further point that the various explanations suggested for why women were targeted as witches (the social marginality of poor, old, single women; the anomalous position of women who inherited male property; the increasing number of unmarried women) “have not shown... [and] cannot show... why the accusations should have concerned witchcraft rather than some other crime.”¹⁰ But I would argue that Clark has the argument backwards. Rather than accepting the identity of woman and witch as unproblematic, what needs to be shown is, first, why witchcraft emerged as such a threatening possibility in the early modern period and, then, how the emerging definition of bad women dovetailed with the emerging image of the witch.

Clark’s contention that the polarity of the sexes was already well established by the time of the witch hunts overlooks the fact that at the beginning of the period the prevailing view was that male and female sex organs were mirror images of each other. This was Vesalius’ view. As his student Baldasar Heselr wrote: “The organs of procreation are the same in the male and the female... For if you turn the scrotum, the testicles and the penis inside out you will have all the genital organs of the female.”¹¹ This idea became a source of considerable anxiety in the early modern period because it suggested that with too much physical exertion women might suddenly turn into men. The idea that the sex organs of men and women were fundamentally different and incomparable first emerges in the seventeenth century with the idea of gender complementarity. As Londa Schiebinger and others have pointed out, the notion of complementarity was successfully used to argue that women’s unique and all-important function, marriage and motherhood, was divinely ordained and determined by their sex organs.¹² Consequently, women were excluded from everything that was culturally and intellectually valued in the public world of men.

⁹ Ibid., 432. See Wilson, “Contraries in sixteenth century scientific writing”; Lafond, *L’image du monde renversé*; Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*.

¹⁰ Clark, “The ‘Gendering’ of Witchcraft,” 427.

¹¹ Heselr, *Andreas Vesalius’ First Public Anatomy*, 181.

¹² Blochman, “Das Frauenzimmer und die Gelehrsamkeit”; Hausen, “Die Polarisierung der ‘Geschlechtscharakter’”; Okin, “Women and the Making of the Sentimental Family”; LeGates, “The Cult of Womanhood in 18th Century Thought”; Bloch, “Untangling the Roots of Modern Sex Roles.”

Among Protestants, household duties and child-bearing became the acceptable limits of their horizon. Luther made this abundantly clear when he likened the good wife to a “snail” or “a nail driven into the wall,” commenting:

She sits at home....the wife should stay at home and look after the affairs of the household as one who has been deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and concern the state.... In this way Eve is punished.¹³

The emphasis on women’s role in the family occurred at the same time their economic opportunities narrowed. Women, to use Merry Wiesner-Hank’s phrase, were “domesticated,” and the split between the public and private sphere so marked in the gender discourse of the nineteenth century was well in place by the end of the seventeenth.¹⁴

The new image of the diabolical witch arose in conjunction with this new stereotype of the good wife. Before the late fifteenth-century witches were not identified predominantly as women. They could be male or female, and they were often well-born, if not noble.¹⁵ But by the mid-sixteenth century between 80–95% of those accused in most places were women, and there was an increasing focus on the sexual activities of witches. The witches’ Sabbath did not exist in the Middle Ages; it was an invention of early modern demonologists and clearly represented an increased fear and fascination with the whole gamut of female sexuality on the part of Catholics and Protestants alike. Charles Zika documents the changes in the visual representation of witches and witchcraft in the early modern period. Late fifteenth-century illustrations show witches as both men and women who are fully clothed and engaged in various nefarious activities such as casting spells, harming animals, causing storms, etc.

¹³ Lectures on Genesis, Gen. 3:16, Luther, *Works*, I, 202–3.

¹⁴ Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 241: “Early modern Europe appears to have been a time when the public realm—politics in its broadest sense—was becoming increasingly male again, both in theory and practice. Women were ‘domesticated,’ told that their proper role was household and family and that public life was for men. Gender roles and the power balance between the sexes were unusually frequent topics for discussion among both learned and unlearned people, and clearly perceived as political, that is, having to do with power.”

¹⁵ Brown, “Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity.”



Fig. 1. A female witch laming a man with an arrow, woodcut, in Ulrich Molitor, *De lamüs et phitonicis mulieribus (Von den Unhulden oder Hexen)* [Strasbourg: Johann Prüss, c. 1493], fol. Br. Ithaca, N.Y. Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University.

But around the turn of the sixteenth century witchcraft illustrations feature women and focus on their bodies and sexuality in unprecedented ways, as in this illustration by Hans Baldung Grien of witches applying ointments to their genitals so that they can fly to the Witches' Sabbath on brooms and pitchforks (1514).



Fig. 2. Hans Baldung Grien, Female witches preparing for a night ride, 1514, pen on red-brown paper, heightened with white. Vienna, Graphische Sammlung, Albertina.

Baldung Grien produced a number of drawings and engravings of naked witches in various erotic poses. The suggestion that women should attempt to pleasure themselves was bad enough, but the idea that this facilitated their journey to a place of unspeakable sexual license was even worse. The perversities in which they were believed to engage appear in the next illustration, which can speak for itself.

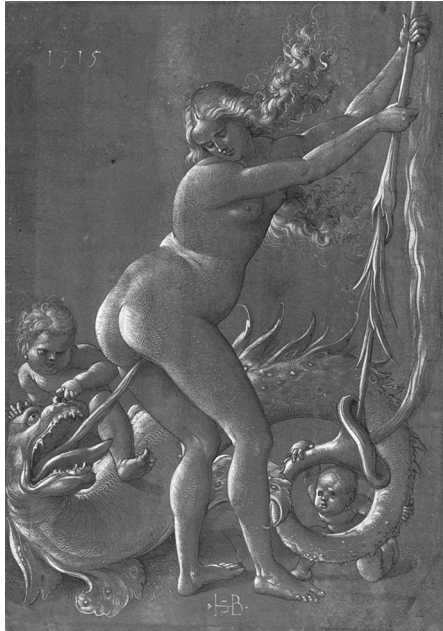


Fig. 3. Hans Baldung Grien, *Witch and Dragon*, 1515, pen on brown-tinted paper, heightened with white. Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle.

Although it is hard for us to imagine, the next illustration was actually a Christmas card Baldung Grien sent to a cleric friend with the inscription, “To the cleric, a good year” (1514). Note the naked witch on her knees and looking backwards between her legs. According to a contemporary German proverb this position allowed one to catch a glimpse of the devil. In a very real sense, what this witch sees is the ordinary world turned upside down.¹⁶ And this is precisely what the Witches’ Sabbath

¹⁶ Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 13.

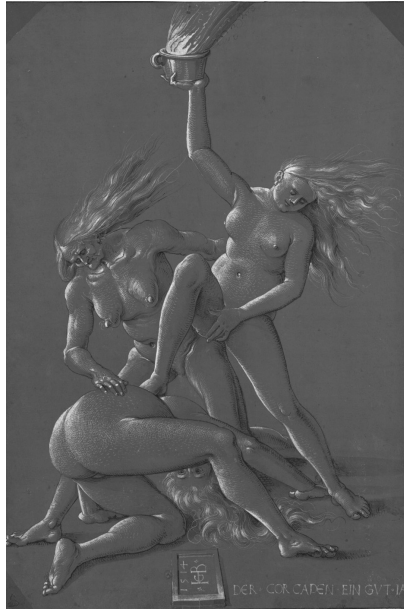


Fig. 4. Hans Baldung Grien, *Three witches*, pen on red-brown paper, heightened with white. Vienna, Graphische Sammlung, Albertina.

was. With its frenzied feasting and rampant sexuality, the witches' Sabbath was the inverse of orderly social and political life.¹⁷

In his article "Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft" and his later book *Thinking with Demons*, Stuart Clark points out that the habit of thinking in dichotomies was a key aspect of early modern mental life, encouraged by the study and practice of rhetoric and dialectic, which was the mainstay of male education at the time. Thus the existence of heaven naturally implied the existence of hell.¹⁸ James I makes this point in his *Daemonologie*: "Since the Devill is the very contrarie opposite of God, there can be no better way to know God than by contrarie." The ultimate inversion for witchcraft theorists and demonologists was a demonical society dominated by women. The Scottish reformer John Knox did himself a profound disservice by writing his diatribe against *The Monstrous Regimen of Women* shortly before Queen Elizabeth ascended the English throne, but his palpable horror at the thought of women rulers was widely shared. The fascination with Amazons exhibited by

¹⁷ Larner, *Enemies of God*, 194f.

¹⁸ Clark, "Inversion, Misrule, and the Meaning of Witchcraft."

early modern males reflects the same sense of outrage that Knox felt when faced with female rulers: “women on top” signified the overthrow of the divinely ordained, male-dominated order of things.¹⁹

Clark offers ample evidence to show that the doctrine of complementarity or “contrariety,” the term he prefers, became embedded in early modern thought: it was built into physics, natural magic, the debate about witchcraft, medicine, psychology, and ethics.²⁰ For example, Francis Bacon argued that nature was “biformed” and that there were “armies of contraries in the world, as of dense and rare, hot and cold, light and darkness, animate and inanimate, and many others, which oppose, deprive, and destroy one another in turn.”²¹ John Aubrey established a “Rule of Contraries” in his natural philosophy.²² Giambattista Della Porta viewed nature in terms of the dualism of sympathy and antipathy.²³ French natural philosophers organized their writing in terms of contraries.²⁴ Works of persuasion and polemics often placed truths and errors in opposite columns or tables or discussed them in alternating paragraphs or sentences. This was the technique used by William Gouge in his *Domestical Duties*. As he says, “because contraries laid together doe much set forth each other in their lively colours, I have annexed to every duty the contrary fault, and aberration from it.”²⁵ Petrus Ramus’ method of reducing complex subjects to their elements through increasingly simplified dichotomies fit in with this way of thinking and appears to have been particularly congenial to Protestants, although it was a standard aspect of rhetorical training for Catholics as well.²⁶ Considering what was contrary to a proposition was one of the most important methods for devising arguments for defense and refutation. Pattern books of rhetorical skill included sections on “The Contrary” in model orations.²⁷ Stephen Greenblatt claims that an emphasis on being able to argue for or against any conceivable proposition “permeated intellectual life in the sixteenth

¹⁹ Kleinbaum, *The War Against the Amazons*; duBois, *Centaur & Amazons*.

²⁰ Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, ch. 4.

²¹ Bacon, *De principis atque originibus* and *De sapientia verterum* in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, V: 475; VI: 710.

²² Hunter, *John Aubrey and the Realm of Learning*, 126–27.

²³ Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 5–6, 8–10.

²⁴ Wilson, “Contraries,” 351–68.

²⁵ Cited in Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 60. Cf. de Marconville, *De la bonté et mauvaisités des femmes*; Breton, *The Good and the Bade*.

²⁶ Ong, *Ramus*.

²⁷ Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 56.

century.”²⁸ All these examples, and Clark provides many more, help us to understand how the crisis of masculinity in the early modern period played itself out in precisely these terms, by establishing such a rigid dichotomy between the sexes that they virtually came to be thought of as distinct species.

The habit of thinking in dichotomies extended to the world at large. A kind of *cordon sanitaire* divided the world of order from the world of disorder and made confusion between the two increasingly unthinkable. The drawing of rigid moral lines is nowhere more apparent than in the field of humor. Taste, propriety, and decorum became the watchwords of the moral Puritanism generated by both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. The scatological humor of Rabelais gave way to the refinement of wit. The new moral universe left no place for the festivals of misrule that had flourished throughout the Middle Ages, reaching their apogee in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The description of one of these festivals in particular, the Feast of Fools, sets up a strange resonance in the ears of one attuned to witchcraft. During this mock religious ceremony, derived supposedly from the Roman Saturnalia, a Pope of Fools was chosen—a child, fool, cripple, or madman—who presided over a service that parodied the Mass. Mock deacons and sub-deacons ate black puddings and sausages on the altar while the “priest” officiated. The members of the congregation, many of whom were dressed as priests and nuns, danced and sang licentious songs, played cards, or rolled dice under the “priest’s” nose. Others threw bits of old leather into the thuribles to produce disagreeable smells. At the conclusion of the “Mass,” the congregation broke into riotous behavior. They formed a procession, danced, leaped about, sang, and exhibited themselves indecently. Some stripped naked. Every so often, the procession would halt while individuals mimed immodest postures and indecent actions to the accompaniment of bawdy songs and suggestive speeches.²⁹ Only a change of perspective was needed to transform this popular festival into the Witches’ Sabbath. And this is precisely what happened as the perspective changed from lay to clerical and inquisitorial culture. Dürer’s engraving of a witch is a case in point.

²⁸ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 230–1.

²⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*.

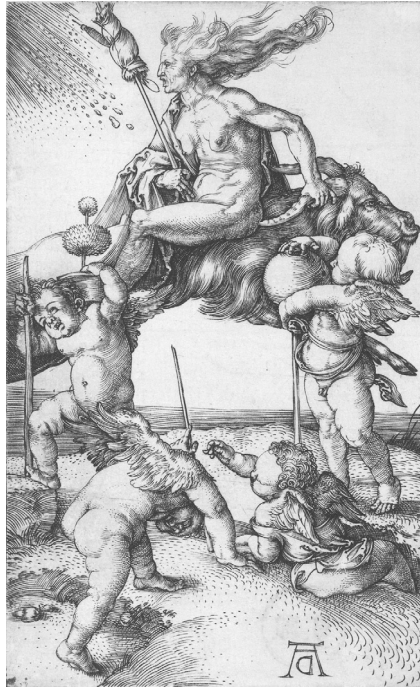


Fig. 5. Albrecht Dürer, witch riding backwards on a goat, c. 1500, engraving. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria. Felton Bequest, 1956.

Not only does the witch ride backwards, an image of disorder, especially sexual disorder, but she is mounted on a goat, itself a symbol of sexual lasciviousness. The distaff that should identify her as a submissive female is, instead, suggestive of a phallus. This together with the fact that she clutches the horn of the goat on which she rides implies that she has appropriated and controls male sexual power. Dürer's witch is a powerful, wild, castrating, and cautionary figure of the dangers presented by disorderly women.³⁰

According to Hans Peter Broedel, the kind of witch envisioned by Dürer was largely invented by the Dominican inquisitors Henrich Institoris and Jacob Sprenger, authors of the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* (the Hammer of Witches) of 1486, a handbook for inquisitors that set down everything one needed to know about the evil activities of witches and the way to prosecute them.³¹ There was no ambiguity

³⁰ Zika "Dürer's witch"; Mellinkoff, "Riding backwards."

³¹ Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum*.

in the *Malleus* about the fact that witches were women. The very title makes this clear since *maleficarum* is a feminine noun in Latin. The *Malleus* has been described as “scholastic pornography,”³² although one of the most recent books on witchcraft denies this—a subject to which I shall return.³³ The authors clearly dreaded and loathed women. Witches were not only lying, cheating, credulous, vain, ambitious, untrustworthy, and lustful; they were also relentless castrators, as the following passage reveals. If this had not been written in deadly earnest and had deadly effects, it would be worthy of Monty Python:

And what then is to be thought of those witches who . . . sometimes collect male organs, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird's nest or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many as a matter of common report?

For a certain man tells that when he had lost his member, he approached a known witch to ask her to restore it to him. She told the afflicted man to climb a certain tree, and that he might take which he liked out of a nest in which there were several members. And when he tried to take a big one, the witch said: you must not take that one, adding, because it belongs to the parish priest.³⁴

One might well wonder what is to be thought of men who could accept such a preposterous story? Where did Institoris and Sprenger get such incredible information? How did they and the fellow inquisitors and judges influenced by their book come to have such clear and detailed knowledge about the sexual proclivities and activities of witches? And why was sex so central to their concerns rather than the harmful actions of witches, which were of far more interest to the common people who suffered from them? For answers to these essential questions, we can turn to Walter Stephens' insightful book *Demon Lovers*.

Stephens contends that witchcraft theorists were neither credulous fools nor prurient misogynists, but tormented skeptics trying to resolve the conflicts in Christian doctrine about the benevolence of God, the existence of spirits and souls, and the efficacy of the sacraments. Neither irrational nor unscientific, witchcraft theorists deployed all the resources available from natural philosophy and theology to vindicate the goodness of God and the truth of the Bible. Witchcraft theory, to use Stephens

³² Anglo, “Evident authority and authoritative evidence.”

³³ Stephens, *Demon Lovers*.

³⁴ Kramer & Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 267.

apt phrase, was a kind of “theological damage control.” It was in itself a theodicy that let God off the hook of seeming injustice:

The identification and persecution of witches was nothing less than a defense of fundamental Christian principles. Those principles remained central to Christianity from long before Martin Luther until long after the Council of Trent. They were not moral or ethical questions about conduct as we have been led to believe, but scientific problems of being and knowledge, concerning devils, angels, the human soul, the truthfulness of the Bible, and the evidence of God’s existence and presence in the world. Witchcraft theory was far more than a demonology. It was not an anomaly in the history of Western Christianity. It was an expression of Christianity’s deepest and truest logic, although in oversimplified and neurotic form. Not that its practitioners were usually treated as fanatics or obscurantist crack-pots; they participated in the most vital, wide-ranging, and up-to-date philosophical and scientific debates.³⁵

While Stephens sees 1400 as a pivotal date marking the point when significant numbers of educated Christians began to believe that human beings, especially women, interacted with demons in intensely physical ways—the most pronounced of which was through sexual intercourse—he argues that this belief was itself the end product of a long period of cumulative doubt that began in the twelfth century. The bed-rock Christian belief in spirits, both angelic and demonic, was undermined by fuller knowledge of Aristotle’s works from the twelfth century onwards. How were Christians to deal with the realization that “the philosopher” categorically rejected the existence of spirits on the ground that matter and form were inseparable aspects of an entity? The Aristotelian idea that physical events occurred as a result of strictly natural causes not only conflicted with the role accorded to spirits in the Gospels and later Christian thought but it undermined the belief both in divine providence and miracles, which Christians had routinely taken as concrete proof of the truth of Christianity and its superiority over other religions. Aquinas and his followers were profoundly disturbed by the Aristotelian idea that natural causes were the only viable “scientific” explanations for physical events, a view encouraged by growing contact with the Islamic world and the West’s absorption of the occult sciences of astrology, alchemy, and natural magic, all of which argued for natural rather than “spiritual” or divine causes.

³⁵ Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 30.

Stephens accepts Salvatore Camporeale's characterization of the period between the 14th and the sixteenth centuries as the "travail of Christendom."³⁶ The Black Death, the Great Schism, new methods of theological research, the discovery and dissemination of new texts, printing, mysticism, trade, travel, and the discovery of the new world all undermined established truths and called into question the idea of divine providence and God's omniscience and benevolence. Misfortune, uncertainty, and insecurity called for a new theodicy, and Stephens argues that this was supplied by the witch theorists. A consistent theme runs through all their writings: the terrible fear that God, spirits, heaven, and hell did not exist. They wrote to assuage their deepest doubts, and these doubts could only be kept at bay by proving that spirits were real and interacted on a physical level with human beings.

From Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum* (1225) to Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Christians were plagued by doubts about the reality of spirits, for if spirits did not actually exist but were figments of the imagination, how could one prove the existence of that most spiritual entity of all, God? Augustine claimed that spirits were incorporeal and that they had "aerial" bodies.³⁷ But if this were the case, how could purely spiritual entities interact with physical human beings? Aquinas tried to resolve the question by asserting that although angels and demons were pure spirit, they could assume bodies made of air that had been condensed by divine power to a suitable shape. Aquinas and subsequent theologians devised a complicated explanation for how devils, who did not have real bodies, could copulate with humans who obviously do: as *succubi* (those lying under) they received semen from human males, which, as *incubi* (those lying above) they deposit in females. As Stephens points out, devils and demons became increasingly corporeal through the centuries, emerging in the fifteenth century as "a riot of corporeality" with horns, reptilian tails, grotesque features, and faces inappropriately situated on their stomachs or posteriors.³⁸ Even more worryingly, during the period of most intense witch hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, devils and demons often appeared in increasingly human guise to the point that they were virtually indistinguishable from human beings. Their interaction with

³⁶ Camporeale, "Renaissance Humanism."

³⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, bks 8 & 9.

³⁸ Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 110.

people was thus assured. Or was it? The paradox was that as theologians and witch theorists became more detailed and concrete in their scientific explanations for the corporeality of demons, they promoted the very skepticism they were at pains to allay.

Stephens claims that the reason why witch theorists were so interested in proving the reality of demonic sex had little to do with an obsession with sex or misogyny but was a consequence of their attempt to provide irrefutable evidence that demons did interact physically with humans. What, after all, could be better proof of physical intimacy than intercourse?

Literate interest in copulation with demons was hardly driven by prurience, misogyny, or puritanical fervor. Literate men craved demonstrations that even sexual intercourse, the most intimate sort of bodily contact, was possible with demons. Copulation offered valuable perspectives on the life of demons, their corporeality, and the possibility of acting meaningfully with them.³⁹

Stephens describes witch theorists as “metaphysical voyeurs”; their deepest desire was not to look through bedroom walls but through those barriers that separated the physical world of human beings from the spiritual life to come.⁴⁰ While he admits that witch theorists were misogynists, he claims their misogyny served the purpose of proving that demons, and hence God, really existed. Witch theorists did not exploit theology in order to demonize women. They exploited the prevailing misogyny to reinforce a demonology that supported the theology they seriously doubted.

Stephens makes a valid point, but only up to a point. His valiant attempt to apply this logic to the primary author of the *Malleus* Heinrich Institoris (Henrich Kramer) and to exculpate him left this reader’s mind reeling!

Of course the *Malleus* was misogynistic, but what for Kramer was the *use* of misogyny? To read his treatment of demonic copulation as a tirade against women’s sexual powers is to miss his point entirely. If anything, his tirade is *for* women’s sexuality. The issue was not keeping women in their place or controlling their sexuality. Henrich Kramer did not fear that women were associating with demons: he *hoped* that they were. His whole theology *depended* on women’s sexual transgressions, and it would have

³⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 32.

collapsed if he had ever had to admit that women's behavior conformed to the patriarchal ideal of chastity and submissiveness.⁴¹

One suspects that Stephens protests too much. It is impossible to believe that the long and tortured history of Christian ambivalence to sex and procreation and the misogyny this generated were not important contributing factors to witch theorists' emphasis on the perverse sexuality of female witches.⁴² After 1400 those accused of witchcraft were no longer charged with practicing specific acts of magic (*maleficium*) but simply with attending the Sabbath where demonic sex was a standard feature. Stephens' explanation that demonic sex replaced *maleficium* as the *sine qua non* of witchcraft because sexual intercourse offered better proof of demonic and human interaction—"...Kramer's interest is not prurience but provability"⁴³—is problematic. Surely, an emphasis on witches and demons making demonic pacts could have provided the same level of "proof" that physical interaction was possible.

The fact that witch theorists were so interested in the specifics of the sexual encounters between witches and demons, so detailed in their descriptions of the size and shape of demonic sex organs (enormous), so curious as to whether women preferred sex with demons or humans, so convinced of the painful and unpleasant nature of demonic intercourse, and so insistent that even demons refrained from "crimes against nature" (i.e. sodomy or even intercourse in anything but the missionary position) indicates a fixation on sexuality profoundly colored by Christian attitudes to sex and celibacy. It also suggests that there was an increase in the level of misogyny in the late medieval and early modern period that made it possible for female witches to replace male necromancers, heretics, and Jews as the Church's most dreaded and dreadful enemy. It is at this point that it is useful to return to Broedel's analysis of the *Malleus*.

While Broedel is prepared to admit that Institoris' and Sprenger's view of women was deeply misogynist, he supports Stephens to a

⁴¹ Ibid., 37.

⁴² I can't help thinking here of a passage from Nietzsche: "Do I counsel you to slay your senses? I counsel you innocence of the senses. Do I counsel you chastity? Chastity is a virtue with some, but with many almost a vice. These are indeed continent: but the bitch of Sensuality looketh enviously out of all that they do. This restless beast ever followeth them, even upon the summits of their virtues, and within the coldness of the mind. And how prettily can this bitch, Sensuality, beg for a morsel of mind when a morsel of flesh is denied her!" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 47).

⁴³ Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 40.

certain extent by arguing that their identification of witches as female “is quite probably descriptive rather than prescriptive” inasmuch as it represents popular opinion.⁴⁴ In Broedel’s view, the genius, or perhaps it would be better to say the evil genius, of Institoris’s and Sprenger’s work is that it reconciled learned and popular views of witchcraft. As scholars have long realized, there was a gulf between what educated theologians thought about witches and the views of less well educated or uneducated lay people. Before the publication of the *Malleus* witch theorists and demonologists tended to view witches as heretics, allies of the devil bent on attacking the Church and enticing its members into sin and damnation. Ordinary people took a very different view. For them, witches were primarily women with the power to inflict harm (*maleficium*); the relation of these women with the devil was not an issue. What ordinary people wanted to know is why bad things happened to them, and the witch supplied an ideal scapegoat in a society that looked for immediate and personal explanations for misfortune. In their role as Inquisitors, Institoris and Sprenger were continually confronted by this popular view of witches and witchcraft. But because it contradicted accepted authorities, who considered witches delusional and denied them any power, they felt obliged to construct a new model of witchcraft that reconciled learned and popular beliefs.

Broedel argues that their new model was predicated on Aquinas’s view of the universe as an integrated whole in which the supernatural realm could be understood, at least partially, through observations of events in the natural world. Humans could speculate about God, angels, the devil, and demons because their actions were similar to human actions, although qualitatively different. Aquinas further believed that sensory experience presented reliable information about the actual world, at least if confirmed by a majority of people, because God would not have allowed men to be chronically mistaken. This led Aquinas to accept the existence of such beings as Satyrs, Fauns, and incubi because “[m]any persons” attest that they have appeared to women. “Hence it seems folly to deny it.”⁴⁵ Given this epistemological framework, Broedel contends that Institoris and Sprenger’s feminization of witchcraft was neither extreme nor radical in itself because it simply confirmed popular conceptions. What was radical, however, was their rationale for why women were witches, a rationale that led them to compile “a

⁴⁴ Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 6–7.

⁴⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, pt. 1, qu. 51, art. 3. Cited in *ibid.*, 94.

veritable *summa* of late-medieval misogynist commonplaces.”⁴⁶ But what still needs to be explained, and Broedel does this up to a point, as we shall see, is why ordinary lay people accepted the extremely misogynist view of women presented by two Dominican monks. And here is where we come back to the issue of curiosity and the way it became gendered female in early modern western culture.

Curiosity, Women, Sex, and Sin

Curiosity was routinely censured throughout the medieval and early modern periods. The paramount text for the negative assessment of curiosity was the Bible. Curiosity is condemned in the Testament and New Testament: “Be not curious in unnecessary matters: far more things are showed unto thee than men understand” (Ecclesiasticus 3:23)... “For all the Athenians and strangers that were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21). Carlo Ginzburg emphasizes the effect that Jerome’s mistranslation of Romans 11:20 had in turning curiosity into a sin. Jerome translated Paul’s injunction “be not high-minded” as “*noli altum sapere*,” which was consistently interpreted to mean “do not seek to know high things.”⁴⁷ But the text that had the most impact on women was Genesis 1–3, which expressly linked female curiosity to sex and sin. The fall was the result of Eve’s curiosity and subsequent eating of “the forbidden fruit,” a term that became synonymous with sex in the mind of the many Christian theologians who viewed the fall as a fall into sexuality.

Women, sex, and sin became an unholy trinity that gathered force through the centuries until it culminated in the witch hunts of the early modern period. Paul Ricoeur has pointed out the recessive nature of the sexual interpretation of the Fall.⁴⁸ Even when not explicitly mentioned, it is there, appearing in the Catholic Church’s tortured view of marriage, sex, and contraception as well as in Protestant writings on marriage and sex.⁴⁹ Although Augustine branded the idea that original sin was sexual as *ridiculum*, his writings are filled with ambivalent statements about women, sex, and procreation. Why, he asks did Adam and

⁴⁶ Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 176.

⁴⁷ Ginzburg, “High and Low”.

⁴⁸ Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 252ff.

⁴⁹ Flandrin, *Un temps pour embrasser*; Noonan, *Contraception*; Bugge, *Virginitas*; Bal, “Sexuality, Sin and Sorrow”; Coudert, “The Myth of the Improved Status.”

Eve immediately cover their genitals after eating the forbidden fruit? Because sin had led to sexual passion and a lack of self control. Before the fall, Adam had as much control over his sexual member as over a finger or arm. Passion and lack of self control was what was bad, not sex itself; but since a certain degree of passion is necessary if the act is to occur, Augustine cannot be said to have validated human sexuality.⁵⁰ In fact, Augustine intensified the link between curiosity and sex that was to prove so fatal for women. No one was more critical of human curiosity than Augustine, who defined it as one of the three forms of the vice “concupiscence”: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and worldly ambition. Curiosity was “lust of the eyes,”⁵¹ and Augustine links it directly with both the sin of pride and the fall. Curiosity was further denounced as the source of heresy and the black arts. The association of curiosity with sin, pride, heresy, and magic became commonplace in medieval thought.

The conviction that curiosity could all too easily lead to magic was enshrined in the Faust Legend. Faust was only one of many figures damned for their curiosity.⁵² Icarus, Daedalus, Prometheus, and Proteus were others condemned either for aiming too high, or, as in the case of Proteus, for adapting too easily to changing circumstances. Such characters had little appeal for those who feared and distrusted change, viewing the world ideally as a static hierarchy in which individuals assumed, and were expected to keep, the occupations and roles into which they were born.

But not everyone shared this negative view of curiosity. The recovery of classical and esoteric texts during the Renaissance, together with expanded trade and travel, encouraged some Europeans to view curiosity positively and to celebrate man’s capacity to understand and change the world. The opening paragraph of Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* describing man’s ability to become whatever he wishes, even to the point of divinity, is too well known to need quoting. Pico places absolutely no limitations on man. He has only to “aspire” and to “will,” both key words in the *Oration*, and he will find

⁵⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, XIII, 13–14.

⁵¹ *Confessions*, Bk. 5.3.3. For a discussion of patristic and medieval attitudes towards curiosity, see Steiner, “The Faust Legend”; Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 59ff.; Peters, “Libertas Inquirendi.”

⁵² For a provocative reading of Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus as illustrating the conflict between Renaissance optimism and Christian pessimism, see Gatti, *The Renaissance Drama of Knowledge*, ch. 4.

himself “inferior to . . . [the angels] in nothing. [F]or if we will . . .” says Pico, “we can.”

Pico’s emphasis on man’s ability to control his own destiny without any external help appears in the work of the Florentine Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino as well. Ficino describes man’s striving to “become God” as entirely “natural,” in the same way that flight is to birds; man requires no external, divine assistance to become perfect in this world.⁵³ Like Pico, Ficino quotes the *Asclepius* passage describing man’s ability to become anything he wishes, and he quotes Hermes Trismegistus to the effect that man is “a great miracle.”⁵⁴

A positive view of Icarus as the prototype of the scientist who dares to know appears in Giordano Bruno, who, as Hilary Gatti has pointed out, shared the Neapolitan poet Tansillo’s admiration for Icarus’ daring, even though it led to death.⁵⁵ Francis Bacon also rejected the traditional interpretation of the Icarus myth in a passage that echoes Bruno: “Icarus chose the better of the two; for all defects are justly esteemed more depraved than excesses. There is some magnanimity in excess, that, like a bird, claims kindred with heavens: but defect is a reptile, that basely crawls upon the earth.”⁵⁶

This positive assessment of curiosity was, however, a decidedly minority view throughout the early modern period. As Barbara Benedict has shown, conservatives and conservative literary culture viewed curious people as “monsters,” “queers,” and “curiosities,” as intellectual and social transgressors because they dared to ask questions about forbidden topics such as sex, religion, the origin of social customs, the sources and uses of wealth, and the justification for social hierarchy.⁵⁷ Conservatives were especially critical of London’s Royal Society and its virtuosi members who “peeped” and “keeked” (to glance illicitly or look furtively) into matters best left alone.⁵⁸ But while they castigated and ridiculed curious males, their criticism came down with special harshness on females.

⁵³ *Theologia Platonica*, 2:247. Cited in Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 2:487; see also 2:491.

⁵⁴ *Theologia Platonica*, 2:256–8. Cited in *Ibid.*, 2:489–90.

⁵⁵ Gatti points out that Bruno commented on Tansillo’s poem in *The Renaissance Drama of Knowledge*, 87.

⁵⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁷ Benedict, *Curiosity*, 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 142

Benedict argues that female curiosity was a consuming topic for early modern males, who saw women as so many Pandoras, Psyches, Lot's wives, and Eves, whose snooping, particularly into sexual matters, was categorically condemned.⁵⁹ In a period characterized by religious upheaval and profound social, economic, and cultural changes, curiosity was gendered female and seen as a threat to established male authority. Curiosity was deemed a sign of discontent and curious women the harbingers of social chaos.

In Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1611), for example, "Curiosità" is depicted as a huge, phallic female with wings and wild hair, who gazes straight ahead with out-flung arms as if to embrace the world. The emblem states that "curiosity is an unbridled desire of those that seek to know more than they should." The figure's red and blue dress is decorated with ears, signifying gossip, and frogs, which, according to Benedict, stand for human energy. Red and blue represent the body and the sky, which in turn symbolize carnal and intellectual knowledge.⁶⁰ As Ripa's figure demonstrates, curiosity was not an acceptable female trait, and any female who exhibited it was either unsexed or over-sexed. Female curiosity and the female gaze were highly charged topics in early modern literature inasmuch as both reinforced Augustine's definition of curiosity as "concupiscence of the eyes" and the idea of women as sexually insatiable.⁶¹ No decent woman raised her eyes in public, and gazing was out of the question. A curious woman was therefore by her very nature unchaste at best and a witch at worst.

The connection between female curiosity and sexual promiscuity was underscored by the deep linguistic connections between sex and knowing that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. One "conceives" an idea just as one conceives a child, and to express this idea one exclaims or "ejaculates." The close association between knowledge, speech, and

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 116: "Impertinent curiosity, particularly sexual snooping, is an impulse traditionally attributed to women. From Pandora's pecking and Eve's eating, to Alice's anxiety in Wonderland, female curiosity in religion, myth, popular culture, and high literature has meant a perverse desire to spy things out, particularly to know what makes men, men."

⁶⁰ The theme of inversion is treated in Davis, "Women on Top"; Babcock, *The Reversible World*; Stallybrass, "The World Turned Upside Down," 201–217.

⁶¹ Benedict, *Curiosity*, 85, 128. Plato's "hungry womb theory" also helped to reinforce the idea that women were sexually insatiable, as did Jerome's mistranslation of Proverb 30:16. Whether consciously or unconsciously, he failed to recognize that the proverb referred to a barren woman's longing for children, interpreting the passage to mean that a woman's sexual desire is never satisfied.

procreation is ancient and widespread. Both the ancient Egyptian god Ptah and the god of the Hebrew Bible create through speech, and many Jews and Christians believed that animals came into existence only at the moment Adam spoke their names. In pictures of the Annunciation the Holy Spirit is often depicted as a beam of light directed at Mary's ear.⁶² As George Steiner has said, "Eros and language mesh at every point. Intercourse and discourse, copula and copulation. . . . Sex is a profoundly semantic act. . . . Ejaculation is at once a physiological and a linguistic concept."⁶³

Because William Harvey, the great biologist and discoverer of the circulation of the blood, could find no traces of semen in the female deer he dissected (a problem with deer, apparently), he concluded that they "conceived" in much the same way thoughts are conceived in the brain. Just as the verb "to conceive" can be taken in both a physical and a mental sense, so too does the verb "to know" signify thinking and copulation.

The association between thought and procreation and, more specifically, the connection drawn between the brain and the genitals had the backing of thousands of years of medical theory. In the *Timaeus* (90e–91d), Plato remarks that semen is produced in the brain and descends to the penis via the spinal cord. This idea became commonplace in the Middle Ages among both Christians and Jews. The *Zohar* contains explicit descriptions of the physiological process through which the semen flows from the brain, through the body, and into the female.⁶⁴ Leonardo da Vinci illustrated the supposed canals through which the semen was transmitted from the brain to the testicles.⁶⁵ The great sixteenth-century surgeon Ambrose Paré accepted this idea, asserting that "a great portion of semen cometh from the brain." This belief continued into the nineteenth century, providing the rationale for the masturbatory theory of insanity. To this day we speak about an author's "seminal" work.⁶⁶

⁶² "Glad us maiden, mother mild/Through thine ear thou were with child/Gabriel he said it thee." This comes from the thirteenth century; quoted in Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 37. See also Jones, "The Madonna's Conception."

⁶³ Steiner, *After Babel*, 37–8.

⁶⁴ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* I, 162a–162b; II, 128b–129a; III, 247a–247b, 296a–296b (*Idra Zuta*). On the diffusion of this idea in medieval and early modern Judaism, see Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, ch. 5.

⁶⁵ O'Malley and Saunders, *Leonardo da Vinci on the Human Body*, 460–2.

⁶⁶ For an amusing discussion of these theories and their persistence in the eighteenth

Given the close association between thought, speech, and procreation, it becomes more understandable why one of the three virtues considered essential for women was silence (in addition to chastity and obedience). A woman who spoke too much, and witches were reputed to do just that, was by her very nature suspected of being unchaste. Even thinking, and especially too much thinking, was considered a problem, even a vice, for women. As Mrs. Malaprop exclaims to young Lydia in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1773), "You thought, Miss! I don't know any business you have to think at all; thought does not become a young woman."⁶⁷ By the time Sheridan wrote this, it was, at least partly, a joke, but the disdain for intelligent, educated women is a consistent theme throughout the Renaissance and early modern period and continues to this day. Educated women had a very hard time fitting into society. Since the prevailing view was that intellect was masculine, learned women were treated like freaks. The highly intelligent and well educated Isolta Nogarola was actually put on exhibition, which only intensified her fragile self-confidence and self-esteem.⁶⁸ After being awarded a doctorate, Elena Cornaro († 1684) achieved very little, for there was little she could achieve given the fact that women could not teach or work in the public sphere. She certainly did not have "a room of her own" in which to work, which is why some educated women joined nunneries if that option was available. At least there they might find shelter in a "book-lined cell."⁶⁹ For most early modern males, a little female education went a long way. Hans Michael Moscherosch, a seventeenth-century Protestant minister, was especially insistent that "maidens" should "not know much." As he exclaims, "Heaven spare us an experienced maiden!"⁷⁰ This utter disdain for bluestocking women, as well as the implied suggestion that knowledge made her "experienced," which certainly suggests a sexual dimension, was prevalent among Catholics and Protestants alike.

The consistent ridicule and abuse leveled at intellectual, literate women was one of the innumerable dark sides of patriarchy and patriarchal culture. As Frances Dolan has pointed out, patriarchal authority

century, see Ormsby-Lennon, "Raising Swift's Spirit." For the universality of these ideas see, Héritier-Augé, "Semen and Blood," 158–175.

⁶⁷ Ferguson, *Dido's Daughters*, 17.

⁶⁸ King, "The Religious Retreat of Isolta Nogarola."

⁶⁹ King, "Book-Lined Cells"; Bell, "Christine de Pizan"; Kaufman, "Juan Vives on the Education of Women"; Ferguson, "A Room Not their Own."

⁷⁰ Cited in Moore, *The Maiden's Mirror*, 27.

entailed a monopoly of the written and, I would add, the spoken word. Dolan documents a number of examples in early modern English drama in which the plot hinges on confrontations between patriarchal figures and their subordinates over written documents. Gloucester grabs Edmund's letter in *King Lear*; York grabs Aumerle's letter in *Richard II*; Arden grabs Michael's letter in *Arden of Faversham*. In each of these cases, the seized letters offer proof of conspiracy on the part of subordinates. All these examples involve males, but there are many others in the early modern period in which educated women confront men and challenge their authority. Catherine Schütz, the wife of the Strassbourg reformer Matthew Zell, had the temerity to quote Galatians 3:28 and Joel 2:28–29 to the very Bishop who told her to be silent when she protested the excommunication of her husband.⁷¹ Argula von Grumbach also defied the male establishment's intellectual authority.⁷²

Hugh Peters' condemnation of Anne Hutchinson provides a further illustration of how males reacted to women who ventured into the public sphere by speaking or writing. He was more troubled by her "masculine" behavior than by her antinomian opinions because such behavior threatened the natural superiority of the husband in the family unit. As Peters said:

You have stept out of your place. You have rather been a husband than a wife; and a preacher than a hearer; and a magistrate than a subject; and so you have thought to carry all things in church and commonwealth as you would have and have not been humble for this.⁷³

Literate women were an anomaly precisely because they trespassed on what was deemed exclusively male territory and, in doing so, unsexed themselves.

The theme of "The Man-Woman" or "The Womanish Man" was a very "potent" topic in the minds of early modern men. The very real fear that things were changing and getting out of place was frequently depicted in terms of gender reversal. In a satirical broadside entitled "A Character of a Turn-Coat: Or, the True Picture of an English Monster"

⁷¹ "You remind me that the Apostle Paul told women to be silent in church. I would remind you of the word of his same apostle that in Christ there is no longer male nor female and of the prophecy of Joel: 'I will pour fourth my spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters will prophesy.'" Cited in Douglass, "Women and the Continental Reformation," 307.

⁷² Classen, "Footnotes to the Canon," 131–148.

⁷³ Adams, *Three Episodes of Massachusetts History*.

(1707) the figures of a man and woman reverse roles when the sheet is turned upside down, a clear indication that the world is topsy-turvy. The message is explained in a bit of doggerel:

For as the Times do change, they'll changed their Face
 Foreswear their Sex, their Age, their Name, and Race.
 As by these Pictures you may plainly see,
 He that was Man, a Woman seems to be.
 And she that did a Woman represent,
 By change into another form is sent.

The obsession with female sexual power and the reversal of gender roles it implied was extraordinarily widespread in the early modern period.⁷⁴ Illustrations of Aristotle in the supremely undignified position of allowing Phyllis, his student Alexander's mistress, to ride on his back, of Solomon worshipping idols under the influence of his foreign wives, of Samson having his hair cut by Delilah, of David ogling Bathsheba, and of Hercules dressed in Omphale's clothes and carrying a distaff were widely disseminated images of virago females who "wore the breeches" and were definitely "on top," a position that was actually forbidden in Catholic marriage manuals and severely punished in penitentials.⁷⁵

The image of domineering, masculine women was related to another theme that resonated in the early modern period as well, hermaphroditism. Hermaphroditism became an important issue precisely because the hermaphrodite was both male and female and therefore did not

⁷⁴ Davis, *Society and Culture in 17th Century France*, 100–1, 140; Underdown, "The taming of the Scold"; Moxey, *Peasants, Warriors, and Wives*; Roper, *The Holy Household*. See the images of female sexual aggression in Waddington, "The Bisexual Portrait of Francis I."

⁷⁵ Sanchez, *De Sancto Matrimonii Sacramento*, bk. 9, dis. 16, qu.1: "We must first of all establish what is the natural manner of intercourse as far as position is concerned. As for the latter, the man must lie on top and the woman on her back beneath. . . . Indeed, it is natural for the man to act and for the woman to be passive; and if the man is beneath, he becomes submissive by the very fact of this position, and the woman being above is active; and who cannot see how much nature herself abhors this mutation." St. Bernardino went even farther, insisting that incest and sodomy were preferable to the wife on top: "It is better for a wife to permit herself to copulate with her own father in a natural way than with her husband against nature. . . . It is bad for a man to have intercourse with his own mother, but it is much worse for him to have intercourse with his wife against nature." Cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 261. St. Bernardino was following Aquinas, who says, "the natural way of lying together is not kept, either because of using an unfit organ or because of using other monstrous and bestial ways of lying" (*Summa Theologia*, 2–2.154.11, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 225).

fit the increasingly rigid gender stereotyping that came into force.⁷⁶ Although some scholars, notably Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Edgar Wind, followed by Carolyn Merchant and Evelyn Fox Keller, view the image of the hermaphrodite as an affirmation of gender equality, more recent studies suggest this is not the case.⁷⁷ For example, Raymond Waddington rejects Wind's positive evaluation of Niccolò Bellin da Modena's depiction of Francis I as a hermaphrodite and sees it instead as a sophisticated joke deflating Francis's pretensions to both military and sexual prowess.⁷⁸

The idea that images of hermaphrodites or discussions of androgyny offered a positive alternative to notions of gender polarity overlooks the fact that the concept of androgyny implies that males and females are polar opposites.⁷⁹ Any suggestion to the contrary aroused fears. As Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park point out, in French civil law an individual's gender determined his or her capacity to marry, inherit, act as a witness, assume the position of guardian, and hold political office. The tremendous weight accorded to the question of a person's gender meant that "sexual ambiguity was . . . not legally tolerated."⁸⁰

The anxiety caused by hermaphrodites expressed a more general and intense fear of homosexual acts as well. However prevalent homosexuality may have been in court circles, the practice was generally viewed with revulsion and horror because it blurred the line between the sexes by undermining the dichotomy between the "active" male and "passive" female. In this context it is understandable that amazons became a subject of considerable interest in the early modern period, for with their military skills and refusal to marry they too blurred increasingly rigid gender stereotypes.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Bauhin, *De Hermaphroditorum Monstrosorumque Partuum Natura*.

⁷⁷ Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* and *Psychology and Alchemy*, in *Collected Works*, V. 12; *ibid.*, *Alchemical Studies*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 13; Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*; Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, 213–4; Merchant, *The Death of Nature and Earthcare*; Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*.

⁷⁸ Waddington, "The Bisexual Portrait of Francis I."

⁷⁹ Merry Wiesner points out that when a woman succeeded in domains reserved for men (literature, arts, sciences) she was said to have "overcome the limitations of her sex" or she was judged "a hermaphrodite." In other words, her accomplishments did not spring from her female nature but from some additional of maleness (*Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 147–8).

⁸⁰ Daston & Park, "Hermaphrodites in Renaissance France."

⁸¹ Tauber, "The Only Good Amazon Is a Converted Amazon"; Woods, "Amazonian Tyranny"; Sullivan, "Amazons and Aristocrats."

Maryanne Horowitz claims that “playing” with notions of gender was an acceptable Renaissance pursuit, but she admits that however playful various authors may have been in their discussions of autonomous female figures, they successfully refashioned them along increasingly polarized gender lines.⁸² But here is where we return to the figure of the witch. For the newly minted image of the early modern witch was the quintessential phallic, sexually active, homosexually deviant woman who haunted the imaginations of Institoris and Sprenger and many early modern inquisitors, theologians, and laymen as well.⁸³

A New “Theology” of Gender

Lyndal Roper and Merry Wiesner-Hanks have been in the forefront of scholars who argue that the institution of marriage and gender relations were central to the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, as theologians, philosophers, scholars, and statesmen came to grips with the social, economic, and political realities accompanying the rise of the middle class, a new and unprecedented degree of social mobility, and the disruptive role of money in societies whose structures were still essentially feudal.⁸⁴ But at the heart of early modern anxieties about gender lay a deeper crisis about what it meant to be a man. In feudal society, gender roles were more easily differentiated inasmuch as men were expected to be warriors and women were not. But in bourgeois

⁸² Ibid.: “...the seven case studies of texts and images collectively suggest that a crucial aspect of Renaissance fashioning of self is the refashioning of others... [I]n the Renaissance cross-cultural questioning of gender categories, authors and artists enjoy playing with Amazons and other ancient figures who transcend accepted gender stereotypes. An apparently amusing ‘male’ game, presented for the enjoyment of conventional men and women (as in Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*), is refashioning autonomous female figures along traditional gender lines, that is, appropriating them to conserve the status quo” (ix). My question is, is this really “playfulness”?

⁸³ Zika, “She-Man.” In an extremely interesting article, Kelly documents the sex change undergone by the devil in the fifteenth century. Long associated with the serpent in Genesis, the Christian devil appears with a woman’s head and torso in fifteenth-century art and in literature at an even earlier date. See his article, “The Metamorphoses of the Eden Serpent.” From time immemorial serpents have been associated with sex, fertility, generation, and regeneration, and they have been worshipped accordingly. For Christians, however, the serpent has only negative associations and connotations. The fact that the serpent in the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duke de Berry as well as in Michelangelo’s Sistine chapel appears with a woman’s face, long blond hair, and a female torso offers another powerful image of a phallic (and sinful) female.

⁸⁴ Roper, *The Holy Household*; Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 252ff. Cf. Wunder, *He Is the Sun, She Is the Moon*.

society gender was more problematic since in their new roles as courtiers and civil servants men did many of the same things women had always done.

At the heart of both professions lay an inescapable contradiction between the nature of the job and the sex of the job holder. The stance of both groups was essentially feminine inasmuch as their role was to be pleasing, pliant, and subservient. J.R. Woodhouse describes the novelty of this situation and the confusion it occasioned in terms of gender identity.⁸⁵ Military prowess and good advice were no longer sufficient to curry favor with a Prince. Wit and the capacity to amuse became the primary avenues to success. But wit calls for the ability to deceive and dissimulate, for talents (if we may call them that) traditionally associated with women. In this situation, the age-old dichotomy between male and female became problematic, and the issue of what it meant to be either assumed a pressing urgency reflected in the increasingly essentialist rhetoric of gender.

The fear of effeminacy and the stigma attached to it led to a polarization of the sexes that bordered on caricature. We can see this reflected in the fashion of the period with the exaggerated codpieces worn by men and the emphasis on broad hips characteristic of Elizabethan dresses. We can also see it in the innumerable discourses about gender published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If we take a careful look at these texts, it becomes clear that, however much they discuss women, they are really written about men and intended for men. When women do appear, it is only to show what men must not be and must not do. As Barbara Correll argues, women have “an essential function” in the conduct literature of the early modern period; they are “projected as the horror of effeminacy, which must be contained.”⁸⁶

We can see this in Erasmus’ handbook for the instruction of young boys, when he advises young males to model their behavior in opposition to that of girls:

⁸⁵ Woodhouse, *Baldesar Catiglione*, 54.

⁸⁶ Correll, *The End of Conduct*, 76: “Woman, marginalized or mystified or demonized, was never excluded from Renaissance humanist writings. On the contrary, as the repository of an ideology of identity constructing the sex-gender system of patriarchal society, woman is everywhere in these texts, constructed to motivate the civilizing process, to further the projects of civic and Christian humanism. As the case of Erasmus shows, especially in humanist discussions of civility, woman has an essential function, projected as the horror of effeminacy, which must be contained.”

Attention must be paid to the care of the teeth, but to whiten them with fine powder is for girls. . . . It is boorish to go about with one's hair uncombed: it should be neat but not as elaborate as a girl's coiffure. . . . The hair should neither cover the brow nor flow down over the shoulders. To be constantly tossing the hair with a flick of the head is for frolicsome horses. The gait should be neither mincing nor headlong, the former being a sign of effeminacy, the latter of rage.⁸⁷

Given what Correll has described as "a kind of psychopolitical crisis of masculine identity and authority"⁸⁸ and the attempt to resolve it through increasingly rigid gender stereotyping, Steven Ozment's contention that Reformation morality allowed women "a position of high authority [as mothers] and equal respect [to men]" is simply not true.⁸⁹ Rhetoric extolling mothers and motherhood is noticeably absent in texts dealing with conduct, just as mothers are noticeable by their absence in literature and art. Louis Montrose has commented on the significant lack of mothers in Shakespeare.⁹⁰ Mothers are significantly absent from male autobiographies as well. One would hardly know from reading the autobiographies of Richard Baxter and John Locke that they had been "of woman born."⁹¹ Jonathan Goldberg notes the same omission of mothers in Stuart family portraits.⁹² But even where wives and mothers are portrayed, there are subtle visual codes emphasizing patriarchal authority. Husbands are on the left of the picture plane so that the viewer would see him first. The male often gestures toward his wife, reinforcing the idea of her subordination, and she is depicted in a passive, demure manner.⁹³ Political imagery shows male rulers taking over female roles. King James I of England envisioned himself as the single parent of his realm, as "a loving nourish-father" who provided his subject with "their own nourish-milk."⁹⁴ Scientific texts dealing with reproduction exhibit the same denigration and absence of women. A pseudo-Paracelsian work described menstrual blood as the poisonous

⁸⁷ Erasmus, "On Good Manners for Boys/De Civilitate Morum puerilium", in *Collected Works of Erasmus* 25:269–89, esp. 276–78.

⁸⁸ Correll, *The End of Conduct*, 58.

⁸⁹ Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 54, 202 n. 12.

⁹⁰ Montrose, "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Cf. Schücking, *The Puritan Family*, 87: "that the mother is essentially an unimportant person is something which the historical evidence . . . makes plain wherever we look."

⁹¹ Montrose, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," 85ff.

⁹² Goldberg, "Fatherly Authority," 85ff.

⁹³ Vanhaelen, *Comic Print and Theatre*, 129. Smith, *Masks of Wedlock*.

⁹⁴ Orgel, "Prospero's Wife," 59.

matrix from which monsters like the basilisk originate,⁹⁵ a notion consistent with Paracelsus' undisputed statements to the effect that women were the source of all evil.⁹⁶ Given this conviction, it is understandable that Paracelsus and many alchemists and natural philosophers devoted their energies to producing *homunculi*, marvelous creatures created by males exclusively from male semen and consequently uncontaminated by any female characteristics.⁹⁷

The absence or elimination of women is also a standard feature in early modern alchemy. Carl Jung's view of alchemy as a psychic and spiritual process in which the male and female aspects of the individual are unified in a psychologically satisfying whole symbolized by the image of the hermaphrodite simply does not describe what alchemists thought or did, as we can see from illustrations accompanying the work of several German alchemists. Although the stone is frequently described as the offspring of a "royal" couple, in many cases this birth is better described as an act of cloning since the philosopher's stone emerges solely from the father. This is the message delivered in Lamspring's book of alchemical emblems. In one emblem, we can see the "king" or father swallow his son in the first scene. The next scene shows the father in bed about to give birth to his son, while the final scene shows the father together with his newly born son.⁹⁸

A similar message appears in the work of the German Lutheran alchemist, physician, and self-styled poet laureate, Michael Maier. In Maier's alchemy, male and female are polar opposites, and they remain polar opposites. When males need the one power with which females are credited, namely the ability to bear offspring, they simply

⁹⁵ [pseudo] Paracelsus, *De natura rerum*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 11, 315–16: "Nun aber damit ich widerumb auf mein fuernemen kom, von dem basilisco zuschreiben, warum und was ursach er doch das gift in seinem gesicht und augen habe. Da ist nun zu wissen, das er solche eigenschaft und herkomen von den unreinen weibern hat, wie oben is gemelt worden. Dan der basiliscus wechst und wird geboren aus und von der groessten unreinheit der weiber, aus den menstruis und aus dem blut spermatic."

⁹⁶ Paracelsus, *De generatione hominis*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, 305: "Das aber ein mensch vil lieber stilet als der ander, is die ursach also, das alles erbars in Adam gewesen ist und das widerwertige der erbarkeit, unerbarkeit in Eva. Solches ist auch also durch die wage herab gestügen in die samen nach dem ein itlichs sein teil davon gebracht hat, nach dem ist er in seiner nature. Denn etwan hat die diebisch art uberwunden, etwan die hurisch, etwan die spilerisch &c." Cf. Paracelsus, *Das Buch von der Geberung der Empfindlichen Dinge in der Vernuft*, in *ibid.*, 278–81.

⁹⁷ [pseudo] Paracelsus, *De natura rerum*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 11, 316–17.

⁹⁸ *The Book of Lamspring*, in *The Hermetic Museum, Restored and Enlarged I*, 301–305. On the subject of parental cannibalism, see Devereux, "The Cannibalistic Impulses of Parents." For a psychoanalytic discussion of alchemical images, see Fabricius, *Alchemy*.



Fig. 6. Figure XIII The Father devours the son, from the Book of Lamspring in *Musaeum Hermeticum reformatum et amplificatum...* (Francofurti, 1678).
 Courtesy Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam.



Fig. 7. Figure XIV The Father gives birth to his son, from the Book of Lamspring in *Musaeum Hermeticum reformatum et amplificatum...* (Francofurti, 1678).
 Courtesy Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam.



Fig. 8. Figure XV The Father and Son are joined in one, from the Book of Lambspring in *Musaeum Hermeticum reformatum et amplificatum...* (Francofurti, 1678). Courtesy Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam.

appropriate it. Having served their purpose, women are no longer necessary. The following two emblems illustrate the male appropriation of female productive powers. In the first, the male figure, Hermes Trismegistus, bears the child himself.

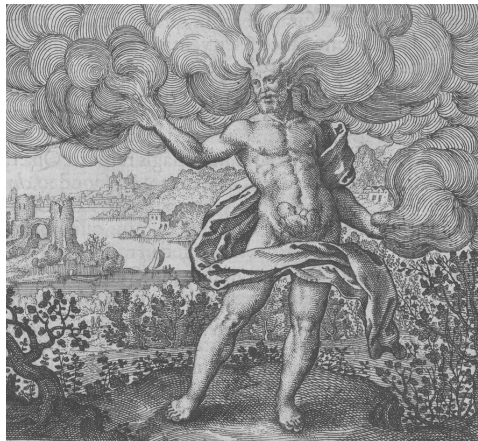


Fig. 9. Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens* (Oppenheimii, 1617) Emblem 1. Hermes Trismegistus. Courtesy Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam.

In the next emblem, Athena emerges fully formed from Zeus's head.



Fig. 10. Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens* (Oppenheimii, 1617) Emblem 23 Zeus giving birth to Athena. Courtesy Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam.

In the next emblem, the maternal role is again repudiated. Here we see an image of the three fathers of Orion standing around an ox hide, into which, to put it delicately, they deposit their semen, semen from which the fully formed male baby Orion will presently emerge.



Fig. 11. Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens* (Oppenheimii, 1617) Emblem 49 The Fathers of Orion. Courtesy Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam.

The last two engravings offer a more sinister scenario. When females are involved, their role is short-lived since their death is the prerequisite to a successful “birth,” as we can see from the next engraving:



Fig. 12. Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens* (Oppenheimii, 1617) Emblem 5 Courtier, woman, and toad. Courtesy Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam.

Here one sees a handsomely dressed courtier carrying a spotted toad approach an elegant lady on a deserted city street. The courtier suddenly thrusts the toad onto the woman's breast. With an expression and gesture of appreciable horror, she watches as the toad begins to nurse. The accompanying epigrammatic verse explains the scene:

To woman's breast apply the chilly toad,
 So that it drinks her milk, just like a child.
 Then let it swell into a massive growth,
 And let the woman sicken, and then die.
 You make from this a noble medicine.
 Which drives the poison from the human heart.⁹⁹

The last engraving of a marriage bed/grave in which the royal couple copulate and die is even more gruesome.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Cf. Klein's discussion of "introjection," the archetypal fantasy of the autistic phase of infantile development. Klein et al., *New Directions in Psychoanalysis*.

¹⁰⁰ Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens*.



Fig. 13. Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens* (Oppenheimii, 1617) Emblem 50 Woman and dragon in a grave. Courtesy Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam.

This illustrates the fifty-ninth sermon of *Turba philosophorum*, which gives a graphic and disturbing description of the dying convulsions of the king and queen, in which the queen is described as “the woman who kills her husbands.”¹⁰¹

Images like these belie the view that early modern alchemists championed the “view of nature and woman as Godly,” to quote Evelyn Fox Keller.¹⁰² In alchemy female nature is routinely tortured, dismembered, sacrificed, drowned, dissolved, and devoured in ways worthy of the Marquis de Sade. These engravings show that natural philosophers and alchemists resuscitated the Aristotelian notion that the form or essential nature of the child is contained in the male semen and that the female is nothing more than an incubator. This doctrine had been challenged by Galen, but with the triumph of the new science we find scientists

¹⁰¹ *Turba philosophorum*, ed. Julius Ruska (Berlin, 1931), 162.

¹⁰² Keller, *Reflections*, 53–54. Merchant takes a similar view of alchemy in *The Death of Nature*, which she reiterates in 1995. Both authors contrast female-friendly alchemy with what they consider to be the misogynist mechanical philosophy. Recent scholarship has shown that this contrast is no longer tenable. See Allen & Hubbs, “Outrunning Atalanta”; Tiles, “Mathesis and the Masculine Birth of Time”; Newman, “Alchemy, Domination, and Gender,” 216–226; Pesic, “Westling with Proteus.”

who claim to have made microscopic observations of spermatozoa containing perfect miniature fetuses.¹⁰³

In an earlier article, I argued that the idea that Protestantism improved the lot of women is a myth and that in crucial ways the accent on marriage for both sexes exacerbated gender conflict.¹⁰⁴ By rejecting celibacy as a legitimate alternative to marriage; by confining sex within marriage more strictly than ever before; and by suggesting that sexual satisfaction was a legitimate concern for wives as well as husbands, Protestantism exacerbated male sexual anxieties. Luther's remark about how bizarre it was for him to wake up and see his wife's braids on the pillow next to him is indicative of the radical reassessment that Protestant clergymen had to make about marriage and gender relations.

In this respect, the witch was a cautionary figure, largely invented in the early modern period to keep women in their place. For witches were precisely those women who refused their newly prescribed role as silent, chaste, and submissive wives and mothers. The witch was the antithesis of the good wife. She was verbally abusive, when she should be silent, promiscuous—and homosexually promiscuous at that—when she should be chaste, domineering when she should be obedient, and out and about, when she should be at home. In short, witches were women who rejected the private world of female domesticity for the public world of men. They were women who rebelled and rebellion was routinely equated with witchcraft and rebellious wives with witches. This view of the witch held true for both learned and popular culture. Thus, however much early Protestants gave lip service to the spiritual equality of men and women and to the important role women should play in the household, especially in regard to the education of children, this did not manifest itself in actual practice. Instead, a new “theology of gender” emerged that affected Protestants and Catholics alike in which women were subordinated to men as never before and their roles in both the public and private sphere were constricted in new and unprecedented ways.¹⁰⁵

The paradox of Protestantism lies in just this: how did a radical evangelicalism predicated on the spiritual equality of all Christians,

¹⁰³ Needham, *A History of Embryology*.

¹⁰⁴ Coudert, “The Myth of the Improved Status.”

¹⁰⁵ Wiesner, *Women in Early Modern Europe*.

regardless of gender, become a bulwark of a hierarchical social order solidly built on inequalities of gender, inequalities that remain alive and well among conservative Protestants to this day.¹⁰⁶ Roper contends that the new Protestant ideology of marriage lies at the heart of this reversal inasmuch as it promoted an agenda of order and discipline predicated on the sole authority of husbands and fathers in the family and of male authorities in society at large.¹⁰⁷ Thus in both theory and practice there was little to distinguish Protestants from Catholics when it came to gender roles in marriage. Patriarchal ideology was reinforced in both groups to such an extent that the father became the “legalized petty tyrant within the home.”¹⁰⁸

One might well ask why marriage became such a central issue in the mind of Protestant reformers. The short answer is sex and sin. Following Augustine, Luther and Calvin rejected the relative optimism about human nature characteristic of Renaissance humanists and emphasize instead the utter depravity of human beings. And like Augustine, they saw the nature of this depravity largely in sexual terms. To quote Calvin:

...our nature is not only destitute of all good, but is so fertile in all evils that it cannot remain inactive. Those who have called it *concupiscence* have used an expression not improper, if it were only added, which is far from being conceded by most persons, that every thing in man, the understanding and will, the soul and body, is polluted and engrossed by this concupiscence; or, to express it more briefly, that man is of himself nothing else but concupiscence.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Roper, *The Holy Household*: “How did this revolutionary evangelicalism become transformed into the consoling, socially conservative pieties of Protestant guildsfolk? How was it possible for a gospel which preached the spiritual equality of all Christians, male and female, rich and poor, and even denied the need for a priesthood, become the bulwark of a secular order based on Hierarchy? How could a religion which began by exulting in the prophetic talents poured out on daughters as well as upon sons come to view women almost exclusively as wives, whose sphere it was to be subordinate to their husbands and instructed by their preachers? ... My central claim is that the moral ethic of the urban Reformation, both as a religious credo and a social movement, must be understood as a theology of gender” (1). As Morgan says so well, “the Puritans were no levelers” (*The Puritan Family*, 19).

¹⁰⁷ Roper, *The Holy Household*, 15. What is especially interesting is that precisely this same radical reversal occurred in early Christianity and for much the same reasons. See Pagels, *Adam, Eve, & the Serpent* and *The Gnostic Gospels*.

¹⁰⁸ Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 7. In *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 128, Davis quotes the preamble to a French ordinance for strengthening paternal power with the family: “Marriages are the seminaries of States.”

¹⁰⁹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:231.

The only institution that could contain this concupiscence, at least to some degree, was marriage, but not marriage in the old Catholic sense, only marriage in a new Protestant form, in which gender roles and sexuality are elaborately defined and surveillance mechanisms established to make sure that husbands and wives behave appropriately.

The draconian nature of the kind of surveillance envisioned by Protestants is illustrated by the instructions issued to “The Office of Elders” in Geneva. These stipulate that the Elders not only examine the behavior and speech of the citizens but also observe their attitude and intentions by visiting every household at least once a year and interrogating the residents. As the instructions ominously say, “in every precinct a lay elder should be chosen, who ‘can have his eye everywhere.’”¹¹⁰ Roper describes the all-embracing nature of the “Discipline Ordinance” promulgated in Augsburg in 1537 with its attempt to micro-manage the rights, duties, and appropriate relationships of individual family members:

The sexual discipline which the whole citizenry was to adopt was both more all-embracing and less well defined than it had been before the Reformation. Now any sexual relationship outside marriage was counted sinful and any occasion on which the sexes mingled, such as dances, might lead to sin. So absolute were the demands of the ideal that the Council was drawn inevitably to define marriage and the relations which ought to hold between husband and wife, parents and children, masters and servants as it articulated the concept of discipline. Indeed, the ordinance amounted to an attempt to order the household, to emphasize the distances which ought to exist between its members, and to define the rights and duties of each. The same ordinance also included an admonition to all citizens to wear clothing appropriate to their social position, so that each may “be recognized for whom he or she is.”¹¹¹

What is so compelling about the concupiscence these regulations were established to monitor and restrain is that it was considered basically a female problem.

I am not arguing that deviant female sexuality was not a subject of much mirth as well as horror in medieval literature. Medieval fabliaux make this abundantly clear. But in the Middle Ages, this literature was counter-balanced by courtly literature with its idealization of women and love and a recognition of the transforming effects of both on male

¹¹⁰ Eby, *Early Protestant Educators*, “Supervision by the Elders,” 252.

¹¹¹ Roper, *The Holy Household*, 112.

conduct. No such literary counter-balance exists in the early modern period. Sex is dangerous, and the dangerous sex is female.¹¹² Female sexual deviancy became an obsession of male authorities and men at large, which explains why witch theorists expended so much time and effort interrogating witch suspects about the precise nature of their sexual encounters with the devil and demonic spirits, why prostitutes were demonized, prosecuted, and expelled from towns and cities that had previously accepted them as a necessary outlets for male libidos, why the number of women charged with sexual crimes increased exponentially, and why magistrates wanted ever-more details about the sex lives of those women they deemed deviant.¹¹³

The figure of the sexually voracious women is endlessly elaborated and became an effective defense for males charged with sexual misconduct. Roper discusses a case in which a male was sentenced to four weeks in prison, while his partner in fornication was given the much harsher punishment of exile simply because he claimed that “she had sprung on him like a billygoat.”¹¹⁴ So conscious were males of the unbridled nature of female sexuality that even sewing-bees were looked upon with suspicion,¹¹⁵ and women were warned against the practice of solitary reading for fear it would lead to masturbation.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Kawerau, “Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte des sechszehnten Jahrhunderts,” 9–10: “A strong misogynist strain makes its way into the literature of the sixteenth century; when women are mentioned it is mainly to complain about them, to take cheap shots at or to insult them. Not a hint of the courtly poet’s chivalry and their veneration of women. A large percentage of the weaker sex in the sixteenth century appears to have earned the dislike of men. To an extraordinary measure they flaunted not only extravagance and sensuality but excessive drinking as well.”

¹¹³ Roper describes the situation in sixteenth-century Augsburg: “an even more important means by which female nature was defined and elaborated was the Council’s interrogation procedure itself. The Council regularly put far more detailed sheets of questions to women than to men, demanding to be told the full details of women’s sexual encounters” (*The Holy Household*, 85).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85. Rothenberg comments on the malevolent power of the womb in Shakespeare and sees this as a sign of male anxiety (“Infantile Fantasies in Shakespearean Metaphor”). In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton proclaimed, “Of women’s unnatural, insatiable lust, what country, what village doth not complain.” In *Love Given O’er*, 5, Gould dwells on the platonic topos of the “hungry” womb: “Ev’n he himself [Plato] acknowledges the womb/To be as greedy as the gaping Tomb.../Takes Men, dogs, Lions, Bears, all sorts of stuff,/Yet it will never cry—there is enough.”

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 179. Cf. Medick, “Village Spinning Bees.”

¹¹⁶ In *Solitary Sex*, Lacquer argues that concern with masturbation only began in the eighteenth century, but as Roper points out, it was “one of the most abhorred sins” much earlier: Inasmuch as it was “the quintessential sin of fantasy, it represented the epitome of sinfulness and a hidden state of mind which demanded continual self-

The obsession with the dangers of female sexuality and women in general that I consider essential if we are to understand the minds of male demonologists provides the subject matter of “Grobian literature,” which originated with the publication of Friedrich Dedekind’s ironic poem *Grobianus et Grobiana, de morum simplicitate, libri tres* (1549). Dedekind and the Grobian authors who followed him sought to civilize males by inculcating the idea that boorish, coarse behavior is unmanly and, even more to the point, a sign of effeminacy.¹¹⁷ Grobian literature obsessively focuses on the materiality of the body, on its uncontrolled orifices as they vomit, excrete, urinate, and exude snot, semen, and blood.¹¹⁸ The object of this literature is to shame its male readers into proper, civilized behavior. This consists in subjugating and sanitizing the delinquent body, which is by definition female.¹¹⁹ The connection of women with the body and matter and men with the soul or spirit goes back to Aristotle and appears as a constant theme in the literature of the Middle Ages,¹²⁰ but in the early modern period this dichotomy was drawn in starker terms than ever before as the genders became increasingly polarized. As Pierre Bourdieu observes, the project of civilizing the body is literally embodied in such things as dress, comportment, and verbal and physical mannerisms. By these means what is essentially a purely social construct of gender identity is made to seem utterly “real” and to reflect the divinely ordained natures of males and females.¹²¹

examination and constant confession under the direction of the model priest, whose archeological skills were needed to unearth sin” (*The Holy Household*, 65). See Flandrin, *Families in Former Times*, 198.

¹¹⁷ Dedekind’s work was followed by a German vernacular adaptation, a 1605 English translation, and Thomas Dekker’s *Guls Horne-booke*.

¹¹⁸ A palpable disgust for the body is a constant theme among evangelical Protestants. Cotton Mather, for example, thought he was no better than a dog because he urinated: “I was once emptying the *Cistern of Nature*, and making *Water* at the wall. At the same Time, there came a Dog, who did so too, before me. Thought I; ‘what mean, and vile Things, are the Children of Men, in this mortal State! How much do our natural Necessities abase us, and place us in the same regard, on the same Level with the very Dogs!’” Jonathan Edwards was equally appalled by his body: “The inside of the body of man is full of filthiness, contains his bowels that are full of dung, which represents the corruption and filthiness that the heart of man is naturally full of” (Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, 67).

¹¹⁹ Correll, *The End of Conduct*, 19–20: “In the sex/gender system of the early modern period, the civil subject must assert supreme identity by containment and erasure of whatever in the cultural semiotic scheme is identified as the feminine—a project remarkable in both its futility and its historical efficacy.”

¹²⁰ Horowitz, “Aristotle and Women.” McLaughlin, “Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes.”

¹²¹ Bourdieu, “Structures and the Habitus.”

Scholars have pointed out how essentially repulsive Grobian literature is when it comes to sex. According to Barbara Könniker grobian sex is “dirty,” “unappetizing,” and “fecal/scatological.” While it is disgusting, it is not pornographic.¹²² Inasmuch as sex is associated with women, in addition to being dangerous sexual predators, women are equally dirty and unappetizing. Grobian literature was written for men, and even though reference is made to a female Grobiana, she is in an entirely different category. Grobianus is not by nature a boor; he is only a boor because he chooses to succumb to female influence. Grobiana, however, is what she is because she is female and can be nothing else. As Correll comments, “presumably you can take the Grobiana out of Grobianus and produce the civil subject that is, in fact, the project of the civilizing process . . . but . . . you cannot take the Grobiana out of Grobiana.”¹²³ The upshot is that in the case of women shame and self-discipline are not enough by themselves to civilize them; they must also be sequestered and excluded from the public realm for their own good, but especially for the good of men.¹²⁴

Conclusion

Throughout history women have always been vulnerable scapegoats during periods of social and political unrest. From the time of the elder Cato, who blamed the decline of the Roman Republic on the lasciviousness and greed of Roman women, to present-day conservative religious movements, women have been cast in the role of human barometers registering the moral climate of nations. For men, chaste, silent, and obedient women are synonymous with a strong, well-ordered state. Hence the Anabaptists at Munster proclaimed the death penalty for wives who were insubordinate to their husbands.¹²⁵

This was one of the admittedly more extreme solutions to the very real problems in the early modern period. Warfare, religious conflict,

¹²² See her introduction to Dedekind, *Grobianus*, xv.

¹²³ Correll, *The End of Conduct*, 130.

¹²⁴ Eby, *Early Protestant Educators*, 22–24. “School Ordinance from the Württemberg Church Ordinance, 1559”: “And inasmuch as in some German schools not only the boys, but also the little girls are sent tot school, we determine that in such schools the children be separated, the boys alone and the little girls also be separately placed and taught, and that the schoolmaster by no means allow them to run back and forth among each other, or to have any disorderly relations with each other or to slip together.”

¹²⁵ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 270.

social unrest, and the explosion of new information undermined established authority in the political, social, and cultural realms and contributed to the growth of skepticism. A new system of order was desperately needed, and in major respects it was built on the backs of women, especially witches. Broedel claims, and I entirely agree, that what demonologists like Institoris and Sprenger were essentially doing was offering their contemporaries a new conceptual framework with which to view the world, an ordering system, so to speak, which explained evil in terms of female sexual sins and attributed social disorder to disorderly women.

Institoris and Sprenger defined witchcraft so as to localize the responsibility for sexual sin in the bodies of particular women, bodies which could be discovered, punished, and burned. Further, by the very act of categorization order *was* imposed: through the creation of an ordered semantic and intellectual system, Institoris and Sprenger provided the necessary terms of a satisfactory symbolic discussion of human sexuality, order, and power. In this new conceptual field, disordered sexuality is identified with the devil, inverted gender roles and sexual dysfunction with witchcraft, and defective social and political hierarchies with women and women's sins. None of this, however, is possible without the use of witches and witchcraft as an ordering term; witchcraft, as it were, provides the conceptual grid which binds this cognitive map together.¹²⁶

If we take Broedel's notion of witchcraft as an "ordering system" and combine it with Stephens' claim that demonologists provided anxious early modern males with a "new theodicy," we can see that the witch hunts of the early modern period were not aberrations in an otherwise progressive age, but an essential element in the creation of a new epistemology and ontology predicated on increasingly exaggerated gender stereotypes of all-powerful males and powerless females. This male/female dichotomy, however, did not fit the facts. As mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, and friends, women have always had power. But the more strenuously that power was denied, the more threatening it became. In a spectacular return of the repressed, the fearsome, phallic figure of the witch emerged almost fully formed from the fervid imaginations of Institoris and Sprenger.

Foucault's idea that power is diffused throughout the social system and not simply exercised from the top down is useful here because it recognizes that subordinated groups, in this case women, can and do

¹²⁶ Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 179.

exert power. For Foucault power is always bound up with resistance. But what is so interesting in the case of the witch hunts is that demonologists and witch hunters were the ones to resist, yet they were also the ones in power. Witches had no power to resist. They could not defend themselves. They could not even transgress for the simple reason that their transgressions were figments of the imaginations of their male creators, who, for reasons I have tried to document, had an unprecedented fear and dread of female power. The fear of women that created the modern stereotype of the witch did not, however, disappear with the end of the witch hunts. It continued to haunt the western male imagination well into the nineteenth century and even in some quarters until today.¹²⁷ But that is a subject for another article.

The early modern period was characterized by a turn toward the literal and a distrust of metaphor and the imagination. There was an increasing tendency to see things in black and white, to emphasize difference rather than similarities, and to organize thought in terms of inviolable dichotomies. The figure of the witch was symptomatic of the increasing intellectual rigidity that produced new gender stereotypes based on an unprecedented dichotomy between the sexes. The essentialist stereotypes that emerged represented one attempt to restore order and certainty to a world racked by skepticism, confusion, inconsistency, and hypocrisy. But at the root of the new ideology of gender was a new worldview in which God and man, spirit and matter, reason and emotion, culture and nature, public and private, work and family, and church and state were polarized as they had never been before.

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¹²⁷ For example, the television evangelist Pat Robertson attacked feminists and the Equal Rights Amendment as evidence that liberal women were set on practicing witchcraft and murdering their husbands and babies.

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SENSUOUS RELATION WITH SOPHIA IN CHRISTIAN THEOSOPHY

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The biblical texts which mention Sophia, “the Divine Wisdom” (*hokmá* in Hebrew, *sapientia* in Latin),¹ have been the object of many commentaries throughout the history of Christianity.² Her ontological status is one of the most debated issues in the history of sophiology. Two interpretations have been, and still are, particularly prominent. The first one considers her as a “personification,” that is, just an aspect or even a mere metaphor of Christ or of the Holy Spirit (an interpretation fostered by the use of the very term “Divine Wisdom”); whereas, according to the other, she is a “real Person,” alongside the Trinity, albeit not a/the fourth Person.³ For people of the second persuasion, she may easily become someone with whom, by definition as it were, a personal relationship is possible. And this relationship has proved in some cases to take on the form of an amorous, even intimate⁴ rapport, as documented notably in the literature of the Christian current called Theosophy.

Indeed, one of the most cherished themes in theosophical literature⁵ is Sophia. Although Christian Theosophy clearly emerged at the beginning of the seventeenth century with Jacob Boehme (1575–1624),

¹ Particularly Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Baruch, Sirach and Wisdom. See discussion in Lang, “Wisdom,” who argues that although she has often been treated as a literary personification, originally she was probably a real goddess.

² For an overview, see Schipflinger, *Sophia-Maria*.

³ Several biblical passages would seem to present Sophia as a “real person.” She claims she was “created”: “The Lord created me the beginning of his works, before all else that he made, long ago. Alone, I was fashioned in times long past, at the beginning, long before earth itself. When there was yet no ocean I was born” (*Proverbs* 8:22–24, according to the *New English Bible*). She also says that “the man who rises early in search of her will not grow weary in the quest, for he will find her seated at his door” (*Wisdom of Solomon* 6:14).

⁴ A number of passages in the biblical texts dealing with Sophia were of a nature to foster such a kind of interpretation. For example: “Wisdom I loved; I sought her out when I was young and longed to win her for my bride, and I fell in love with her beauty” (*Wisdom of Solomon* 8:2).

⁵ For an overview of the theosophical current, see Faivre, “The Theosophical Current,” and “Christian Theosophy”; and Versluis *Theosophia* and *Wisdom’s Book*.

an important predecessor in the preceding decades was the German physician and alchemist Heinrich Khunrath (1560–1605), best known today as the author of *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*, written in Latin. That book originally appeared in 1595, but the second and considerably enlarged edition (1609) has greatly contributed to its fame.⁶ For the most part devoted to an extensive commentary on the sapiential texts of the Bible, it is also replete with many alchemical, neo-paracelsian discussions, and the twelve complex illustrated plates which adorn it were to become even more famous than the text itself. Khunrath took Sophia to be a real person but did not claim to have been in “sensuous” contact with her.⁷ However, it is probably the *Amphitheatrum* that sparked off the strong interest in the Divine Wisdom over the three following centuries, beginning with Boehme’s sophiology.

Boehme’s visions and speculations bear mostly on Sophia’s ontological and cosmological role, but he also strongly emphasized the notion of “God’s corporeality.” Besides, his works are not devoid of some passages that might signal an occasional intimate relationship with her. For example, he writes that she addressed him as her bridegroom: “O my fiancé/how good I feel in being married with you/do kiss me with your desire/that I may show you all my beauty.”⁸ Nevertheless, sensuous though this may sound, it is intended in a mostly “interior” way; indeed, a little further she adds: “I will have my dwelling within thy innermost/and be your dear faithful bride/I do not marry your terrestrial flesh/because I am a queen of the heavens/And my kingdom is not of this world.”⁹

Some later theosophers, while endorsing Boehme’s views in the main and maintaining the necessity of an “interiorisation” of Sophia within

⁶ For a bio-bibliography of Khunrath, see Telle, “Khunrath, Heinrich.”

⁷ Sensuous evocations are not absent from Khunrath’s text for all that. See for example in Appendix I how he commented upon *Wisdom of Solomon* 8:2 (quoted above, note 3). But the expressions he uses there, which also bear the mark of *The Song of Songs*, may be interpreted metaphorically as well. Let us note in passing that *Wisdom of Solomon*, although absent from the German translation by Luther, was not ignored, present as it was in other translations. Khunrath devoted long commentaries to it in his *Amphitheatrum*.

⁸ “O mein Bräutigam/wie ist mir so wohl in deiner Ehe/küsse mich doch mit deiner Begierde/in deiner Stärke und Macht/so will ich dir alle meine Schöne zeigen” (Böhme, *Der Weg zu Christo*, 31).

⁹ “Ich will mit dem Perlein im inneren Chor wohnen/und deine getreue liebe Braut seyn: In dein irdisch Fleisch vermähle ich mich nicht/dan ich bin eine Königin der Himmeln/und mein Reich ist nicht von dieser Welt” (Böhme, *Der Weg zu Christo*, 33).

our soul, insisted on the possibility of establishing a kind of physical rapport with Sophia. The fact that this occasionally took on an erotic character constitutes one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the relations between eroticism and esotericism. This chapter discusses some examples of that particular trend as represented by Christian theosophers—a trend which does not seem to have reached fruition until the second half of the seventeenth century, notably with Johann Georg Gichtel.

Johann Georg Gichtel, the Theosopher of Amsterdam (1738–1710)

After unsuccessful efforts to found an evangelical missionary society in his city of Ratisbon, where he had some problems with the clerical authorities, Gichtel came to live in Amsterdam in 1668 and was to remain there for the rest of his life. He made his mark in Christian Theosophy for two main reasons: he was the first editor of Boehme's "complete works" in 1682; and he wrote 838 letters which were edited in six volumes by his disciple Johann Wilhelm Überfeld under the title *Theosophia Practica*¹⁰ (plus a seventh volume which contains his biography by Überfeld). On the ontological level, most of his ideas about Sophia as developed in *Theosophia Practica* are congenial to those of Boehme,¹¹ of whom he nonetheless does not appear to be a mere epigone.¹² In a letter of 1701 he explained to a correspondent, in a very boehmian manner, what Sophia was supposed to be, namely "the mirror of Eternity in which the Spirit has seen from Eternity all his works in Fire and

¹⁰ The edition of *Theosophia Practica* (henceforth referred to here as *Th. P.*) referred to in this chapter is that of 1722, the third one. The pagination is continuous throughout the first six volumes; therefore, I indicate only the page numbers and the date of the letter, not the number of the volumes, except for vol. 7, which has a new pagination. For good overviews on Gichtel, see Gorceix, *Johann Georg Gichtel*; Versluis, *Wisdom's Children*, 29–38 (chapter "Johann Georg Gichtel and His Circle"); Versluis, *Wisdom's Book*, 129–139 (with a selection of texts); Versluis, "Gichtel, Johann Georg." On Gichtel's bibliography, see in particular Gorceix, *o.c.*, 32–39, 149.

¹¹ See Gorceix, *Johann Georg Gichtel*, 85–88, 127–132. Gorceix and Versluis have only provided few references on the erotic aspect of Sophia in the writings of the theosopher of Amsterdam, but the present chapter adduces more examples of this kind. The quotations from *Th. P.* given in this article are not, unless specified and/or with few exceptions, given by Gorceix nor Versluis who, obviously, were not prone to focus on this "erotic" aspect.

¹² Following this article are a series of short translations of relevant materials, labeled *Sophiana*. See *Sophiana II*, as an example of how Gichtel occasionally makes his stand.

Light,” she has the brilliance of a burning candle and is the celestial substantiality (*Wesenheit*), the very corporality of Jesus, of his flesh and blood which he brought from Heaven and infused into Maria. In this respect, the Lutheran Gichtel held that the “papists,” in particular the monks living in cloisters who worship the Virgin Maria, had not found “the right foundation,” that is, Sophia, whom he considered the more important of the two female figures because it was she who “opened herself into Maria’s virginal tincture.”¹³ Her presence permeated and pervaded the created world (the skies, the plants and flowers, the metals, etc.).¹⁴

According to Gichtel, when Moses says in Genesis that Adam and Eve were blessed, and that the animals were presented to them so that they could be given names (Genesis 1:28), it is not Eve proper who is meant, but in reality the celestial virgin Sophia who dwelt in Adam and whom we, poor children of that same Eve, have unfortunately lost.¹⁵ Although one of the consequences of the Fall is the existence of the phallus—“an instrument of Venus, not of Sophia”¹⁶—Sophia’s own aspect is that of a human creature; her members are similar to ours, albeit not of an animal kind.¹⁷ She has been Moses’ mouthpiece and was “rekindled”, that is to say, married again, to humanity and called upon to become the new spiritual body of a newborn Christ. What a wife is to her husband, she can be to our souls.

In accordance with Proverbs 8:27–31, Gichtel stresses her “playful” aspect. This biblical passage teaches that she “played” with God,¹⁸ but Gichtel claims she also played with Adam. To the present day she still

¹³ See *Sophiana III*.

¹⁴ See *Sophiana IV*.

¹⁵ “Und ob schon Moses in der mehrern Zahl schreibt: Gott segnete sie, so ist solches nicht von Eva, sondern von Sophia zu verstehen, welche aus dem Seelen-Feuer leuchtet” (*Th. P.*, 299–300, 20 August 1697). Similarly, Gichtel also wrote that when God said it was not good for Adam to remain alone, He actually meant that the Celestial Wisdom should dwell in him (*Th. P.*, 1047, 10 January 1699).

¹⁶ “Nun ist das männliche Glied ein Instrumentum Veneris & non Sophiae, und wird Hebräisch Jarech genennet, welches auch Lenden oder Hüft heisset, weil die Venae spermaticae auf der Hüft liegen” (*Th. P.*, 301, 20 August 1797).

¹⁷ “Ihre Gestalt ist eine menschliche Creatur von solchen Gliedern als wir Menschen, aber ohne thierische Glieder” (*Th. P.*, 1800, 5 November 1709).

¹⁸ “When [the Lord] set the heavens in their place I was there [...], I was at his side each day, his darling and delight, playing in his presence continually, playing on the earth, when he had finished it, while my delight was in mankind” (Proverbs 8: 27–31).

longs to be our playmate.¹⁹ This playfulness is depicted in Gichtel's letters in such a way that it often takes on an erotic character, linked by the author to the notion of creative "imagination." He claims that the latter can function within ourselves if we possess a heart filled with "desire."²⁰ It is a matter of "focusing our imagination on her," while surrendering ourselves to her with our body, soul, and spirit.²¹ When all the doors are closed by the "locks of darkness," we have an efficient weapon against the spiritual and practical hardships of our life by using our "strong Imagination," and then we will experience in what a friendly way she will take "her man, whom she had lost in Adam" in her arms and kiss him. If the Imagination is properly Love-oriented, a flash of lightning will burst forth within our soul, which in turn will engender a light spreading over our senses.²² Gichtel compares this process with the *magia* operated by a magnet, and with what happens in ordinary life when one falls in love.²³ He occasionally describes the process as a tense expectation ending up in a kind of orgasmic pleasure (clearly modelled on Boehme's concept of the "flash of lightning" that appears from the struggle of dark opposing qualities as part of the cosmogonic "birth of God").²⁴ Then, once united with Sophia, man retrieves his prelapsarian state and enters a Paradise in which he enjoys his five senses in a most extraordinary, albeit "interior" way; he tastes, feels,

¹⁹ Überfeld writes that Adam would play with her amidst the divine wonders which were hers ("Adam [spielte] mit seiner Jungfrauen in ihren Gottes-Wundern," *Th. P.*, vol. VII, 148). And Gichtel says about himself: "ich spielte lange Jahren allein mit der Göttlichen Weissheit, was ich empfunden, kan ich nicht schreiben; es öffnete sich aber ein Spiegel nach dem andern, dass ich mit allem Gefundenen nicht vergnüget, ich wolts auch gern allen Menschen gegönnet haben" (*Th. P.*, 908, 11 June 1698; see also in *Sophiana IX*: "Was er nun bei solcher Vermählung und Hochzeit empfunden, wünschte er auch anderen Seelen zu geniessen, weil es ihm an Worten ermangelte").

²⁰ "Imagination und Begierde des Herzens [sind] erfordert" (*Th. P.*, 2756, 1 September 1699).

²¹ "setzet im Gebät eure Imagination in Sie, als in eure Haus-Frau, und ergebt euch in ihr Liebe-Regiment mit Leib, Seele und Geist" (*Th. P.*, 3635, 4 May 1708).

²² See *Sophiana V*. This image of a flash of lightning giving birth to the light is to be found already in Boehme, who described that "flash" ("Blitz") as the "fourth quality" ("Qualität") which results from the first two opposite "qualities" struggling with one another in the dark "Angstkammer" of the third quality—a struggle which is part of the cosmogonic process of the "birth of God." This mythemic element was to be felicitously taken up again by Franz von Baader (see his influential essay *Über den Blitz als Vater des Lichts*).

²³ See for example *Sophiana VI*.

²⁴ See for example *Sophiana VII*.

smells, sees, and hears Sophia even better than a husband does with his cherished wife.²⁵

Several passages in *Theosophia Practica* purport to substantiate these views through a narrative of personal experiences. Indeed, his friend and disciple Überfeld informs us that in 1673, on Christmas day, Gichtel, who was praying intently, found himself surrounded by a dark cloud which transformed itself into a white one within which Sophia appeared to him in person “in the form of a virgin.” She embraced the fire of his soul and “married him.” No spouse, we are told, would be able to “play” with her husband in such a lovable way as Sophia did with Gichtel’s soul. The sweetness was ineffable, but Gichtel made a point of remaining rather discreet as to some further details: it is not appropriate, he writes, to discuss what happens in the marriage bed. We are told, though, that Sophia spoke to him “from mouth to mouth,” promised him conjugal faithfulness as well as perpetual help in all the hardships that might befall him, and claimed she would bring a spiritual seed into him. Henceforth, “everything he had refrained from accepting from rich women she would replace.”²⁶ Her language was “interior,” without any “exterior” words. It had no sounds and could not be compared to any human tongue, but he was able to understand it as if it had been his mother’s tongue.²⁷ Although the wedding proper ended around the beginning of 1674,²⁸ they were never to be separated from one another again. Up to this point, the descriptions of Gichtel’s relationship with Sophia have been taken from Überfeld’s statements, but in at least two of his own letters, one from 1698 and the other from 1709, Gichtel had already given a very similar, albeit less detailed, account of the experience.²⁹ He writes that it lasted for

²⁵ See Sophiana VIII.

²⁶ See Sophiana IX. The idea of Sophia and Gichtel happily living under the same roof, as it were, is reminiscent of the passage in *Wisdom of Solomon* (8:16): “When I come home, I shall find rest with her; for there is no bitterness in her company, no pain in life with her, only gladness and joy.”

²⁷ “Der Weisheit inwendige Sprache war ohne äusserliches Wort, ohne Klang, ohne Thon; sie war auch keiner menschlichen Sprache gleich, und dennoch verstund er sie so wol als seine Mutter-Sprache” (*Th. P.*, vol. VII, Gichtel’s biography by Überfeld, 146).

²⁸ “Und währte diese Hochzeit bis zu Anfang des 1674ten Jahrs” (*Th. P.*, vol. VII, Gichtel’s biography by Überfeld, 144).

²⁹ See Sophiana X. For additional and chronological information on the successive apparitions of Sophia to Gichtel, see some of the texts presented by Versluis in *Sophia’s Wisdom*, 138–139 (a testimony by an anonymous author), and 130–132.

many years, during which he “played alone” with her, regretting that he could not share his happiness with other humans.³⁰

The fact that Sophia remained, Gichtel claimed, lavishing him in kisses and blessings ever since the experience of 1673/1674, induced him to speak of her to his correspondents in a style and with a vocabulary that, as already noted, resonate with sensuality.³¹ He assures us that her feelings toward humans are stronger than those of a fiancée toward her affianced: she is in love with “the Fire of our soul,” so much so that she suffers from not being loved enough.³² Indeed, so strong is her desire “to see the fiancé again, whom she lost with Adam,”³³ that she “runs towards us, with fire in her eyes, in her heart, in her arms, out of breath.”³⁴ She is even closer to a man than his wife,³⁵ and so attractive that she has many suitors. Alas, few among them are capable of seeking to share with her more than voluptuous pleasure, few are desirous to satisfy her burning desire to make them pregnant, thus “begetting” (*ausgebären*) the “children of love.”³⁶

“Begetting”? As a matter of fact, just as the conjunction of a man and a woman is necessary for a child to be born, likewise, without Sophia and/or Christ we engender nothing. Here, man is assigned

³⁰ *Th. P.*, 908, 11 June 1698 (see quotation above, n. 19).

³¹ For example: “Sie nimmt keine irdische Begierde in sich ein, lässt sich auch von keinem Grimmigen-Geist bezwingen; der aber demütig von Herzen ist, [...] den umarmet und küsst sie, und führt ihn in ihre Braut-Kammer zur Schaulichkeit” (*Th. P.*, 2722, 25 August 1699).

³² “Ich kan euch in Wahrheit schreiben und bezeugen, dass unsere himmlische Jungfrau weit inbrünstiger in unser Seelen-Feuer verliebt ist, als eine verliebte Braut in ihren Bräutigam, und schmerzet sie höchstens, dass wir ihre Liebe so geringe achten, und uns mehr als sie lieben” (*Th. P.*, 1221, s.d.).

³³ “Die Jungfrau GOTTes arbeitet in der Seelen, wieder ihren Bräutigam, den Sie in Adam verloren zu erblicken; darum wil Sie uns gantz in ihre Arme haben und eifert über unsere irdische Buhlerey” (*Th. P.*, 2040, 14 July 1699). See also, for example, *Th. P.*, 3024, 11 August 1699.

³⁴ “Sie läuft uns, ob wir schon noch ferne sind, mit feurigen Augen, Hertzen und Armen entgegen, und küsst unser Gemüt und Feuer-Grund” (*Th. P.*, 2614, 17 May 1701).

³⁵ “[Sophia] ist unserem Gemüte weit, weit familiärer, als Mann und Weib seyn können” (*Th. P.*, 2034, 11 July 1699).

³⁶ “Denn die Jungfrau viel Buhler, aber wenig ernsthafte Werber hat. Die meisten meinen nur mit Ihr zu huren und in Wollust zu leben, nicht Kinder der Liebe mit Ihr auszugebären” (*Th. P.*, 2616, 7 May 1701). “Die Jungfrau ist in unsre Feuer-Seele feurig verliebt, und buhlet heftig drum, Sie will den H. Geist aus uns ausgebären” (*Th. P.*, 909–910, 11 June 1698). For further examples of the verb “ausgebären” (to beget) in that sense, see *Th. P.* 1047 (20 January 1699), 2025 (27 July 1699), and 2577 (1699, no exact date).

the function otherwise allotted to woman. Indeed, Gichtel tells his correspondents that they can feel it within themselves when Sophia has made them pregnant, followed by a period of labor which makes them suffer until the child, the “little boy,” is born;³⁷ but thereafter the joy is so great that it could not be put into words. Nevertheless, if Sophia plays here the role of the father and a man that of the mother, these roles are interchangeable as well, since she is also both fiancée and mother.³⁸ In terms of motherhood, Gichtel compared himself to a child quenching his thirst at the “sweet milk” of his mother’s (Sophia’s) breast.³⁹ Despite the “sweetness” of these descriptions, another aspect of Sophia is stressed too, that of a fiery fighter who, after giving milk to her lover, engages him into a common war against the Devil, also called the Dragon.⁴⁰

Understandably, the theosopher of Amsterdam was grateful to God for imparting to him these sublime mysteries and revelations, a blessing which persuaded him to never bind himself to any woman. He claimed that his choice for sexual abstinence proved all the less difficult to practice since Sophia gave him, as a gift, a “chaste complexion” which helped him protect himself from Venus.⁴¹ Furthermore, intercourse with Sophia provides him something that Venus could not possibly give, namely a special kind of knowledge (a “gnosis”). Überfeld writes that Gichtel “played with his Virgin [Sophia] in her God’s wonders,” thereby receiving the revelation of the “hidden secrets” related to the Fall of Adam, the new birth in Christ, and the fight of Michael against the Dragon.⁴² Gichtel himself claimed that her light opened up his

³⁷ “Die Zeichen werdet ihr innerlich wol empfinden ob ihr mit Sophia geschwängert seyd, und die grossen Gebuhrts-Schmerzen fühlet: Welche Wehen zwar oft ankommen; es ist aber die Gebuhrt oder Knäblein noch nicht reif genug” (*Th. P.*, 2616, 17 May 1701).

³⁸ This interchangeability is also documented in the theosopher Johann Jakob Wirz (1778–1858), a silk weaver from Basel: Sophia as mother can be spouse too, and a child can also be husband to his mother (Schipflinger, *Sophia-Maria*, 233).

³⁹ “[Sophia] gibt uns erst von ihrer lieben Mutter-Milch zu trinken, und machet unsere Seele feurig und inbrünstig” (*Th. P.*, 2615, 17 May 1701). And Überfeld wrote: “[Gichtel] genoss der süssen Liebes-Milch in lauter Freuden: Was er nun gebäthen; oft nur mit Einem Gedanken, das stund da” (*Th. P.*, vol. VII, Gichtel’s biography by Überfeld, 149).

⁴⁰ See for example: “Eben also gehet Sophia mit uns zu Werk; sie führet uns nicht gleich in den Krieg mit dem Teufel im Fleisch, sondern gibt uns erst von ihrer Mutter-Milch zu trinken, und machet unsere Seele feurig und inbrünstig” (*Th. P.*, 2615, 7 May 1701).

⁴¹ See Sophiana XI and also, for example, *Th. P.*, 2577 (1699, no exact date).

⁴² See Sophiana XII.

understanding of Heaven and Hell.⁴³ Such statements are the expression of a common *topos* in theosophical literature, namely the conjunction and/or identity of Love and Knowledge. Besides, the capacity of Sophia to reveal “hidden truths” about the universe is mentioned in the *Wisdom of Solomon*.⁴⁴

Although he praised the virtues of virginity, Gichtel did not reject marriage and contented himself with mentioning St. Paul’s position on this matter, namely, that it is better not to marry⁴⁵ (I *Cor.* 7, 9). But Überfeld also informs us that the theosopher of Amsterdam felt unhappy listening to some married men and women who told him about their spiritual life “with bloody tears in their eyes.” They confessed they were ashamed of what they did in bed, lamenting that sexual intercourse resulted in a loss of divine strength within them.⁴⁶ This is confirmed by the fact that a number of Gichtel’s followers, who went under the name of *Gichtelianer* (Gichtelians) or *Engelsbrüder* (Angelic Brethren, or Brethren of Angelic Life), were intent upon retrieving the state of virginal perfection lost by Adam. Überfeld was instrumental in the establishment of that community, which began to function in earnest in 1710. It did not count a great many members, but its long existence is documented in Central Europe well into the twentieth century.⁴⁷

In this connection, although Gichtel said (as noted above)⁴⁸ that he regretted that during his “honeymoon” with Sophia he could not share his happiness with other persons, he did in fact share it, perhaps as early as 1674. According to Überfeld he brought together a few people from various places in the Netherlands in order to establish some sort of a sophianic cult. Enthusiastic as they were over Sophia, they would become inebriated and dance and sing, intoxicated as if they had been drinking too much wine. Each of them were keen “to get a sweet kiss” from her. They “cried” because their thirst had not been quenched and

⁴³ “Sie öffneten auch den Verstand, dass man in der Tiefe beydes in Himmel und Hölle von ihr bestralet” (*Th. P.*, 1799, 5 November 1709).

⁴⁴ See for example the passage where the author of *Wisdom of Solomon* writes how he was granted “a knowledge of the structure of the world and the operation of the elements [...] the nature of living creatures [...]. I learnt it all, hidden or manifest, for I was taught by her whose skill made all things, wisdom” (*Wisdom of Solomon* 6:17–22).

⁴⁵ See for example *Th. P.*, 3644 (17 July, year unknown): “Wir verbieten die Ehe nicht, [...] und sagen mit Paulo, dass es besser sey, ledig zu bleiben, als zu ehlichen.”

⁴⁶ See *Sophiana XIII*.

⁴⁷ See for example Hutin, *Les disciples anglais*, 182 s, n. 26; and Gorceix, *Johann Georg Gichtel*, 28–29.

⁴⁸ See above, notes 19 and 30.

even tried “to rush into the bedroom of the bride.”⁴⁹ These fits of what looks like a collective trance are corroborated by some allusions made by Gichtel himself in his correspondence.⁵⁰

In closing, it would seem appropriate to mention another striking point about the sensuous aspect of Gichtel’s sophiology. Notwithstanding his frequent warning that the relationship with Divine Wisdom should not be too “terrestrial,” some very practical advantages are reported to have been gained through that companionship. To wit, she is reported to have been a house hunter, as it were, in the sense that she was materially and directly instrumental finding in Amsterdam some of the dwellings in which Gichtel successively lived. In particular, it was she who “procured” (*versorgete*) a house for him in May 1698 which suited him to perfection and where he was to spend the rest of his life.⁵¹ In a similar way, she is reported to have gone as far as to lend Überfeld a hand in his editorial task of editing Gichtel’s correspondence after the latter’s demise.⁵² Are we dealing here with an experiential way of literally interpreting the passage in *Wisdom of Solomon*, which reads: “the man who rises early in search of her will not grow weary in the quest, for he will find her seated at his door”?⁵³ However that may be, creative Imagination may work wonders, indeed!

Sensuous Aspects of Sophia in Some Other Theosophers

Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714), who exercised the pastoral ministry despite his aversion to all clergy (he believed the true Church to be the “inner Church”), is the celebrated author of *An Impartial History of Churches and Heresies*⁵⁴ and a contemporary of Gichtel. He found himself

⁴⁹ See *Sophiana* XIV.

⁵⁰ See *Sophiana* XV.

⁵¹ *Th. P.*, vol. 7, 144–145: In Amsterdam he was dissatisfied with his sixth dwelling, therefore “seine Gehülfin [Sophia] versorgete ihm das sibende und letzte Haus auf der Leydschen Graf: Zog darein primo Maji 1698, in welchem da sein Fuss wieder geruhet, bis er im zwölfen Jahr hernach GOtt seinen Geist gegeben, da die himmlische Jungfrau ihn in die ewigen Hütten eingeführet.”

⁵² Sophia acting as a secretary is described by Niklaus Anton Kirchberger. On this, see also further below, note 76.

⁵³ *Wisdom of Solomon* 6:14, already quoted above, note 3.

⁵⁴ Arnold, *Unpartheische Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie*. For an overview and bibliography on Arnold, see Deghaye, “Arnold, Gotfried”; Versluis, *Wisdom’s Book*, 107–128 (with a selection of texts).

in congenial company with the theosophical milieu, although he was himself more of a representative of the so-called “mystical theology”⁵⁵ than of Theosophy proper. His book on *The Mystery of the Divine Sophia or Wisdom*, published in 1700 in Leipzig, is one of the central works that have been devoted to Sophia.⁵⁶ Although he appears to have been preaching chastity and not marriage, he did marry in 1701, one year after the publication of his book. This decision may have been one of the reasons why Gichtel wrote in 1708 that Arnold “had not understood Sophia.”⁵⁷

Although Arnold did not claim that Sophia ever appeared to him, he is lavish in his descriptions of a sophianic wedding in terms of amorous experience, thereby drawing much upon the *Song of Songs*. We are informed by him that her kisses and sweet manifestations are likely to help us forget about looking for other human love relationships.⁵⁸ He tells us how, in a “cabinet of Love,” we can celebrate our wedding with that bride, who is also a mother.⁵⁹ The poems are replete with sensuous evocations. In one of them Sophia cries out:

I will surrender to you
To your kiss which is throughout virginal and pure
Noble fiancé, how well I feel in being married to you!
Yes, kiss me all over,
So that the fruit of marriage may rise;
When strength and sweetness
coalesce after the battle is won⁶⁰

⁵⁵ See his *Historie und Beschreibung der mystischen Theologie*.

⁵⁶ *Das Geheimnis der Göttlichen Sophia* contains a treatise of 191 pages. Then follow 351 pages of poetical texts in prose, or poems proper, plus an anthology on the same subject.

⁵⁷ “Herr Arnold hat sich zwar unterstanden, einen Tractat davon zu schreiben; weil er aber am ersten Adam blind war, hat er auch Sophiam nicht verstanden” (*Th. P.*, 3640, 4 May 1708).

⁵⁸ Already in the introduction of his book, §29, he writes: “Sie soll euch soviel mit lieben/mit umfassen mit ihren süßen ausgüssen zu thun geben/dass ihr frembder buhlschaft bald vergessen werdet.”

⁵⁹ “[Sie ist sowohl] eine jungfrau als ein bräutigam oder auch [...] eine mutter” (*Das Geheimnis*, 43).

⁶⁰ “ich will mich übergeben/Zu deinem kuss der gantz jungfräulich ist und rein,/Edler bräutigam wie ist mir/Doch so wol in deiner ehe!/Küsse mich doch für und für/Dass der Ehe frucht auffgehe:/Wenn sich stärk und sänfftigkeit/Menget nach besiegtm streit” (p. 103 of the part titled “Aus dem 1. Kapitel des Hohen-Lieds Salomonis,” in Arnold, *Das Geheimnis*).

Further on, the poet exclaims: “Hug me, and draw yourself into me/[...] My treasure, my light, my place, my whole myself, my sweet life/My heaven, paradise and play, my suitor...”⁶¹

At this juncture, a short foray into the English corpus of Theosophical literature may be welcome,⁶² more especially since Jane Leade (1623–1704) and John Pordage (1607/8–1681), who have a prominent place in the history of Theosophy, were to find a hearing in the pre-Romantic and Romantic periods, a time when the theosophical current enjoyed a second and final blossoming. Jane Leade was granted an apparition of the Divine Wisdom in April 1670, and this reoccurred several times subsequently. The first time Sophia appeared almost as she had

⁶¹ “Umfass und ziehe dich in mich [...] Mein schatz, mein licht, mein auffenthalt, mein gantztes ich, mein süsses leben/Mein himmel, mein Paradies, und spiel, mein Buhler” (Arnold, *Das Geheimnis*, 117). Many other examples could be adduced, notably in some passages in prose, when he writes, for example: “In ihrer gantzen Beywohnung ist reine wollust. Nimmermehr kan eine irdische braut einem manne geschmücker/keuscher/züchtiger und anmuthiger vorkommen/als diese hochgelobte jungfrau. Ja es ist nicht die geringste Vergleichung zwischen beyden in diesem falle. Es ist auch nur ein Schatte/was einer sonst davon sagen kann/und was etwa nach dem Hohenliede [...] in einigen poetischen gedanken eröffnet” (Arnold, *Das Geheimnis*, 113). (“In her own vicinity is pure delight. Never will a man receive an earthly bride more tasteful, chaster, more modest, and lovelier (more graceful) than this highly praised virgin. Indeed, there is not the slightest comparison between them in this case. It is also only a shadow of what one otherwise can say, and of what the Song of Solomon reveals in poetic thought.” Translation, Versluis, *Wisdom’s Book*, 122). Among similar passages, see Arnold, *Das Geheimnis*, 119 (and the English translation, Versluis, *Wisdom’s Book*, 126).

⁶² Dealing with the influence of Boehme in the English literature of the seventeenth century, Wilhelm Struck had already noted the presence of a “sensory mysticism” (*Gefühlsmystik*) that led the theosophers in the wake of Boehme into “the realm of the erotic” (Struck, *Der Einfluss J. Boehmes*, 137–139. Quoted by Gibbons, *Gender*, 18). Additionally, Willy Temme has described how the idea of the divine Sophia in Böhme’s work was transformed through its English reception in John Pordage and Jane Leade. He has argued that in Leade particularly, Sophia assumed dynamic new associations with mother, womb, rebirth, thus taking on a less metaphysical, more and more embodied sense, which was transmitted to the radical Pietists in Germany, notably Eva von Buttlar (1670–1721). Around 1700, Eva founded in Allendorf an der Werra the Christian and Philadelphian Society, aimed—among other things—at fostering the restoration of the original androgyny of mankind. It counted about seventy members; she claimed that two of them were among the three earthly representatives of the Trinity: Justus Gottfried Winter and Johann Georg Appenfeller as respectively God the Father, and the Son—and she, who was Sophia herself, and/or the second Eve (as Jesus Himself was the second Adam). The fact that a physical union with “Mother Eva” (Eva von Buttlar) was supposed to be part of the practices of the Society brought it into disrepute among several pietist movements of the time (Temme, *Krise der Leiblichkeit*; for Eva’s views concerning Sophia as compared to those of Leade, Pordage, Gichtel and Johann Willhelm Petersen, see sub-chapter “Der Kontext: Sophia und Eva”, 311–335).

to Gichtel, “in the midst of a most bright cloud.” At first she did not become Jane’s bride but promised to become her “natural mother”:

Behold! I am God’s Eternal Virgin *Wisdom*, whom thou hast been enquiring after: I am to unseal the treasures of God’s deep Wisdom unto thee, and will be, as Rebecca was to Jacob, a true natural mother; for out of my womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a spirit, being conceived and born again.⁶³

But she was called upon to become Jane’s bride as well:

[Having seen] the lustrous Presentation of her perfect Comeliness and Beauty into one Spirit I was all inflamed, making complaint, bemoaning our selves, how we might possibly compass the obtaining this matchless Virgin-Dove for our Spouse and Bride, who with her piercing fiery Arrow of Love, had us wounded so deep, as no Cure throughout the Circumference of this lower Sphere could be found.⁶⁴

And Jane seems to have indulged in some sort of a sensual fantasy when she wrote, for example, how she grasped “with love-violence, this my fair, wise, rich and noble Bride [Wisdom].”⁶⁵ Sophia likewise appeared to John Pordage, the greatest representative of the theosophical current in England, who devoted a whole book to Sophia (interestingly, his *Sophia* was published in 1699 in Amsterdam). He too stressed the nuptial character that her relationship with the Son, the Holy Spirit, and humans takes on.⁶⁶

A flurry of debates over Sophia took place at the end of the eighteenth century, notably between the French Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (the “Unknown Philosopher,” 1743–1803) of Paris, the German Karl von Eckartshausen (1752–1803) of Munich, and the French and German speaking Niklaus Anton Kirchberger (1739–1799)—a Swiss from Bern who enthused over Boehme and Gichtel. In his correspondence with Karl von Eckartshausen (in German) and Saint-Martin (in French), Kirchberger tried to make a distinction between two different, albeit

⁶³ Leade, *The Laws of Paradise*, Preface, quoted from Versluis, *Wisdom’s Book*, 143 (for a full description of the apparition, see 143–144; a French version of the latter is in Hutin, *Les disciples*, 267–268.). On Jane Leade, see notably Versluis, *Wisdom’s Children*, 57–77 (chapter “Jane Leade, the Philadelphians, and the Doctrine of Universal Restoration”); *Wisdom’s Book*, 141–148 (with a selection of texts); and his article “Leade, Jane.”

⁶⁴ Leade, *The Wonders*, vol. 22, 106. Also quoted by Gibbons, *Gender*, 145.

⁶⁵ Leade, *The Fountains of Gardens*, 37–38. Also quoted by Gibbons, *Gender*, 149.

⁶⁶ For an overview on Pordage, see Versluis, “Pordage, John”; *Wisdom’s Children*, 39–56 (chapter “The Visionary Science of Dr. John Pordage”); *Wisdom’s Book*, 75–106 (with a selection of texts by Pordage); and Hutin, *Les disciples*, Chapter IV.

not incompatible procedures as he saw them. Either we let Sophia's presence manifest itself in a way that is purely "interior" (within our soul only), or we experience her in a way that is "exterior"—in which case our senses (and by the same token, occasional forms of erotic sensuality) concretely come into play.

When writing to Eckartshausen about Sophia, Kirchberger occasionally dwelt on the "exterior" aspect. He mentioned, for example, the "great magical law" according to which "desire," along with "imagination," engender "substance."⁶⁷ Indeed, Sophia herself endeavors to establish an exterior—physical—rapport with us, to the point of letting herself be "embraced"—hugged. Bearing in mind the testimonies he had read in Gichtel's *Theosophia Practica* and in Jane Leade's works—about whom Eckartshausen and Kirchberger also exchanged ideas—he wrote to his correspondent in Munich: "Have no doubt about her manifestations [...]. On this matter, documents are extant upon which no impartial seeker may cast doubt." When our creative (magical) Imagination is active, he added, Sophia sometimes lets her rays of love fall upon us and she may eventually unveil herself entirely, so much so that her suitors can contemplate her face to face in her glorious splendor.⁶⁸ But in the same exchange with Eckartshausen he insisted upon the necessity of first seeking Sophia "internally" because, he said, failing to do so would make a marriage with her impossible.⁶⁹

Be that as it may, Eckartshausen was not prone to dwell on the subject for a very long time. The reason was that he preferred to identify Divine Wisdom with Christ,⁷⁰ thereby aligning himself with the former of the two options presented in the introduction of this chapter. Kirchberger's conversation with Saint-Martin had more potential, since for him she was a real person, and one very dear to his heart as well. In his works, Saint-Martin had already devoted many passages to Sophia—in fact, she was one of his most cherished themes.⁷¹ Several letters exchanged

⁶⁷ "Es existiert mein theurer Freund, ein grosses magisches Gesetz, das Dispositif davon heist, Begehren, Lust und imagination machen Substanz und Wesenheit, jedes eifrige Begehren nach ihr [Sophia], komt von ihr her" (Kirchberger to Eckartshausen, 7 November 1797, in *Briefwechsel*, 316).

⁶⁸ See *Sophiana XVI*.

⁶⁹ "Sophia, ihre Hand, ihre Ehlichung, ihre Leitung, die Mittheilung ihrer Weisheit, ihren Schutz, ihre Einführung in die pneumatische Welt, sind die gesegneten Folgen davon" (Kirchberger to Eckartshausen, 7 November 1797, in *Briefwechsel*, 313).

⁷⁰ On this matter, see Faivre, *Eckartshausen*, 317–318.

⁷¹ For a good overview, see Jacques-Chaquin, "Sophia."

between Saint-Martin and Kirchberger bear on Jane Leade and John Pordage and show how successfully the Swiss prompted his French correspondent to read some works written by these English theosophers. Kirchberger also sang the praises to Saint-Martin of Arnold's *Mystery of the Divine Sophia*, although he added that the Divine Wisdom did not appear to Arnold as tangibly as to Gichtel. In Arnold's book he appreciated both the aspects—"interior" and "exterior"—of sophianic manifestations.⁷² Furthermore, in a long letter Kirchberger sent a detailed account of the "personal" relation between Sophia and Gichtel. This report is based upon his reading of *Theosophia Practica* and does not omit the most sensuous passages of that book. He had no doubt about the authenticity of these narratives.⁷³ Saint-Martin lent an attentive ear to the lavish descriptions offered by the Swiss. He responded that he felt "enraptured" by the details, going as far as to write: "Everything here bears the stamp of truth."⁷⁴

In addition, Saint-Martin revealed to his correspondent that in respect to celibacy, his own story was similar to Gichtel's. He believed that he too had known Gichtel's bride, although "not as particularly as that theosopher [Gichtel] did."⁷⁵ Indeed, Saint-Martin's letters are lacking almost completely in "sensuous" elements. That did not deter Kirchberger, however, from insisting on the sophianic "exterior" manifestations. In particular, he mentioned Sophia's editorial competence, broadcasting the story that she came to dwell in Überfeld's house with a view to help him order and supervise the arrangement of Gichtel's posthumous letters. During these visits, the Swiss explained, she busied

⁷² Kirchberger to Saint-Martin, 25 July 1792, in *Correspondance* (2004), 25–26. The original letters of the correspondence are lost, but several handwritten copies, made in the first half of the nineteenth century, are preserved in libraries of Bern, Lausanne and Grenoble. A transcription of the 1862 edition is now available at: http://www.philosophie-inconnu.com/nouveautes_present.htm, with modernized spelling and some editorial improvements. This online resource is cited hereafter as *Correspondance* (2004). Its editor, Dominique Clairembault, is preparing a new edition based upon these copies.

⁷³ Kirchberger to Saint-Martin, 25 October 1794, in *Correspondance* (2004), 186ff. Kirchberger's report, albeit written in a somewhat flamboyant style, does not distort the contents of the descriptions given by Überfeld and Gichtel.

⁷⁴ "J'ai lu avec ravissement les nouveaux détails que vous m'envoyez sur le general [a title that the two theosophers had decided to bestow on Gichtel]. Tout y porte le cachet de la vérité" (Saint-Martin to Kirchberger, 19 November 1794, in *Correspondance* [2004], 195).

⁷⁵ See Sophiana XVI; it is in the same letter that he gives a narrative of the spiritual experience which induced him to remain a bachelor.

herself with renovating several passages which were unclear for a period of about six weeks during which “a continuous feast” also was on the agenda. Therefore she was, or so Kirchberger argued after Überfeld, in great measure responsible for the good quality of the edition of *Theosophia practica*.⁷⁶

Sensuous love between Sophia and theosophers does not seem to be much documented after the end of the eighteenth century, with one notable exception: Sophia occupies a pre-eminent place in Franz von Baader (1765–1841), the most outstanding theosopher in the first half of the nineteenth century. He considered the exercise of our creative, “magical” Imagination as highly instrumental in preparing the “dress of our bride” (*Brautkleid*)—that is, of the Divine Wisdom—with a view to make her habitation within us possible. But he did not hold that she tends toward a form of actual incarnation.⁷⁷ The sensuous aspect of companionship with Sophia seems to be totally absent from his thought and writings.

Concluding Remarks

When Divine Wisdom is considered as a real person, sophianic devotion appears as a mode of spirituality in which the notions of theosophy and mysticism *stricto sensu* (mysticism understood as an experience of union between God and a human being) tend to overlap, in so far as in both cases we are dealing with two entities, divine and human. Moreover, the term *Brautmystik*, or “bridal mysticism,” in common use within the context of mysticism proper, may apply to both, particularly in view of the feminine word *Braut* (fiancée)—regardless whether the subject of the experience is male or female, since in such forms of intercourse the order of the genders is easily inverted.

⁷⁶ See Sophiana XVIII. Of this information (mentioned above, note 52) given by Kirchberger to Saint-Martin on 10 March 1795 (in *Correspondance* [2004], 208) I have found no trace in *Th. P.* (i.e., neither in Gichtel’s letters, nor in vol. 7, Gichtel’s biography by Überfeld; but the relevant passage may simply have passed me by. For further discussions of the exchange between Kirchberger and Saint-Martin on sophiology in general, see Faivre, *Kirchberger*, 167–180.

⁷⁷ See, among many examples: Baader, *Geistererscheinung*.

Nevertheless, whereas for Christian mystics the experience is that of a union with God, for male and female theosophers it occurs with a person who is not God (Sophia is only an intermediary entity between God and us). This trait resonates with two of the main aspects of theosophical literature: first, the focus on mediations (divine entities are mediations *par excellence*); and second, the importance of the notion of incarnation as a means of supporting the idea that the various levels of reality are linked together in a continuous chain of being. Given the second characteristic, it comes as no surprise that among those theosophers who felt they were experiencing the presence of Sophia within themselves, some evinced a tendency to “incarnate” her to the point of seeing in her a person with whom a bond not only amorous but also—up to a certain point—sensuous was possible. Conversely, theosophers like Baader, of a less “experiential” and more “speculative” orientation, were understandably less prone to develop such a form of sensuality in their relationship with the Divine Wisdom.

Sophiana

It has seemed appropriate to complement this contribution by a section presenting some quotations from original texts particularly relevant to the subject. Each quotation is numbered (I, II, III, etc.), and footnotes in the above essay correspond to these identifiers (example: “see *Sophiana* IV”). In each, the original Latin, German, or French is presented on the left, with the English translation on the right, and the citation following.

I

Ut sponso cum sponsa coniunctio
intercedit arctissime summa, ita (opto)
& mihi ut sit in sempiternum (det
DEUS) cum Sapientia aeterna; quae
columbula mea, pulchra mea, for-
mosa mea. Incipe, obsecro tu mystica
concubina Alysag Sunamites cubare
in sinu meo: tu sancto fervore calefa-
cias mentem meam, tuis amplexibus
frigentia membra confove, Animula!
Corculum!

Just as between husband and wife the
conjunction is most closely achieved,
so be it (such is my wish) in Eternity
(may GOD give it to me) between
myself and the Eternal Wisdom, who
is my little dove, beautiful, splendid.
Do begin, I beseech you, you my mysti-
cal concubine Alysag the Sunamite,
to sleep on my breast; warm up my
soul with your holy ardour, and my
cold members with your embrace, oh
my dear soul, my heart

Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum*, Section ‘Interpretationes’, Interpretatio Gradus Tertii, CXLVI.

II

Böhm gebrauchet sehr viel das Wörtlein S^Ophia, welche er Adams Gehülfin und Braut nennet, dabey nun zu merken, dass er mit Sophia eben auf J^Esum unsere himmlische Braut ziele, und damit die Liebe meinet./Denn obs schon unterschiedliche Synonyma sind, so bedeuten sie doch nur eines, und wird damit die himmlische Jungfrau des innern Menschens verstanden, welche als ein Licht aus unserer Feuer-Seelen ausgeboren wird, und eben Adams Gehülfin vor dem Fall oder Schlaf war, damit er sein Gleichnis ausgebaren sollte.

Th. P., 2030–2031, 27 July 1699.

Boehme very often uses the word S^Ophia, to name Adam's companion and fiancée, but it should be noted that by Sophia he intends J^Esus as our heavenly bride, and thereby means Love/Indeed, although these are different synonyms, they have only one meaning: what is understood here, is the heavenly Virgin of the inner Man, who is being born as a light from our fire-souls, and who was Adam's companion before his Fall or Sleep, in order for him to beget his own image.

III

So forscheten [die Katholiken] in der Fräulichen Tinctur in Maria, darinn sich die himmlische S^Ophia eröffnet, und in derselben Christus empfangen worden: Also haben die Closter-Leute wol etwas gefunden, aber den rechten Grund nicht, und darum wolten sie auch gerne der Maria Kräften zuschreiben, dass sie der Schlangen sollte den Kopf zertreten, Gen. 3, wie sie denn selbige Wort stets herumgedrehet haben.

Th. P., 1948–1949, 7 March 1693. N.B. “Tinktur” (tincture) is a common term in Paracelsian and Bohemian parlance.

Thus they (the Catholics) searched within the feminine tincture in the (person of) Maria, in which the heavenly S^Ophia opens herself, and in whom Christ was received. Therefore the cloistered people did find something, but it was not the genuine basis, and therefore they tended to attribute to Maria powers that would smash the Snake's head (Gen. 3), and thereby they constantly distorted that name (of Sophia)

IV

[Die himmlische Weisheit wird] auch an dieser geschaffnen Welt erkannt, indem sie mit ausgeflossen ist in Himmel und Erden und alle Gewächse, wie an dem Firmament, item an Kräutern, Blumen, dero Farben, Geruch, Geschmack und Kräften, auch an Metallen der Erden und deren Tinctur zu sehen und zu finden ist.

Th. P., 2896, 29 April 1701.

We also recognize (the Holy Wisdom) in this created world, since she is emanated in the heavens and on the earth and in everything that grows, and is to be seen and found on the firmament, and likewise in herbs, flowers, their colors, odor, taste and virtues, also in metals of the earth and their tincture.

V

Und obschon alle Rigel der Finsterniss scheinen vor die Pforten geschoben zu seyn, machet euch nur stark, und setzet mit der starken Imagination durch, ihr werdet wol erfahren, wie freundlich Sie ihren in Adam verlorren Mann in Christo umhalsen und küssen wird, wie der Parabel vom verlorren und wiederkommenden Sohn gelehret wird.

Th. P., 1794, 5 November 1709.

And, in 1699:

[wir] dürfen keinen Gedanken noch Imagination in uns fassen, als Liebe, welche [das] magische Feuer GOttes immer temperiret; daraus der Blitz in die Seelen; und aus dem Blitz das Licht oder Glantz im Gemüt und Sinnen.

Th. P., 2577, 1699 (no exact date).

And although all the gates seem to be closed by the bolts of darkness, make yourself strong, bring your strong imagination to bear, and surely you will experience how friendly she will hug and kiss in Christ her Man who had been lost in Adam, as the parable of the prodigal son teaches us

[we] should not conceive any thought nor any Imagination within ourselves, but Love, which [the] magic Fire of GOd always “balances”; from hence the flash of lighting (is hurled) into the souls; and from that flash, the light or brightness in our heart and our senses.

VI

...es hat sich der Bräutigam in der Seelen offenbaret, und ist so feurig in uns verliebet, dass ich’s mit Worten nicht aussprechen kan, und ziehet uns durch seinen Magnet so stark, dass wir Ihm gern entgegen laufen wollen, wenn uns das Irdische nicht mächtig hinderte und immer zurückhielte.

Th. P., 3010–3011, 29 April 1701.

...the bridegroom has revealed himself within the soul, and he is so inflamed with love for us that I cannot express it with words. He pulls us so strongly with his magnet that we would have gladly run towards him, if the terrestrial did not hamper us mightily and were not always holding us back.

VII

Und durch solche starke Begierde nach der Erlösung von der Finsterniss wird das Feuer immer stärker, und der Glanz, als Sophia, heller, welches so lange mit einander im ringenden Rad stehet, bis endlich das Licht sieget, und die Finsterniss überwiegt; daraus entstehet die Temperatur [= Balance] oder Paradis.

Th. P., 2016, 16 March 1699.

And by virtue of such a strong desire of salvation from darkness, the fire grows stronger and stronger, and the brightness, as Sophia, becomes lighter. The struggle takes place so long within the wheel (of anguish), until finally the light triumphs and gains the upper hand over the darkness. From that, the Balance or Paradise emerges

VIII

... Bis die völlige Verlöbniß im Geiste vollzogen, und aus Zwey ein Wille worden: Dan heisset derselbe Wille GOtt-Mensch, Mensch-GOtt, der wird dan wieder mit Flügeln voller Augen bedeckt, und ins Paradis eingeführet, welches sich im Schmack, Fühlen, Geruch, Sehen und Hören innerlich erzeiget.

See also in the same letter, page 1799:

... und wir schmecken, fühlen, sehen, hören und riechen täglich ihren freundlichen Umgang, dass wahrhaftig kein verliebter Mann mit seinem lieben Weib so freundlich und gemeinsam seyn kann.

Th. P., 1794–1795, 5 November 1709.

And, finally:

Machet euch Sophiam, als die wesentliche Liebe, gemeinsamer und beandter, und setzet im Gebät eure Imagination in Sie, als in eure Haus-Frau, und ergebet euch in ihr Liebes-Regiment mit Leib, Seel und Geist; ihr werdet in eurer Seele eine grosse Erleichterung und Süßigkeit, auch im Gebät eine treffliche Kraft empfinden.

Th. P., 3635, 4 May 1708.

... Until the complete betrothal in the spirit is achieved, and from 'two' has become 'one' single will. Then, this same will is named GOd-Man, Man-GOD, and it is covered again with wings replete with eyes, and introduced into Paradise, [a Paradise] which innerly reveals itself in taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing

... and we daily taste, feel, see, hear and smell her friendly company, so much so that no man in love could be as friendly and united to his dear wife.

To Sophia, as the essential love, make yourself more united, more known; and while praying, focus your imagination on her, as you do on your wife, and give yourself over to her way of loving with your body, soul and spirit. You will find within your soul a great relief and sweetness, and an excellent strength in your prayer.

IX

... als er zu Ende des 1673 sten Jahres um Weihnachten des Mittags, ohngefähr um 11. Uhr, auf seine Knie gefallen, und mit grossem Ernst im Gebät eingekehret, vor GOTTes heiligen Angesichts gelegen, und im Geist erhaben war, dass Er unserer grossen Schwachheit vergeben, und seinen liebsten Willen offenbaren wolte;/ So geschahe im Geist eine Bewegung: Und nachdem zu erst eine schwarze Wolke geöfnet worden, erschien ihm aus der weissen Wolke die edle himm-

... one day, at the end of 1673 (it was Christmas, in the morning, around 11), when he had been kneeling down and had been intently praying and meditating, lying in front of GOd's holy Face, elevated in his spirit, [asking GOd that He might] forgive us our great weakness and reveal His dearest will/thereupon, there was a movement within his spirit. And after a black cloud had first been opened [to him], from [another one, which was] white, there appeared the noble

lische Jungfrau Sophia Jesu, mit verklärtem Angesicht, als seine getreue Gehülfin und Gespielin, die er vorhin unerkant, so herzlich geliebet, im Geiste des Gemüts, und zwar von Angesicht zu Angesicht; da GOTT ihm also sein ewiges Wort JESUM, zur lieben Gespons und Braut, in Jungfräulicher Gestalt, heraus in seine Menschheit sandte, dass seine Seele und auch die äussere Creatur Sie im 3ten Principio [this notion is part of the Boehmian vocabulary] sehen und hören konte./Diese tath sich nunmehr ehelich zu seinem Seelen-Feuer, als ihrem Feuer-Mann. O, wie freundlich hat Sie seine Seele umhülset! Keine eheliche Matron kan mit ihrem Ehegatten liebreicher spielen, als Sophia mit seiner Seelen taht. Was er nun bei solcher Vermählung und Hochzeit empfunden, wünschte er auch anderen Seelen zu geniessen, weil es ihm an Worten ermangelte: Und wenn er schon ganze Bücher davon geschrieben hätte, so würde doch die unaussprechliche Süßigkeit nicht können ausgedrucket werden, bezeugte er öfters, bevorab, da aus dem Ehe-Bette nicht gut zu schwatzen wäre./Sie sprach mit ihm Mund zu Mund, als ein Freund mit dem andern, und sagte ihm alle eheliche Treu und Hülfe zu, dass Sie ihm geistlichen Samen geben, und ihm im innern Lichts-Grunde beywohnen wolte; ihn in keinem Creuz, Noht, Armut, Elend oder Tod nimmermehr allein lassen noch verlassen; ja dass Sie ihm alles, was er mit den reichen Weibern verleugnet, ersetzen, und an ihrer Stelle seine treue Pflegerin und Versorgnerin seyn wolte.

Th. P., vol. VII, (biography of Gichtel by Überfeld), 142–143.

heavenly Virgin Sophia Jesu, with a transfigured face. [She appeared to him] face to face, as his faithful companion and playmate, whom he had not recognized before, but had loved so fervently in the spirit of his heart. God therefore sent him His eternal Word Jesus, as a dear spouse and bride, in virginal form, into his humanity, in order that his soul and also the exterior creature might be able to see and hear her in the Third Principle. Thereupon, she married the fire of his soul, [she married him] as her man of fire. Oh how friendly has she hugged his soul! No married wife can play more lovely with her husband, than Sophia did with his soul. What he experienced during this marriage and wedding, he wanted other souls to enjoy as well, for he was at a loss for words. And even had he written whole books thereon, they would not have expressed the inexpressible sweetness, as he often claimed, and anyhow, it is not done to blather about what has happened in the marriage-bed. She spoke with him from mouth to mouth, as a friend with another friend, and promised him all conjugal faithfulness and help, and that she wanted to give him spiritual seeds, and would live with him in the inner Ground of Light. She would never leave him alone again, nor abandon him, in any painful cross, need, poverty, hardship, or in death. Yes, everything he had refused from rich women she would replace, and in their stead, she wanted to take care of him and of all his needs.

X

Es war ohngefähr des Mittags 11. Uhr, da erschien mir im Geiste die teure SOphía: Erst öffnete sich eine schwartze Wolke, die mir eine Bedeutung vieler Leiden und Trübsalen war, welche auch hernach in die 21. Jahr heftig gewütet; hernach öffnete sich eine Schnee-weiße Wolke, welche liebliche Paradis-Freude auch auf die Leiden gefolget, und alle Bitterkeit versüßet; darauf erschien aus der weißen Wolke meine liebste Gespielin von Angesicht zu Angesicht, und sprach mir Mund zu Mund Treue zu.

Th. P., 1798, 5 November 1709.

It was about eleven in the morning, when dear SOphía appeared to me in the spirit. First, a black cloud opened, which meant to me many pains and hardships, that actually plagued [me] violently during the next twenty-one years. Then a snow white cloud opened, the lovely paradisiacal joy of which has come after those pains, and has soothed all bitterness. Thereupon, out of the white cloud my dearest companion appeared to me face to face, and from mouth to mouth she promised me faithfulness

XI

Gleichwie nun vom Mann ohne Weib und vom Weibe ohne Mann keine Gebuhrt geschehen kan, also können wir ohne Sophia oder Christus nichts thun oder ausgebären. Dieses Mysterium hat mir GOtt aufgeschlossen, dass ich dadurch bin bewogen worden, mich an kein Weib zu binden, und reuet mich nicht, Sie hat mir auch ein keusches Gemüt gegeben, und vor der Venus bewahret.

Th. P., 2031, 27 July 1699. Translation, Versluis, *Wisdom's Book*, 134. N.B.: I would prefer to translate "ausgebären" by "begetting."

Now as no birth can come forth from the man without the woman, nor from the woman without the man, so without Sophia or Christ we cannot do or bring forth anything good. This mystery God hath opened to me, that thereby I have been led not to attach myself to any woman, nor do I repent of it, for she has given me a chaste mind, and preserved me from Venus.

XII

Ferner wurden ihm damahls erst die verborgenen Geheimnisse unseres Falles in Adam, und die Herniederbringung des Verlorenen durch die Menschheit Christi, und unsere Wiedergeburt in Ihme, aufgeschlossen, darzu er eine Engels-Zunge von nöthen gehabt haben müste, so er's hätte sollen aussprechen. Die Weisheit zeigte ihm nochmals, dass der Streit Michaels und des Drachen vorhanden. [Dann beschloss Gichtel,] sich mit

Moreover, at that time the hidden mysteries of our Fall in Adam were first opened to him, also how the lost Being (= Lucifer) was hurled down by [virtue of] Christ's humanity, and [also] our rebirth in Christ; he would have needed the tongue of an angel to put it into words. Wisdom again showed him that the fight of Michael against the Dragon was imminent. [Then, Gichtel decided] not to get involved with anyone, but instead

Niemanden gekandt zu machen sondern mit seiner Jungfrauen in ihren Gottes-Wundern zu spielen.

Th. P., vol. VII, (biography of Gichtel by Überfeld), 148.

to play with his Virgin in her divine wonders.

XIII

Des Ehe-Verbots aber wird er mit Unrecht beschuldiget: welches daher rühret: Es hatten ihm getraute Ehe-Männer und Weiber mit Schmerzen geklaget, was für Hurerey und Exzesse im Ehestande und Ehe-Bette vorgingen, dass es mit blutigen Tränen nicht gnug zu beschreyen wäre. Ingleichen haben ihm etliche bekannt, dass sie in vielen Tagen zu keinem Gebät kommen können, noch sich zu GOtt nahen dürfen, wegen der grossen Beschämung, da sie sich ihre Augen gegen GOtt aufzuheben gescheuet, auch im Streit wider das Fleisch nicht bestehen mögen, bis sie resolvirt sich geistlich zu beschneiden.

Th. P., vol. VII, Biography of Gichtel by Überfeld, 308.

But he was unjustly accused of prohibiting marriage, and here is the reason why: some married men and women had told him, in great pain, what fornication and excess took place in marriage and in the marriage bed—so much so, that tears of blood would not suffice to weep over it. Likewise, some confessed to him that for many days they could not bring themselves to say any prayer, nor dared come near to GOD, because of their great shame, since they were afraid to lift up their eyes towards God, and lost the battle against the flesh, until they decided to circumcise themselves spiritually.

XIV

Ein jeder wolte Sophiam in seine Arme haben, und von Ihr einen süssen Kuss geniessen; welches auch mit gar grosser Freundlichkeit manchmal geschahe, dass sie von dem süssen Geschmack nicht gnug rühmen könnten, sondern in Trähnen fielen. Ach, welch Lobgesang stieg nicht auf! Denn sie genossen sehr viel Liebe von der teuren Jungfrau, dass sie oft vor Liebe tanzeten und sprungen, als ob sie voll Weins gewesen, darbey sie die Nachfolge Christi hoch priesen, und grosse Lust darzu bezeugten./Die reichen Josephen buhleten gleichsam um den seligen Gichtel, welchen sie als ihr eigen Hertz liebten. Niemand hatte was Eigenes; auch liebten sie einander hertzlich... Ein jeder drung

Everyone wanted to hold Sophia in his arms and enjoy a sweet kiss from her; which in fact did happen repeatedly, with great friendliness [from her], that they could not speak highly enough of its sweet taste, but burst into tears. O, what a song of praise arose! For they enjoyed very much love from the dear Virgin, so that they often danced and jumped around for love, as if they were full of wine, while highly praising the Imitation of Christ and evincing great devotion to it./The rich Josephs also paid homage to the late Gichtel, whom they loved like their own heart. None [of Gichtel's followers] had any possession of their own; and they loved one another dearly... Every one of them rushed

aufs sehrste in die Braut-Kammer, und übten sich ganz eiferig in der Liebe, bemüheten sich also um der Jungfrauen Eheliching überaus stark.

Th. P., vol. VII, (biography of Gichtel by Überfeld), 180–181.

most vehemently into the bride-chamber, and most eagerly practiced [the art of] Love; so they were trying extremely hard to marry the Virgin.

XV

Meine Buhler genossen sehr viel Liebe von der teuren Jungfrau; sie tanzten und sprungen oft vor Liebe, als sie voll Weins gewesen: In der Prob aber bestund allein Bruder Über[feld], der lieber Gut und Blut verlassen wollte, als die Jungfrau, und geniesset nun mit mir den grossen Ausfluss der lieben Mutter, die seinen Geist mit grossen Schmerzen wiedergeboren hatte.

Th. P., 1799, 5 November 1709.

My followers were gratified with very much love from the dear Virgin; they often danced and jumped for love, as if full of wine. But only Brother Über[feld] managed to pass the test: he would forsake his possessions and his blood relatives rather than the Virgin, and now he is enjoying with me the great outpouring of the dear Mother, who with great labors has given rebirth to his spirit.

XVI

...sobald wir unsere Begierde und unser Vergnügen, unsere Lust in etwas setzen; im Gemuth eine Wesenheit entstehet, durch die Lust wird unser Geist desjenigen Gegenstand[s] schwanger in welchem er seine imagination gesetz... Wenn wir also dieses köstliche Kleinod nicht völlig im Schut vergraben wollen... wen[n] wir getreu bleiben enthullet sie sich gänzlich, so dass ihre Liebhaber sie in ihrem majestaetischen Glanz von Angesicht zu Angesicht schauen können, dann gehet die höchste Vereinigung.

Kirchberger to Eckartshausen, 30 September 1797, in *Briefwechsel*, 306–307.

... as soon as we project our desire, our pleasure and our lust on to something, a being arises within our soul [= heart]; through the lust, our spirit becomes pregnant of the object on which it has focused its imagination... Therefore, if we do not want to completely bury this precious treasure [= Sophia] under a heap of rubbish..., if we remain faithful [to her], she reveals herself entirely, so that her suitors can contemplate her face to face in her majestic brightness; then, the highest union is achieved.

XVII

Si nous étions l'un près de l'autre, j'aurais aussi une histoire de mariage à vous conter, où la même marche a été suivie pour moi, quoique sous d'autres formes, et qui a fini par avoir le même résultat.

If I were near you, I could give you a story of a marriage in which the same way was followed with me, though under different forms, ending in the same result.

French from Saint-Martin to Kirchberger, 19 November 1794, in *Correspondance* (2004), 195; English in *Theosophic Correspondence* (1949), 150.

Saint-Martin wrote later

Je crois bien avoir connu l'épouse du general Gichtel...mais, non pas aussi particulièrement que lui. Voici ce qui m'arriva, lors du mariage dont je vous ai dit un mot dans ma dernière [lettre]; Je priai un peu de suite pour cet objet et il me fut dit intellectuellement, mais toujours clairement: "Depuis que le Verbe s'est fait chair, nulle chair ne doit disposer d'elle-même sans qu'il en donne la permission."

French from Saint-Martin to Kirchberger, 4 January 1795, in *Correspondance* (2004), 199; English in *Theosophic Correspondence* (1949), 153.

I believe, in fact, that I have known General Gichtel's bride, of whom you speak in your letter of 29 Nov.; but not so particularly as he did. This is what happened to me, at the marriage I hinted at in my last. I prayed rather perseveringly for this object, and it was said to me intellectually, but very clearly: "Since the Word was made flesh, no flesh ought to dispose of itself without His permission."

XVIII

Sophie est venue elle-même, après la mort de son époux [Gichtel], ordonner et diriger l'arrangement de ses lettres posthumes; elle a renouvelé plusieurs passages qui n'étaient indiqués qu'imparfaitement dans les brouillons que Gichtel avait remis à son ami Ueberfeld; et, à mesure que ce dernier travaillait à cette rédaction, Sophia le dirigeait en personne. Elle est venue, à cet effet, voir Überfeld à différentes reprises. Une fois elle y est restée pendant six semaines. C'était un festin continu, pendant lequel elle a communiqué au rédacteur et à quelques amis fidèles du défunt, des développements de sa sainte économie qui dépassaient de beaucoup tout ce que le monde a jamais pu s'imaginer.

French from Kirchberger to Saint-Martin, 10 March 1795, in *Correspondance* (2004), 208; English in *Theosophic Correspondence* (1949), 160–161.

Sophia came herself, after her spouse's [Gichtel's] death, to order and superintend the arrangement of his posthumous letters; she renovated several passages which were very indistinct in the drafts which Gichtel had given to his friend Ueberfeld, and as this latter worked, Sophia directed in person. She came for this purpose, at different times, to see Ueberfeld. On one occasion she remained six weeks. It was a continual feast, during which she communicated to the editor, and some friends of the deceased, such openings of the holy order as far surpass all that the world has ever conceived.

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DEADLY DATES:
BODIES AND SEX IN SPIRITUALIST HEAVENS

CATHY GUTIERREZ

In his writings on love and marriage, eighteenth-century visionary Emanuel Swedenborg asserts that conjugal love can take one of two trajectories and unite either the good with the true or else the false with the evil; participants in such unions are bound for heaven or hell respectively. Marriage is divinely ordained, and the union of God and the church stands as the ideal union to which humans should aspire. Reporting from his mystical visits to a heaven resonating with Neoplatonic overtones in which the lower and higher worlds mirror each other, Swedenborg's writings intimate that the image of God is reproduced in the mating couple, a recreation of the primal androgyne, when male and female he created them.¹ Caught between the representation of the genders as dual and of married love as a single entity, Swedenborg recapitulates his contemporary and later influential distress about whether to see love through binary oppositions or as a process of achieving wholeness. The conflict of how to perceive conjugal love continued, in Swedenborg's legacy, in his pervasive influence on the American renaissance.

Swedenborg's writings were the primary theological touchstone for the American articulation of Spiritualism, a religious movement begun in 1848 and characterized by some contemporary scholars as the more exoteric branch of American hermeticism.² Modeling their ideas on

¹ There has been a great deal of scholarly speculation about the influence of the kabbalah on Swedenborg's thinking; while it is clear that Swedenborg would have access to both Jewish and Christian kabbalistic writings, it remains speculative whether he was indeed influenced at all by kabbalah. In "Emanuel Swedenborg, the Jews, and Jewish Tradition," Wouter Hanegraaff concludes that there has not yet been proven any direct connection between Jewish writing and Swedenborg's thought. Furthermore, according to Hanegraaff, any resemblances can be more aptly accounted for by the more general transmission of Neoplatonic ideas.

² All thoughtful commentators on Spiritualism question the precise "creation" of this movement, since phenomenologically similar events had been happening in Europe and America since time immemorial. However, I maintain the use of the traditional dating because it serves handily as a reference when people could self-identify as believers, which I think is particularly important given the often shocking nature of political

the recently developed telegraph, Spiritualists proposed that continuing communication between the living and the dead was not only possible, but was the logical—and empirical—outcome of the technologies of the day. With the telegraph, photography, and later the telephone providing instant and invisible communication across space, Spiritualists simply noted that space went up to heaven as well as across to the territories. With refinements on the Mesmeric trance state, mediums (most often women) became the living instrument of communication between the living and the dead. And like contemporaneous discussions of electricity, Spiritualists held their discovery to be scientifically true, even if not yet well understood.

Contact with the dead disclosed that heaven resembled the familiar landscapes of earth, with neighborhoods, churches, schools, and social occasions, in essence a sanitized version of the ethos of the time. The dead participated in the fascination with technology as well as the burgeoning populism of the new middle class, and like many contemporaneous religious movements both Spiritualists and the spirits reflected a cultural celebration of the ideals of democracy. Spiritualism proposed that people retained all of their individual characteristics at death and therefore wished to maintain their relationships with those on earth. The spirits of the dead also retained their earthly flaws and were not made perfect upon entrance to heaven, but rather were subject to errors and mistakes in the afterlife.

Spiritualists were also notable for espousing progressive and frequently radical political reforms on nearly every front. In addition to their important contributions to Abolition and women's rights, they also embraced a wide gamut of liberal platforms, from improving the condition of prisons to relatively arcane calls for phonetic spelling and more congenial underwear. As Ann Braude has ably demonstrated, Spiritualism also sounded the death knell for wide-spread American Calvinism and particularly its policies of infant damnation.³ By providing grieving mothers with what was understood to be empirical proof of the continued existence of their children in heaven, the movement

and theological claims the Spiritualists made. For a discussion of Spiritualism as the “exoteric” branch of the occult “church” in America, see Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Chapter Ten, especially 188. Both Versluis and Godwin give some credence to the later claims by more hard-line occultists that Spiritualism was seeded or perhaps even masterminded by occult adepts to prepare society for future hermetic truths. See Godwin, *o.c.*, 197–200.

³ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, Chapter 2.

implicitly and explicitly condemned the picture of a God who could callously and capriciously send innocents into the fires of hell.

In fact, the ethos of Spiritualism was so inclusive that it held out hope for all of humankind. Its teleology of both individuals and “tribes and races” was coterminous with progress and education. Hence, Spiritualism dispensed entirely with the concept of hell, arguing instead that misdeeds stemming from poverty and ignorance should not be equated with evil. Women in particular seem to have cherished the banishment of hell as a hallmark of the new religiosity. Cora Hatch, arguably the most famous medium of her day, joined such august women as Emma Hardinge Britten when she announced that “evil is a word that should be cast out of every vocabulary; for it does not follow that because the finite can not equal the infinite, it is evil. In our opinion, *the finite comprehension of good is all the evil that exists*, and as men’s understanding enlarges, so will their ideas of goodness increase.”⁴ By positioning good and evil as a scale of knowledge rather than a set of polarities of sin and salvation, Hatch and others proposed universal inclusion in heaven. Life was not a one-time testing ground but rather a preamble for a long and continuing education. The spirits of the dead could repent, learn, and improve in the afterlife and thereby move forward to moral perfection after their deaths.

The dead, then, much like those who were expending their energies in communicating with them, were upwardly mobile. Unlike their contemporary Huck Finn’s idea of heaven, where angels reclined on clouds (striking Huck as enormously dull), the Spiritualist heaven was alive with motion. The dead went to school, grew up in spirit bodies, met, fell in love, got married, even occasionally had spirit children. Expanding on Swedenborg’s tripartite heaven, the Spiritualist heaven was depicted as usually having seven spheres, with the dead advancing toward perfection as they increased their spiritual knowledge. The synchronic element of heaven was not lost on the Spiritualists, and the famous dead were routinely called upon to give advice to the living. Spiritualism thus alleviated grieving on the personal level and buttressed its own cultural privileging of progress by having the wise and powerful dead advocate liberal reform. With progress as the hallmark of both life and the afterlife, Spiritualism held out salvific hope for all. In its wholesale denial (contrary to Swedenborg) of the existence of hell,

⁴ Hatch, *Discourses*, 315.

however, Spiritualism created a theological entanglement about what to do with those who had committed grievous crimes while on earth.

Since spirits were embodied and independent, the entire range of sexuality is represented in heaven, from the cruel and perverse to the unassailable experience of true love. Thus, the radical continuity between heaven and earth proposed by Spiritualists held true as well in matters of love. For the majority of Spiritualists, the ideals of love that may be read obliquely through communications with the dead were largely those shared by the white, Protestant, bourgeois mainstream. American ideas of love during the Victorian epoch strongly affirmed the cultural centrality of marriage and legitimated sex—and even desire—within that context. However, as Steven Seidman has argued, as pragmatic and economic buttresses for marriage increasingly receded in the nineteenth century, a spiritualized version of love took their place. Guided by monogamy and promoting both health and reproduction, marriage and sex were laudable to the extent that they were controlled.⁵

If Spiritualists departed from their contemporaries in any generalized sense, it was only in betraying the frequency with which marriage failed to meet their own high expectations. Marriage was upheld as such a profound ideal that the majority of humans lacked the wherewithal to succeed at it, at least in earthly life. The desirability of love, marriage, and sexual union were all affirmed by Spiritualists, arguably more vigorously than by society at large. Sex existed in heaven but usually did not produce offspring, thereby eliminating the moralizing tendencies of much non-Spiritualist writing that posited procreation as the only justification for the sex act.⁶ The importance of love was governed by the free will of two equal individuals rather than measured by the economic or procreative outcomes of such a union. For Spiritualists, the union itself was the unit of value both on earth and in the afterlife.

⁵ Seidman, *Romantic Longings*, 40–50.

⁶ I have never seen a reference to homosexuality in Spiritualist writings, other than as a vague threat, in the Free Love fringe movement, that homosexuality will be the result of sexual misconduct. There are no instances of same-sex love or condemnation of that love in heaven that I have come across. It is possible that this was just too far off the middle-class radar to enter the record, or it is equally possible that the idea of proto-homosexuality would have been so threatening to their lack of hell that it was merely ignored. Seidman confirms that this remarkable silence is the norm across Protestant and medical discourses of the era (Seidman, *Romantic Longings*, 22).

Love and eros were intrinsic parts of life and death, and I will argue that Spiritualism denied the supremacy of the soul over the body as well as other concomitant Enlightenment dualisms that privileged one term of an opposition at the cost of the second. First, however, I will examine Swedenborg's writings on love and marriage for their influence on Spiritualist understanding. Then I will trace the varieties of sex in Spiritualist heavens and argue that this esoteric movement refused to sacrifice the body on the altar of the soul.

Swedenborg on Sex

A Herodotus of the heavens, Swedenborg reported his mystical jaunts to the afterlife as a travelogue, and one curiously devoid of the author's own editorializing or any sense of awe. Without any comment, Swedenborg announces that heavenly marriages are strictly among those who are consociated, implying that most earthly marriages are dissolved in heaven but that the right person will indeed be found in the afterlife. In his most widely read work, *Heaven and Hell*, the reader learns that the union of man and woman in marriage is tantamount to the union of the good and the true, and this radical metaphoricity inheres in a series of complements; binary attractions between the will and understanding, between heaven and the Word, and between God and the church are added to the original. True conjugal love, such as exists in heaven, cannot be rent, since doing so would be the microcosmic equivalent of tearing the very fabric of the relationship with the divine asunder.⁷

On the contrary, bad conjugal love, which is apparently rife, is the marriage of the false with the evil and is characterized as "adultery." Swedenborg writes:

[T]he pleasure of adultery is essentially nothing but the pleasure of a love of the union of what is false and what is evil. This is a hellish pleasure, because it is diametrically opposed to the pleasure of heaven, which is the pleasure of a love of what is true united to the good.⁸

The attraction between the false and the evil is the chief metaphor for the inhabitants of hell, and the series of binary oppositions (true/false,

⁷ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, section 374.

⁸ *Ibid.*, section 384.

good/evil) are complemented by the series of binary attractions (false/evil, good/true, will/understanding).

In 1768 Swedenborg undertook what is possibly his longest mystical reflection on marriage and its religious primacy. Currently translated as *Love in Marriage*, this work enumerates the absolute centrality of the union of souls on earth if one is lucky and in heaven for eternity. As he had in *Heaven and Hell* ten years earlier, Swedenborg reports on the conditions of heaven from visionary experience and gives straightforward, pragmatic advice for the living with the superior cultures of heaven acting as his ideal model. Completely ignoring the conflicting injunctions to celibacy in the New Testament, Swedenborg's heavenly informants claim that marriage pervades all of creation from angels to worms and that sexual love is the concrete expression of the union of the masculine good and the feminine truth.⁹

Married sexuality is thus not a necessary affliction, but rather a celebrated condition of union. His discussion of sex, as distinct from procreation, is explicit, and one learns that married male angels can never be impotent, and therefore their sense of sexual pleasure remains constant eternally.¹⁰ The book is a minute dissection of marriage and sexuality on an encyclopedic scope, ranging from the proper engagement period to the misdeeds of adulterers, rapists, and lovers of sexual variety. Swedenborg explains that having a concubine is a sin (unless one is separated), and that chilly or superficial marriages on earth are preferable to divorce since they produce children and placate one's parents.¹¹ Polygamy is dealt with in detail as a lascivious error, but if practitioners live by the word of God, these "Mohammedans" will only be punished for this trespass by being separated from the Christians in the afterlife. In both its tone and scope, *Love in Marriage* stands as a sweeping, emotional, and extremely hopeful disquisition on relations between the genders and the primary importance of these relationships in religious life.

Marriage abides in heaven, adultery in hell, and both are marked by a system of correspondence in which like attracts like, whether it is good or evil. Emanuel Swedenborg was a man perched precariously between two worlds, not only heaven and hell, but also the Renaissance and

⁹ Swedenborg, *Love in Marriage*, sections 90 and 92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, section 355.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 332, 463, and 276.

the Enlightenment. As Wouter Hanegraaff has argued, Swedenborg's system of correspondences reflects this awkward historical moment of negotiating the classical esoteric worldview, in which the world stands in divine reflection of the cosmos, and Cartesian dualism that implies a hierarchy of the divine and material, soul and body, God and man. Hanegraaff writes:

From this perspective, Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences emerges as an impoverished version of the esoteric original, in the sense that it retains only the "vertical" dimension of heavenly archetype versus natural reflection, and, as a result, reintroduces an element of dualism which posits the superiority of spirit over matter. . . . It should be noted that Cartesian dualism is combined in Swedenborg's mind with a traditional Christian emphasis on renouncing the things of this world for the sake of heaven.¹²

Swedenborg's writings on conjugal love participate in this confusion, advocating simultaneously that the body mirrors the universe, a Renaissance ideal of man being the microcosm of the divine, and that the use of the body in marriage is radically bifurcated into dualisms that map onto heaven and hell. In the final analysis, it is the latter construction that governs Swedenborg's discussions of erotic love, although he does suggest that the binary opposition of male and female can be resolved in the farthest reaches of divine love when the two become as one.

Bad Sex in Heaven

In the years prior to the Civil War, perhaps the most influential Spiritualist was Judge John Edmonds of the New York State Supreme Court. Judge Edmonds and his circle represent the upper echelons of Spiritualist society, and his séances were regularly attended by the intelligentsia of the epoch. Edmonds, along with his friend Dr. George Dexter, compiled a two-volume *magnum opus* on communications with the spirit world. These are verbatim transcriptions of spirit circles or the reproduction of automatic writing that took place during them. The dynamics between the living and the dead are quite telling in this elite circle, and Judge Edmonds is frequently visited by illustrious company such as Francis Bacon and Swedenborg. These sorts of spirits deliver high-flown speeches on lofty topics, ranging from the constitution of

¹² Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 427–428.

the solar system to the uses of electricity and the true definitions for concepts like love and justice.

However, the judge and his friends also set out to help the spirits on the lowest rung of heaven; the fact that the living are in a position to give spiritual advice to those in heaven attests to the theological difficulties of banishing hell. In 1853, the judge and his coterie spent a couple of weeks communicating almost exclusively with the spirits in the first sphere. These were reported as harrowing experiences, with circle members frequently afraid of physical harm from the spirits that overtook the medium's body. The medium herself was understood to be at mortal risk if the sessions lasted too long, and with some regularity the safety of the circle required that Bacon or Swedenborg step in and protect them from attacks from these heavenly creatures.

The lowest rung of heaven is a vile deathscape, with gutted buildings, smoldering fires, and gangs of criminals wandering around looking for trouble. Children and animals are beaten to the perverse delight of on-lookers, and every form of torture is employed by spirits on one another. Since the dead cannot die, torture results in the spirit body suffering until the brink of death and then a protracted reenactment of the final moment ensues. Miserable souls perpetrate cruel acts on others in a barren landscape, resulting in a heaven that is indistinguishable from most concepts of hell except that it has no devil-character overseeing the administration of suffering.

It was here, in the lowliest heaven, that the judge went to help the needy. In the context of the séance, he was given a series of visions, some of which he could only watch, while in others he was able to interact with the dead. When he found a spirit who seemed ready to repent and move on, he helped in any way that he could. Most, however, were intractable in their love of baseness, mocking him or worse. It is on this rung of heaven that we encounter the limits of sex—lasciviousness, adultery, and prostitution. It would appear that depraved sexuality cannot be consummated in heaven and exists alongside violence and pain. In one description of a woman who seems to be a prostitute (her face is “painted” and she has “bedizened her bed with curtains!”), he recounts:

At length a man in passing turned aside, under the influence of passions which had marked his earthly career, and with her entered her house. I saw them both influenced by the same passions, but were incapable of satisfying them. The woman became furious. She raved wildly, and in her insensate rage she dashed the things around her to pieces. The

man enjoyed her anger and she raged at him for laughing at her. She seized a chair and aimed a blow at him. He evaded it, and with his fist knocked her down. He struck her in the neck just below the chin, and when she fell, he gnashed his teeth in his rage, and stamped with his foot on her breast. He kicked her in the side several times, and rushed from the house.¹³

This ghastly scene is by no means singular in this series of communications. Crime in heaven is heavily gendered; women are prone to vanity, promiscuity, prostitution, and the destruction of children. Men are guilty of drunkenness, debauchery, physical violence, torture, and murder. The principle of like attracting like is still operative in Spiritualist heavens, and the reader is told that affinity is how souls are placed in heaven to begin with—one simply arrives in the sphere where there are like-minded spirits. Improvement, however, was the hallmark of death as well as life, and when an individual spirit stirred and recognized that progress was possible, then and only then would options begin to make themselves apparent.

One of the very few stories of the lowest heaven that ends on a hopeful note is the case of an adulteress who had run off with a stage actor, deserting her husband and children and sending her parents to their grave in shame. Rather than being wanton, however, the woman is depicted as being pitiable, abused on earth by her adulterous lover and finally deserted by him upon entrance to heaven. In life she had been willful and misguided, but she had also been mistreated at the hands of men, and this appears to swing the scales of justice in her favor. She is also educable. Judge Edmonds approaches her, offering advice and directing her to the foothills of a mountain over which she has to laboriously walk to find the second sphere. Despite her exhaustion, en route she saves a child from being tormented at the hands of its mother.¹⁴ And while the text never tells of a successful completion of her journey to the next sphere, later editions of the book include footnotes detailing her subsequent communications saying that while progress was grindingly slow, it was indeed happening.

As mentioned above, with the absence of hell, Spiritualists frequently backed themselves into an epistemological corner with the presence of evil. The majority of Spiritualist writing simply ignores the problem of theodicy or focuses on the repentant and their efforts at reform.

¹³ Edmonds & Dexter, *Spiritualism*, 182–183.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

I propose that this unusual lingering on improper erotics in heaven is predicated on a shift in the quasi-Protestant understanding of the misuse of sexuality: bad sex is not a sin, but it is a crime. The key, I argue, is not to read improper sex against normative sex, but rather against the unlikely matter of prison reform.

Judge Edmonds presided over a criminal court and approached the lowest rung of heaven as a judge rather than a theologian. When encountering spirits of the dead who had been hanged for crimes on earth, Edmonds even found himself in the curious position of having to ask if he himself had sent the man to the gallows! Long after this sojourn into the bottom of heaven, the reader learns that the judge had been appointed the chief administrator of a New York state prison. Edmonds was concerned by the use of corporal punishment by the guards but found himself reluctant to attend a whipping session. One day, he stumbled upon one about to take place. The prisoner looks pleadingly at the judge for reprieve, and when none is forthcoming, says defiantly, "Whip away! It ain't the first time. It has never done me any good yet, and won't now." The judge responds promptly, "Then take him down. He knows best what will do him good."¹⁵ The remainder of the scene reads astonishingly like Pinel freeing the madmen of their chains at the asylum in Bicêtre and bringing enlightenment to the dark corners of the medieval understanding of insanity. The kindness shown by Edmonds results in the man promptly becoming the model prisoner; he is polite, restrained, contrite, and, one learns, suffering from a disease that causes insanity, so in the end, he is not even morally culpable.

Spiritualists conceived of improper sexuality as a crime created by poverty, ignorance, and social injustice, rather than an ontological state of sin. As a crime, the root causes of bad sexuality could be ferreted out and cured. As a heavily gendered crime, society's victims—women—could be understood to be pitiable rather than contemptible. The women who are depicted as prostitutes and adulterers in heaven have been harmed at the hands of violent, inconstant men who dupe and deceive them into crime. Apparent evil is a lack of knowledge or opportunity that results in crime, not sin. The binary opposition of good and evil gets broken with that of heaven and hell, thereby denying that marriage and adultery, in Swedenborg's terms, or even proper and improper sexuality could also be mutually opposed. Cast against pro-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 309.

gressive reform, sexual deviance undercuts Cartesian dualism because the perpetrator and the victim are ultimately one and the same. Bad sex is not destined for hell, but rather for improvement.

Middling Sex in Heaven

As Mary Ryan has argued in her seminal work, *The Cradle of the Middle Class*, the emergence of a white-collar stratum of society indelibly shifted gender roles and consequently contributed to a cultural fascination with romantic love. Ryan argues that the creation of a middle class, in which men worked outside of the home and the home itself stopped being the site of producing food or wares, undercut the overt economic benefits of marriage, casting monogamy in a search for a new identity. As marital bonds became less tangible and more tenuous, the middle class responded with a wholesale embrace of romantic love.¹⁶ Marriage, stripped of its utilitarian purposes, would be elevated to much loftier heights and much higher expectations—those of true love.

Spiritualists certainly participated in the fetishization of marriage and highlighting of the importance of romantic love. As reform-minded progressives, however, Spiritualists also recognized that a good number of earthly marriages were unhappy and unhealthy, often trapping women and children in dangerous situations and turning them once again into victims. Rather than wishing to eliminate marriage, however, Spiritualists proposed that it was so important that it could barely be entrusted to the living at all. In the hands of the Spiritualists, true marriage became nearly entirely an affair of the dead.

Adherents forwarded the idea of “spiritual affinities,” which posited that souls are coupled divinely and eternally, but that there is no guarantee one will find one’s mate while alive. The spirit of Franz Petersilea spoke for the majority of believers when he responded that marriage was desirable but contingent while on earth, but that in heaven it was eternal. He communicates:

Soul-mating is not so much for earth as it is for heaven, and people on earth do not, as yet, understand the law. They marry when quite ignorant and youthful—they marry after the flesh and beget children after the flesh, but they pass on and leave their fleshly bodies behind—they are no more of the flesh but of the spirit—and now commences a higher and

¹⁶ See Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, chapter four.

better education; but, thousands on earth are, through natural attraction, really, although ignorantly, united to their own true other self. These will always remain together as one, for they are one; but thousands more are not, and these will be released on leaving the body, to be properly united to the true counterpart.¹⁷

Petersilea's assessment of the situation—that most earthly marriages are of the middling sort—appears to have been largely agreed upon by living believers. While many Spiritualist tracts discuss the importance of romantic love and express the longed for hope of finding one's affinity while on earth, the majority that I have found actually express the inverse—the unhappily, or tediously, married on earth may rest assured that their situation is temporary and that it will be rectified in heaven.

Spiritualists pitted the perfect marriage of heaven against the imperfect ones on earth in order to sound the call to change divorce law in America. In 1862, the New York-based Spiritualist weekly, *The Herald of Progress*, ran an article written by a Mrs. Jane R. Griffing. Mrs. Griffing's call for marriage reform enumerates two basic tenets of Spiritualist rhetoric on the subject: first, earth is but the poor simulacrum of heaven, and therefore comparisons between the two provide an unassailable example of what is ultimately right and good.¹⁸ That is, even if people are not instantly perfected at death, heaven's cultural practices are superior to those of the living and can serve as heavenly chastisement for earthly missteps. Secondly, it is the responsibility of those alive to usher in as progressive a future as possible, and bad marriages concretely hamper the future by producing bad children. She writes:

Among the many wrongs that exist in society, there are none that are so fraught with evil as those that receive the sanction and protection of our marriage laws—none so efficiently shielded by custom and so difficult to reach with the probing knife of Reform. They are hedged about by all our traditional opinions, by all the passional selfishness of mankind...preferring that [the problem] remain festering in the heart

¹⁷ Petersilea, *Letters from the Spirit World*, 161–162.

¹⁸ Most scholars either do not notice or else do not find it interesting that, rather than having heaven be a projection of earth (as scholarship frequently characterizes it, and for good reason), for the Spiritualists, earth was a poor copy of heaven. One of the few exceptions to this is the on-line Ephemera project, the author of which rightly notes that earth is a second-rate imitation of heaven and that it exists in a temporally later state than heaven which has progressed far beyond it. See <http://www.spirithistory.com/invent.html> for details.

of humanity, poisoning the life springs of childhood and embittering the whole lives of many noble men and women.¹⁹

Mrs. Griffing opines that even married people do not recommend the institution to each other and long for the days of being single; she refers to marriage as a “whited sepulchre” and calls for the happy day when marriage might be as it is in heaven. That condition, however, is predicated on easier access to divorce to be able to shed false marriage in search of a true one.

At the fringes of Spiritualist society (about which I will say more later), marriage, like deviant sexual expressions, needs to be read against thinking about crime. The leftist branch of the already leftist Spiritualists advocated the dissolution of marriage altogether as the economic disparity between financially independent men and dependent women resulted in what they argued was a legally sanctioned but unsavory practice—prostitution. Amanda Frisken argues,

In advocating social and economic remedies for prostitution, sex radicals went beyond a demand for the vote. By referring to marriage as legal prostitution, they insisted that both groups of women exchanged sexuality for material benefit, but men held up married women as exemplary, and disparaged the prostitutes they secretly visited.²⁰

Thus, even the middling sex of married people is a crime and women are its victims. And while not all Spiritualists would have agreed with such a radical determination of the essence of earthly marriage, they would almost certainly have been familiar with such rhetoric and were at a minimum sympathetic to the plight that marriage could present, particularly for women.

If one’s marriage on earth were unsatisfactory, however, heaven held the promise of rectifying that. *Letters from Astrea*, a series of communications through the prolific medium Mrs. Mary T. Longley, contains dialogues between the spirit Astrea and her earthly soul mate, who remains nameless. The reader becomes aware, through the questions asked and the answers received, that the unidentified supplicant is married and has a family with his earthly wife. The preface to the text includes a disclaimer about why the unnamed man has agreed to publish such personal material:

¹⁹ *Herald of Progress*, May 17, 1862.

²⁰ Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull’s Sexual Revolution*, 27.

He also wishes it to be known that the principal reason for his consenting to the publication of these, to him, sacred messages is the hope that they may give comfort and encouragement to such as have not experienced the bliss of a congenial married life, or even any married life; and also the knowledge that sometime and somewhere this blissful fruition will be realized.²¹

While presumably the living man is comforted by communications with his intended, Astrea details her own sufferings without him in heaven. The reader learns that she is denied access to heavenly temples of the highest teachings reserved for coupled souls. Astrea explains,

In Spiritual Worlds woman has all the privileges and rights vouchsafed to, or inherent in, man. Yet there are studies that neither can pursue separately: there are Temples of Revelation, that no man, no woman, can grace or enter independently; each must be accompanied by his or her Soul Mate—the two making up the *One Being*, Soul Completeness.²²

Progress, the hallmark of heaven itself, was slowed or halted for Astrea who was waiting for her love to die. In the middle spheres of heaven, affinities between souls righted the mismatched marriages of earth and ensured that true love extends beyond being coupled; it makes one whole.

Platonic Love Reconsidered

Erotic love in its proper context overcame binary dualisms and created a whole out of the misleading appearance of duality of genders. In heaven, good love overcomes the separation of the sexes and reunites the lost halves of a single androgynous being. Resonances from Plato's *Symposium* are implicit and explicit in these discussions. The Spiritualists, however, side not with Diotima and her rather cold metaphysical truths, but instead with Aristophanes and his gleeful tale of desire. According to the Platonic Aristophanes, the world was once peopled with a race of spherical beings who were so powerful that they challenged the gods. To prevent further trouble, Zeus sliced the spheres, thereby creating *eros*:

²¹ Anonymous, *Letters from Astrea*, 4 (non-sequential numbering between reprinted pieces).

²² Anonymous, *Letters from Astrea*, 35.

Now, since the natural form of human beings was cut in two, each half longed for the other. So, out of their desire to grow together, they would throw their arms around each other when they met and become entwined. . . . Love collects the halves of our original nature, and tries to make a single thing out of the two parts so as to restore our natural condition. Thus, each of us is the matching half of a human being, since we have been severed like a flatfish, two coming from one, and each part is always seeking its other half.²³

The Spiritualists indeed believed that love not only collected the halves of their natures, but also reunited the halves of their bodies.

In one of the more interesting farragoes on this topic, the learned Spiritualist Edward Carpenter traces the cause of erotic desire backwards not through historical time but through evolutionary time. He begins with the single-cell reproduction of the protozoa as a primal memory of being severed from one's half. This sensation governs attendant behaviors on higher evolutionary planes and accounts for why the sperm instinctively knows how to physically conjoin with the egg. On a cellular level, he argues, we reenact the search for originary wholeness: "Not 'fertilization' but 'fusion' is the key word of the [conception] process. The mystical conception, as old as Plato, of the male and female as representing respectively the two halves of a complete being, turns out to be no poetic metaphor. As regards the essential features of reproduction, it is a literal fact."²⁴ From the microscopic to the transcendent, bodies wish to be united.

The Spiritualists ran the gamut in terms of being willing to openly discuss sexuality. The question of whether there was physical sex in heaven was frequently posed in spirit circles, and the most popular reply was "sort of." The gross materialities of earth did not translate well into the middle spheres of heaven, and any carnal taint to love was unthinkable.²⁵ However, that did not preclude the possibility that true love could and should be expressed sexually. Sexuality was written

²³ Plato, *Symposium*, 191b–191d. I am quoting the translation by William Cobb in his *Erotic Dialogues*, 30.

²⁴ Carpenter, *The Drama of Love and Death*, 18.

²⁵ This problem gets worse the higher up the spheres one goes, since spirit bodies (usually) become increasingly ephemeral; spirits on the higher echelons are clothed in light and often consume aromas. These reaches where the tactile becomes more elusive, however, tend only to be rumored in heaven. Even the culturally vaunted dead like Shakespeare and Swedenborg only reside on the third to fifth heavens, generally speaking, and the upper-most levels are almost never contacted directly.

about as a reunion of the primal androgyne rather than intercourse strictly speaking.

The spirit of the then-recently deceased John Pierpont, active Spiritualist and a leader of the movement, was asked just such a question. Conducted through the mediumship of Mrs. Longley, Father Pierpont responds to a rather blunt question of whether sex continues beyond the grave. He replies with a long disquisition about the primal nature of soul mates as single in essence and but dual in gender, separated into two for the purpose of “human expression.” He communicates via automatic writing,

Soul mates are always united sometime, it may not be for many, many years, according to their unfoldment and work, or knowledge in the spirit world; sometime and somewhere the union will be, of course, since the law of affiliation and attraction, as well as vibration, in the spirit, all life, or being, must find its own.²⁶

The union of the two halves in heaven takes bodily as well as spiritual form. The fullness of erotic love at some distant point in the future extends beyond the emotional to a concrete and undifferentiated physical unity, a veritable orb of the original Platonic androgyne. I quote at length to show the raw sexuality depicted here:

The organ of generation maintains and is like a seat of life, since it, through the intelligent will and the love element, increases the flow (so to speak) of the magnetic aura toward the counterpart of the individual (soul mate) and causes a blending of the whole harmonious natures, not in sexual intercourse as known on earth, but in the conmingling of the auras as their atoms meet in mutual harmony and love. . . . We are told that, ultimately, in the Celestial Spheres, ages on, the reunited Soul Mates appear as one rounded Glorified Sphere of Light, possessing the attributes of Intelligence, Energy, Wisdom, Love and Power; but that the distinct individual attributes and elements of each, the male and female, are plainly discerned and manifested; there is no swallowing up of either individuality by the other part; and that whenever desirable, they can separate and appear as two distinct individuals, male and female.²⁷

Sexual contact in heaven is distinctly corporeal and tangible. And while the spirits, or the Spiritualists, could not let go of the primacy of individuality, the emphasis remains on the joining of two beings into a single unit; individual expression is optional.

²⁶ Anonymous, *Letters from Astrea*, 64.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65. The parenthetical comments are in the original.

Andrew Jackson Davis, one of the most famous Spiritualists of his day and what I would characterize as the movement's primary theologian, was also not one to shy away from discussions of erotic love. Davis was a proponent of spiritual affinities and at the forefront of political activism for marriage reform. As a country doctor and a homeopath, Davis wrote more than most Spiritualists on the proper use of the body, and sexuality was a central example. In *The Great Harmonia*, Davis writes,

Sex is the fundamental law of existence—that is to say, the male and female, positive and negative principles. Those who comprehend this law in its fullness hold that key which will unlock all mysteries in the world—including those of science, morals, religion, and spirituality. It is the Alpha and Omega of all production and generation.²⁸

Even this apparently ringing endorsement of sexuality, however, evades the restrictions of the binary opposition of genders, not only by creating a single entity in the sex act but also by placing erotic love on a ladder of love in which it is not at the top. Love itself is subject to improvement, and erotic love is on a particular rung of behavior that can be surpassed. Davis enumerates the types of love in ascending order: self-love (which is cast in a positive light as creating the individual), conjugal love, parental love, fraternal, filial, and finally universal love. This last accounts not only for love of one's fellow beings but also love of the divine and even the soul's curiosity, providing the impetus for progress and discovery.²⁹

For Aristophanes and his Spiritualist followers, erotic desire was a search for lost wholeness in body and soul. Later Platonists, however, would propose a more protracted and difficult ascent to love's ideal, and Spiritualists were the inheritors of this legacy as well. With this, we turn from the Spiritualist conception of love as Platonic to a conception of love as Neoplatonic. As the spheres of heaven extend upward toward the divine, so too do the objects of love.

Free Love at the Second Coming

The Free Love movement in America is generally a misnomer, a slander attached to those who advocated marriage reform by those who

²⁸ Davis, *The Harmonial Philosophy*, 280.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 278–279.

did not. While there were indeed sex radicals of the day, the majority of Spiritualists expended their energies trying to distinguish their own concern for liberal reform from the libertine fringe. A strict separation of the two was ultimately doomed, however, since while not all Spiritualists were free lovers, most free lovers were in fact Spiritualists. With the caveat that this is not representative of the mainstream of Spiritualist beliefs, I will now turn to the extremes of eros advocated under the rubric of Spiritualism.³⁰

Like spiritual affinities, free love marshaled some ideological support from Plato. The contemporaneous Oneida Community, founded by John Humphrey Noyes (studied by Arthur Versluis in the following chapter), was a long-running experimental community based on a millennialist vision of perfection implemented by a Platonic view of utopia. The community practiced what it called “complex marriage,” or the ability to have heterosexual intercourse, under certain regulations, with any other adult member of the society. And while the Oneidans occasionally referred to themselves as “free lovers,” in both theory and practice they were sharply distinguished from the sex radicals. The free love movement advocated any form of uncoerced heterosexual expression, including celibacy and monogamy. The Oneida Community by contrast advocated an equal distribution of love—both emotional and physical—among all members of the community, and members expended an extraordinary amount of energy breaking what they called “exclusive attachments,” or the lure of romantic love.

Noyes, however, was well-educated and well-read, and when the time came for the community to replenish its members, he instituted a eugenics program based on Platonic ideals in the *Republic* and elsewhere. His “Essay on Scientific Propagation” remains a deliciously shocking document, calling for the careful breeding of humans as one would show dogs. He combines Platonic eugenics with cutting-edge Darwinian theory to argue that superior spirituality is a characteristic that could be bred for as easily as long snouts or blue eyes. Plato’s rigged lottery, in which the talented people would “coincidentally” be mated with other talented people, was replaced by Noyes with applications to a committee. Thus he combined the structure and propagation of the

³⁰ For a fascinating foray into how Horace Greeley was forced to disassociate himself from Love Spiritualists who were ruining his reputation, see Fornell, *The Unhappy Medium*, 33–37. While Fornell’s work is dated inasmuch as he was not at all sympathetic to his subjects, his research on many topics remains unsurpassed.

Republic with an apostolic ideal of communal love, although his concept of love included eros.³¹

Free lovers watched the Oneida Community hawkishly and frequently cited its health and happiness as proof of the medical benefits of unrestrained eros. The uses of Plato, however, extended beyond community-building to justifications for free love by invoking the Forms. In a fascinating *apologia* from 1857, Austin Kent argued that Plato's construction of the one and the many, in which a single metaphysical perfection could be instantiated in multiple ways on earth, served as the rationale for free love. In his case, Kent loves intelligence:

I am, in the sense in which I am speaking, comparatively a fixed fact in in [*sic*] always loving or having an affinity for certain attributes of other human beings. I love mentality. Some minds more than others, because their mentality is more in harmony with the particular development of mine—but I can love no one mind exclusively. . . . If I love mind, to love one mind exclusively from another is impossible.³²

Kent, a follower of Andrew Jackson Davis's philosophy, felt it incumbent on himself to explain that in the lower spheres of heaven two souls are undoubtedly united, but as they progress through the spheres, non-exclusive love is implemented. In this manner, Kent graciously explained how Davis and Swedenborg could be mistaken when they advocated spiritual affinity for couples only. As one progresses through the higher spheres of spiritual evolution, a heavenly utopia of free love emerges. Kent writes:

How glorious that day! A day so long prayed for by all the pious of earth. In this heaven there will be no exclusive marriage, or giving in marriage. But we shall be as the real and higher angels. We say, let that day come! let it come! though it should overturn and overturn,—purify and sanctify,—sift and burn, in a preceding judgment, and bury in one common grave of the past, all sectarianism [*sic*] and all exclusive marriage, and land our race in one ocean of love and union! Let all jealousy [*sic*] and hate go to its own place! . . . Then will the “will of God be done upon earth, as it is done in heaven.” We shall be as the angels. We have

³¹ For the call for human breeding, see Noyes, “Essay on Scientific Propagation.” There are several excellent scholarly works on this fascinating group. For one example, see Klaw, *Without Sin*.

³² Kent, *Free Love*, 25. Plato addresses a similar issue in the *Symposium*, but the love of beauty as it is manifested in several people is but a stage along the way of increasing abstraction until one loves the idea of beauty itself. See Plato, *Symposium*, 211c.

no doubt that exclusive marriage prevails to some extent, in the lower spheres. But we do not call these angels of heaven.³³

Kent's effusiveness notwithstanding, many other free lovers also relied upon the language of the New Testament in which the angels are neither married nor given in marriage to provide theological leverage for their cause. This conjunction of Spiritualism, radical sexuality, and Christian rhetoric made for some extremely odd bedfellows, including the case of that most roaring of radicals, Victoria Woodhull.

A most cursory sketch of Victoria Woodhull's remarkable life would have to include that she was in the first group of women to address the House Judiciary Committee (which concluded that Elizabeth Cady Stanton's speech was superfluous after Woodhull's); that she and her sister were the first female stock brokers in America; that her newspaper printed the first translation of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and that he was a congenial pen pal; and that she was the first woman to run for president of the United States, with no one less than Frederick Douglass as her running mate. For two years she served as the president of the National Association of American Spiritualists.³⁴ She was also the most famous and outspoken advocate for free love in America.

In 1871, Victoria Woodhull delivered a speech, "The Elixir of Life," to the Chicago Convention of Spiritualists, in which she told her audience to prepare for the day when their daughters would be dating the dead.³⁵ The millennium, Woodhull claimed, was immediately at hand, but this would usher in not a Christian apostolic utopia but rather the return of the dead. Simultaneously, the living would eliminate disease which in turn would conquer death. Heaven and earth would literally be united, with the eternal living and the returned dead inhabiting the same millennial *topos*. The key to bringing about the second coming of the spirits was the implementation of free love.

The millennium of love can be attained either voluntarily or it will be imposed on people by the spirit realm at their return. She depicts the usually benign spirits as angry and vengeful, a departure from

³³ Kent, *Free Love*, 80–1.

³⁴ Bret Carroll has argued that the existence of just such organizations should indicate that Spiritualism was much less amorphous and much better organized than scholarship portrays it. I find his argument ultimately untenable. See his *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* for more information.

³⁵ For a more detailed reading of this speech set against cultural trends, see Gutierrez, "Sex in the City of God."

their normal status as perfectly happy in heaven and interceding in human affairs only when called upon to do so. Woodhull writes, “I tell you that the spirits are coming back to tear your damned system of sexual slavery into tatters and consign its blackened remnants to the depths of everlasting hell.”³⁶ Spiritualism, having dispensed with a final judgment, had no real language of the apocalypse, since its theology lacked a hell, a judging God, and a category of the damned. Woodhull reinfused Spiritualism with the rhetoric of the apocalyptic, but with an inversion of the usual roster of sins—humanity was misusing sexuality, and therefore the spirits were angered.

Despite her casual relationship to Christianity, Woodhull conscripted its traditional forms in the service of a reversal of what constitutes sinning:

Oh, children of the earth, that you had better put your houses in order and await the coming of the bridegroom or the bride. Accept sexual freedom while it can be attained, by degrees, and not wait until it shall tear up your souls at its sudden coming. . . . I have come to you, in time, to warn you to prepare for what is surely coming, aye, even now is at your very doors, liable to break in upon you and find you like the foolish virgins with your lamps untrimmed.³⁷

Sin, then, was normative sexuality and salvation was free love.

The rhetoric of the apocalypse, however, is undercut by the very nature of the millennium Woodhull was describing: this was no battle between the forces of good and evil, the ultimate in cosmic dualisms. Instead, this millennium would result in the happy collapsing of heaven and earth, a state in which all would enjoy perfect knowledge and the complete freedom of sexual expression. With death defeated, there would be free intercourse between the living and the dead, enmeshed together on the ladder of love:

Then shall we be able to bridge over the gloomy chasm of death, and to build for ourselves a Jacob’s ladder, reaching from earth to heaven, on which spirits and mortals will be perpetually engaged ascending and descending in unending harmony and felicity.³⁸

³⁶ Woodhull, “The Elixir of Life,” 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

The Ladder of Love

As Arthur Versluis and others have shown, America inherited Europe's legacy of esotericism.³⁹ Transplanted and transformed in a new landscape, American hermeticism continued the traditions of the Old World while stamping them ineluctably with the marks of an upstart nation. Spiritualism existed in this hybrid space of radical democracy—including metaphysical democracy—and the esoteric strains of a learned tradition. As a polyglot movement that crossed class, gender, and even occasionally racial boundaries, Spiritualists' understanding of erotic love reflected their diversity and mutual tolerance. The importance of the body and its expression in sexuality was never denied, however. Eros was more than appropriate, it was divine. Only the range of what fell within the category of proper erotics was subject for debate—the essential propriety of the erotic was not.

I have argued that two primary cultural productions must be taken into an account of Spiritualist sexuality. First, by abolishing hell, Spiritualists were logically forced to embrace the spectrum of human experience as heaven-worthy, including sexuality even in its worst expressions. By severing the primary dualism of heaven and hell, Spiritualists consequently had to sever an entire series of associated dualisms, like sin and salvation, bodies and souls, and a Swedenborgian version of adultery and marriage. By affirming that human error is not an ontological state of sin but rather a corruption of the good, Spiritualist believers moved all forms of antisocial behavior, including improper sexuality, into the realm of reform. Not the threat of brimstone but the promise of a progressive tomorrow would eliminate the misuse of sex. Declassified from sin to crime, bad sexuality was moved into the arena of the culturally operable, where it could be studied, counseled, and eventually cured. But it would not be condemned.

In what I hope to show was a related current, Spiritualist articulations of sexuality in heaven repeatedly thwart the characterization of even a heterosexual couple as a binary opposition. While the sexes were considered complementary in their natures, they were thought of not as polarized but rather as perfectly fitted pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The

³⁹ See Versluis, *Esoteric Origins*, particularly chapters three and four. Most recently, Alfred Gabay has written on the exportation of hermetic ideas from Europe to America, the American component of which he charmingly calls the "democracy of the soul." See *The Covert Enlightenment*, particularly chapter six.

long arm of Plato is felt everywhere in these discussions, with sexuality recreating the primal, androgynous whole from which we have all been rudely severed in life. Sex, including in heaven, is a recuperative technique that re-embodies humans as they were originally envisioned, not as separate sexes but as one. The situation, I would argue, is precisely analogous to what Versluis says about the commonalities of different forms of hermeticism: “Hieroeidetic knowledge can be understood in terms of a shift from an objectifying view of language based on self and other to a view of language as revelatory, as a *via positiva* leading toward transcendence of self-other divisions.”⁴⁰ Brimming with Platonism, Spiritualist sexuality overcame the subject-object distinction in its construction of true love.

Finally, I have argued that not even apocalyptic rhetoric in Spiritualism conforms to the binary distinctions that are indeed its very hallmark. Sexuality in the free love movement was too mobile and multiple to conform to dualisms of good and evil; in fact, the basic dualism of married monogamy was its primary target for destruction. Like Woodhull’s ladder that stretched from heaven to earth, the erotics of the afterlife were constantly in process, ascending and descending and unable to be caught in the stasis of marriage.

It is, I propose, precisely the image of the ladder, but this time a Platonic one, that prevents Spiritualism from accepting its most influential predecessor, Emanuel Swedenborg’s, vision of binary sexuality. Platonic and Neoplatonic thought colored all of Spiritualist writings, where the dominant metaphor of a ladder of spiritual knowledge prevailed. Multiple spheres of the heavens stand in for any number of more classically esoteric visions of ascent, from Plotinian emanations to the sephiroth of the Kabbalah and beyond. The universe was not reducible to the simple mathematics of the saved and the damned, and it would seem that generations of Americans remained completely unscathed by the Enlightenment and its privileging of God over man. Additional cultural creations by the Spiritualists would support an argument that Cartesian dualism simply passed them by: in many real ways, they failed to privilege culture over nature, men over women, whites over blacks, or Christianity over anything else. Retaining a Renaissance worldview in which the universe, including humanity, was shot through with the divine, Spiritualists liberated love to ascend to the highest heaven.

⁴⁰ Versluis, “What is Esoteric?” 12.

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SEXUAL MYSTICISMS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA:
JOHN HUMPHREY NOYES, THOMAS LAKE HARRIS,
AND ALICE BUNKER STOCKHAM

ARTHUR VERSLUIS

When we look at the more noteworthy developments in nineteenth-century American attitudes regarding sexuality, we can consider them in terms of broad social changes—like the emergence of the “free love” movement in the nineteenth century—or focus on particularly significant individuals. Here we choose the latter approach, for while a general understanding of broad social movements is of course important as background, the study of American esotericism inexorably requires one to consider specific individuals, their context, writings, and thought. This is particularly true when it comes to nineteenth-century American exemplars of sexual mysticism—that is to say, authors whose writings and lives turn on an esoteric understanding of heterosexual practices as part of a spiritual path toward angelic union of the sexes that in turn becomes reunion with the divine.

There are only a few nineteenth-century American authors whose works and lives include a developed esoteric sexual mysticism, but each of these figures is historically quite important.¹ Two of them, John Humphrey Noyes and Thomas Lake Harris, were among the most successful and influential leaders of utopian communities in the history of the United States. Harris, in particular, saw heterosexual union as part of an esoteric Christian mysticism aimed at realization of an angelic androgynic unity and ultimately at union with God.

John Humphrey Noyes and Oneida

Among the most famous and long-lived of American utopian communities is Oneida, the founding and charismatic leader of which was John

¹ In this chapter we do not discuss proponents of sexual magic, such as notably Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875), who is the subject of a chapter by John Patrick Deveney elsewhere in this volume.

Humphrey Noyes (1811–1886). Noyes’s community and Noyes himself has been the subject of a lively scholarly industry—indeed, there are books about Noyes dating from as early as the mid-nineteenth century, such as Rev. Hubbard Eastman’s *Noyesism Revealed* (1848). Clearly, what generated all this interest in Noyes were his controversial sexual doctrines and practices. Noyes is best known for his encouragement, and his community’s practice, of communal marriage and for endorsing the practice of *coitus reservatus* in an innovative Christian doctrinal context.

Noyes came from a fairly wealthy merchant family and graduated from Dartmouth. A first cousin to President Rutherford B. Hayes, he was converted in the great revival of 1831 and went to divinity school at Yale, where he began to pursue radical causes. Endorsing William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionism, Noyes also began to endorse “perfectionism,” the idea that Christians should try to attain complete salvation from sin in this life. This approach has a long history in Christianity and often was persecuted in Europe—one thinks, for instance, of the Cathar heretics of Provençal France, whose highest level was that of the *perfecti*. Like them, Noyes aimed for the perfect life on earth. Also like the Cathars and similar groups, he and his community were not exactly welcomed by society at large.

Early on, Noyes began to see exclusive wedlock as an unhealthy institution. As he gathered a perfectionist community in Putney, Vermont, he began to publish his views, which scandalized his neighbors and ultimately caused his community to flee to Oneida in 1848. There they practiced an interesting and relatively well-organized kind of socialism in which matters of procreation and sexual intercourse, as well as most other decisions, were subject to community judgment. While the community at Oneida, which by 1851 had 205 members, was controversial for its sexual views, it was in fact fairly conservative in many other respects, not least in its business practices, which included the production of dinner silverware in addition to farming and logging. Indeed, when the community effectively disbanded in 1881, it did so by forming the Oneida Corporation, which is still responsible for manufacturing Oneida silverware today.

The most controversial of Noyes’s contentions was his affirmation of “complex marriage” and male continence. As practiced at Oneida, the latter consisted in sexual intercourse without male ejaculation, which, Noyes insisted, transformed intercourse from an animalistic rutting into, at least potentially, a vehicle of spiritual experience. Although this

view has parallels in both Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism, Noyes almost certainly did not derive his approach to sexuality from Asian traditions. Where he did get it, however, remains unclear.

Hannah Whitall Smith, in her book *Religious Fanaticism* (1928), writes fairly favorably of Noyes, remarking that he and his teachings were less “dangerous” than those of Harris. According to her,

the followers of Noyes...constructed a world of their own, in which special laws prevailed, and...adopted a highly peculiar system of sex morality. But they were neither ascetic nor licentious, but on the contrary strictly practical and severely disciplined.²

Smith had visited both the Noyes and the Harris communities, and writes that whereas Oneida was “pleasant, if erratic,” Harris’s community and “strange religion” was

dark and mysterious, wrapped in a sort of esoteric symbolism, and enveloping a secret central doctrine which grows more and more repulsive the closer one approaches to understanding it.³

Furthermore, whereas Noyes was “a shrewd and honest fellow,” Harris she considered a “greedy and dangerous sensualist, self-deluded, no doubt, but arrogant, harsh, and revengeful.”⁴

Smith’s distaste for Harris has much to do with the comparative complexity of his thought, and with the fact that whereas Noyes was relatively forthright about the unusual sexual arrangements of the Noyesian utopian community, Harris was much more secretive: his communities clearly did have inner and outer circles. Noyes’s teachings concerning such relatively esoteric sexual techniques as *coitus reservatus* were quite innovative, but neither his community at Oneida nor his work in general show many explicit connections to prior esoteric currents or traditions. By contrast, Harris’s writings and communities emerged from, and thoroughly reflect, earlier esoteric currents, Swedenborgianism in particular, and to a lesser extent Christian theosophy in the tradition of Jacob Böhme.

Such differences between these two major American founders of utopian communities account, I would argue, for their very different scholarly treatment during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

² Hannah Whitall Smith, *Religious Fanaticism*, 100, 106.

³ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Noyes, his community, and his sexual teachings, are the subject of an academic cottage industry (perhaps appropriately, given the industrial successes of Oneida), with publications such as Richard DeMaria's *Communal Love at Oneida* (1978), Robert Fogarty's *Special Love/Special Sex* (1994) and *Desire and Duty at Oneida* (2000), Lawrence Foster's (ed.) *Free Love in Utopia* (2001), and Spencer Klaw's *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (1993), not to mention the numerous articles and other works devoted to this general subject and theme. By contrast, almost nothing at all has been written about Thomas Lake Harris, although William James called him "America's best known mystic." Why is Harris today obscure, while Noyes is the subject of so much study?

As I suggested above, Harris's esotericism may have been a major reason. Noyes's community was in many ways more accessible and immediately comprehensible: Oneida was an astonishing industrial success, and even its unusual sexual dimensions were, as Noyes himself even euphemistically called them, essentially *social*. There is an extraverted, public, even flamboyant aspect to nearly everything about Oneida. Harris, by contrast, though he too led very large and fairly prosperous utopian communities in New York and in California, lived a much more reclusive and inward-directed life, one that is (despite obvious and profound differences of doctrine and practice) not entirely dissimilar to the life of theosophers such as John Pordage or Johann Georg Gichtel.⁵ In short, to most modern historians Harris is much less accessible and far more foreign in background and mode of expression than Noyes. But precisely for that reason, he is all the more interesting to the historian of esotericism.

Thomas Lake Harris

Harris was born in England and emigrated to America in 1828. In 1845, he became a Universalist minister in New York City, a career which served him for less than two years, for in 1847 he joined the circle around the well-known "spiritualist theologian" Andrew Jackson Davis. But shortly thereafter, Harris became disillusioned by Davis's endorsement of "free love" and moved to Mountain Cove, Virginia (now in West Virginia), where he lived with a spiritualist community

⁵ See Antoine Faivre's chapter in this volume; and cf. Versluis, *The Wisdom of John Pordage*.

from 1850–1853. The community eventually failed and Harris resumed his travels, lecturing on spiritualism in the East and South. During the 1850s, Harris wrote didactic spiritual poetry and developed his seminal ideas, including a belief in fairies and in inner spiritual marriage to one's "counterpart." His first wife, Mary—who bore two sons—died unexpectedly in 1850, and he remarried in 1855 to Emily Waters, who accepted Harris's inner marriage to the "Lily Queen," and lived in celibacy with him until her death in 1885.

After undergoing a series of profound inner experiences during the 1850s and having developed much of his theology and cosmology, Harris and his wife traveled to England in 1859, where he announced his own esoteric millennialist group called the "Brotherhood of the New Life," intended for the "reorganization of the industrial world." Back in America in 1861, Harris established his group at Brocton, Salem-on-Erie, New York, and another in Fountain Grove, California, where Harris and an inner circle moved in 1875. His Brotherhood was known for its avant-garde views on sexuality, and it eventually came to draw heavily on the Western esoteric traditions.

Harris's early work emerged within the New England Swedenborgian ambience of the 1850s. Addressing that audience, he drew very much on its characteristic vocabulary and worldview, but in fact he presented himself as the successor to Swedenborg. The idea of such a succession had a background in the view among liberal Swedenborgians, such as Prof. George Bush of New York University, that the Swedenborgian system provided not an endpoint, but a foundation from which later revelations would emerge.⁶ Thus, in *The Arcana of Christianity* (1858) and in its sequel, *The Song of Satan* (1860), Harris claimed to have received the direct visionary blessing of Swedenborg himself and to have achieved an even higher level of revelation. Indeed, Christ (often referred to in Harris's work as "Christ-Christa") had appeared to Harris and said, "I will open thine eyes and instruct thy heart henceforth in the celestial principle, which is the inmost sense."⁷ One can readily imagine the responses of many New Church members to Harris's implicit claim of superiority to Swedenborg's teachings.

It is clear that Harris's characteristic views had been worked out already during this relatively early period, and that his subsequent

⁶ See Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 22.

⁷ Harris, *The Arcana of Christianity*, I.44.

controversial life was an unfolding of them. At the end of his life, early in the twentieth century and nearly fifty years later, we find him struggling against demonic influences and in visionary realms, while suffering related physical torments and regarding himself as the “pivotal man” in the world, the single figure who incarnates the primal apocalyptic struggle between good and evil. But already in the 1850s we find Harris writing about “internal respiration” (a concept derived from Swedenborg), about the existence of “fays” or faeries, and about the spiritual importance of male-female “counterparts”: a theory that derived from the Swedenborgian idea of “conjugal” love.

It is not easy to make one’s way through Harris’s works. Much of what he writes is prolix and more or less train-of-thought with various digressions. For example, his book *The Millennial Age* is a record of his extemporaneous remarks at the Marylebone Institute in London, in February and March of 1860. As a result, it is a frustrating text with much blather and little substance. Only occasionally does one gain a sense of what made Harris such a strikingly attractive figure for those of his contemporaries who became part of his circle and who perhaps enjoyed being awash in Harris’s flood of verbiage. He must have been a charismatic speaker who gave his audience a sense of being genuinely in touch with invisible realities.

The primary influence on Harris was Swedenborg, though one can detect some possible traces of Christian theosophy as well. But naturally, Harris insisted that his thought and vision was original to him:

It was my privilege to behold the Lord, whom I saw in his divine appearing, and who laid upon me the charge of receiving and unfolding such of those arcana of the celestial sense as are contained within this volume.⁸

The language here, as in much of Harris’s work, is Swedenborgian in origin; where Swedenborg wrote of “conjugal” relations between men and women, Harris taught a doctrine of “counterparts,” and so forth. As already indicated, there are also some parallels between some of Harris’s writings and Böhmean theosophy. For example, Harris later began to insist that the individual in a divine marriage is linked not with an earthly counterpart, but with the “Lily Queen” of heaven. This term is derived from Böhme’s prophecies of a coming *Lilienzeit*, or time

⁸ Harris, *The Arcana of Christianity*, I.9.

of the lily, and from the Böhmean tradition of the soul's marriage to Sophia, or divine Wisdom.

A particularly interesting passage about one of Harris's spiritual groups is to be found in a letter published in the *New Jerusalem Messenger*, now the *New Church Messenger*. This group of about fifty people was led by S.E. Reynolds, who had been ordained by Harris, and met in an old schoolhouse. The description of their meetings is very interesting:

Speeches are given by influx. To those whose interiors are quickened, this influx is both visible and sensible. When intelligence and faith are treated of, it is through the left temple. When love to the Lord and His Kingdom, through the top of the head and extending to the heart and lungs. When the Word is illuminated the influx is through the forehead. Those who are in self-love will soon be pervaded by an influx from the hells, passing in at the back of the head and neck, opening interior sight and pervading the entire back. These will soon deny the Lord, or imagine that they are filled with the Holy Ghost... For my part I think that but the few will attain unto inspiration, while the great mass of mankind who have spiritual manifestations, will receive them from spirits in self-love, filling the world with a literature vastly inferior to that of the ordinary schools of the day.⁹

This description clearly reflects Swedenborg's characteristic habit of linking various types of influx to very specific parts of the human body (which microcosmically parallels the body of the divine "Grand Man"), but there may be Böhmean connections as well. Harris's English follower W.P. Swainson remarked frequently, in his book on Harris's occult teachings, concerning the parallels between Böhme's teachings and those of Harris, but there are also parallels between Harris's teachings and some aspects of the Philadelphians' works.¹⁰

Although he remains relatively little-known, Harris was a prolific author. In addition to *Arcana of Christianity: An Unfolding of the Celestial Sense of the Divine Word* (1858–1867), he published a collection of extemporaneous lectures entitled *The Millennial Age: Twelve Discourses on the Spiritual and Social Aspects of the Times* (1860), a monograph on "universal religion" entitled *The Breath of God with Man* (1867), and, in the

⁹ *New Jerusalem Messenger*, now the *New Church Messenger*, II.108, I.349–350.

¹⁰ See Swainson, *Thomas Lake Harris and His Occult Teachings*, 64ff. On the Philadelphians, see Versluis, *Wisdom's Children*. For extracts from experiential texts written by the Philadelphians, see Versluis, *Wisdom's Book*. An extended comparison of Harris's and his followers' writings with the Philadelphian writings, including the works also of John Pordage, would be most interesting but is beyond the scope of this article.

book *The Golden Child* (1878), a daily chronicle of life in the California community he had founded. Harris has also left us hymns and songs, and there is a significant body of unpublished material.

In *Religious Fanaticism* (1928), Hannah Whitall Smith, who seems to have devoted much of her life to gathering rumors about utopian visionaries in nineteenth-century America, wrote that Harris had spent several years “in the Orient, where he learnt a strange vocabulary,” and attracted adherents from as far away as Japan.¹¹ Of course, Harris had not actually gone to the Orient, but it is true that he had a number of Japanese followers.¹² Whatever “the Orient” means here, Smith’s comment would suggest that Harris may have had some contact with Buddhism, and at first glance one might be tempted to perceive some allusions to Buddhist meditation in, for instance, *The Millennial Age*, when Harris talks about one of his pet themes, “internal respiration.” “Redemption of the body,” he tells his audience, “is to begin with internal respiration.”¹³ But in fact Harris is alluding to a particular kind of breathing that derives from Swedenborg and that is understood to be a result of divine grace rather than a conscious practice or discipline. That Harris knew little about Buddhism is quite obvious some pages later, when he speaks of Buddhism’s goal as “‘nigban,’ the utter cessation of active faculty,” “heaven as eternal stagnor” that “ends at last in the stagnation of the inner man even here below.”¹⁴ His dismissal of Buddhism echoes the prevailing literature of the day.¹⁵ It seems clear, then, that Harris’s esotericism was thoroughly European in origin.

Although there are perhaps some elements of Harris’s teaching concerning “counterparts” that could be seen as resembling Asian Tantrism, everything I have studied would suggest Western esoteric origins for this particular doctrine. Some of the theology behind the doctrine—including a male-female divinity, and a belief in an enduring transcendent spiritual body—is to be found in the Christian theosophic tradition and in Swedenborg’s theory of “conjugal” love.¹⁶ Harris’s doctrine of counterparts states that each individual, male or female, has a counterpart of the other gender. It is rare for both counterparts to

¹¹ See Smith, *Religious Fanaticism*, 121.

¹² See Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 154, 199–200.

¹³ Harris, *The Millennial Age*, 142.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁵ See Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, 16–50.

¹⁶ Swanson emphasizes the parallels with Böhme’s work, esp. *Thomas Lake Harris*, 64ff.

be incarnated and married; in general, one's counterpart is a spiritual being.¹⁷ Hence one comes to know one's counterpart through an inner revelatory process, and this is important in view of the public attacks on Harris in the newspapers, instigated by a young woman named Alzire Chevaillier near the end of the period when he was at Fountain Grove. She publicly revealed Harris's teaching of counterparts and gave it a particularly lurid spin.¹⁸ But many other accounts and documents show that in fact Fountain Grove seems to have been an ascetic community, where the sexes were largely separated. The personal accounts of some members indicate that there were sexual dimensions to the counterpart experiences, but they refer to experiences of union with non-physical beings. Still, it is evident that Harris's teachings also included a joint male-female transformative process.

One of the most extensive discussions by Harris of a husband-wife joint process of transformation is to be found in his *Arcana of Christianity* (1867).¹⁹ Harris writes that "through the body of the female Word, God reveals Himself to the woman," but the woman

needs therefore the hierophant, who becomes masculine-feminine, supplying from his masculine mind the bodies for the spirits of the ideas disrobed of their ultimate appearance, and left as feminine bodies for the woman's eyes.²⁰

Elsewhere, he writes that "through the Woman's Word, in the organism of the wife, its virginal sense is first unfolded in the male organism."²¹

¹⁷ See Harris, "The Children of Hymen," in *The Herald of Light*, II.307. Harris writes "Had moral evil never prevailed upon your orb each would have found its own mate and the celestial nuptials been ultimated in the natural union. The Divine Providence, now and for ages has permitted the natural union to occur between spirits who are not in all instances destined to eternal conjugal oneness in the Heavens. For the opposition between the Heavenly and the earthly life is so great that were those who were destined to be thus conjoined in the celestial nuptials externally united, the strife between externals and internals would be...fearful." At the same time, "marriage, by the conjunction of spirits in whom regeneration is complete, is the return of the twain into primal oneness."

¹⁸ That there was a sexual dimension to these practices was central to the public accusations of Alzire Chevaillier, who raised such a stir that eventually Harris felt compelled to leave the estate near Santa Rosa and travel East. Similar accusations were leveled against Laurence Oliphant, Harris's most famous and remarkable erstwhile follower. See Smith, *Religious Fanaticism*, 219–228; see also Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 534–560.

¹⁹ See Harris, *Arcana of Christianity*.

²⁰ Harris, *Arcana of Christianity*, I.250.

²¹ *Ibid.*, I.349.

These are typically obscure remarks, but it appears Harris is suggesting that a man and a woman play important roles in spiritual awakening for one another.²² Following this discipline, which can condense ten years of inner work into one, can lead the husband and wife into a “crowning with the crown of life.”²³ Like John Pordage, Harris writes about a process of inward “new creation,” though unlike Pordage, Harris’s new creation comes about through a process of male-female joint inner transformation, aided by “fays” or inner spirits.²⁴

In the 1850s, Harris came to oppose what he called Swedenborgian “sectarianism,” and it is clear why. In Harris’s view,

[the] sect of Swedenborgians is built around a nucleus of written memorials. It is purely historical; necessary perhaps to make up the complement of the sects, but valueless in the sense of a Divine Institution.²⁵

Harris was impatient with those who adhered to sectarian doctrines but were unwilling to enter into a transformative process themselves. In addition to a mutual male-female transformative process, other characteristic esoteric aspects of Harris’s works include the internal respiration already alluded to and visionary travels and travails.

Internal respiration, a term derived from Swedenborg’s *respiratio interna*, in Harris takes on a particularly personal dimension.

Here is a description from a woman member of Harris’s Brotherhood of New Life at Salem-on-Erie, New York. She entered a dark night of the soul in which

her whole state [was] one of indescribable agitation and grief. Then came the opening of the Breath in the night and all suffering ceased. . . . It begins in the lower part of the abdomen, and from thence rises and fills the lungs. . . . as high as the throat and down to the knees.

This, we are told, was the first degree, and in the “deepest degrees” it “is felt from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head,” and is “full of comfort to spirit and body.”²⁶ Furthermore, she is subsequently filled with great love and tenderness when she reads the Bible or contemplates the life of Christ. The descriptions of “internal breathing” have specific physical aspects; it is clearly not abstract or strictly intellectual.

²² Ibid., I.332.

²³ Ibid., I.349.

²⁴ Ibid., I.333.

²⁵ See Harris, in *The Herald of Light*, II.437.

²⁶ Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 173.

The visionary dimensions of Harris's teachings have their clearest predecessors in Andrew Jackson Davis and, before that, in the work of Swedenborg. Harris's accounts include visiting the spiritual inhabitants of planets like Saturn or Venus, as well as the Sun. This is an established current that we also see later in the *Sympneumata* of Laurence Oliphant, Harris's erstwhile student. When, in 1922, Harris's English follower W.P. Swainson wrote a small volume titled *Thomas Lake Harris and His Occult Teachings*, he began with a few chapters devoted to Harris's fantastic visionary voyages to various planets and continued by offering a lucid and concise description of Harris's accounts "of the conditions of life on the sinless or unfallen worlds."²⁷ These worlds are described as beautiful and "ethereal," or "aromal." Venus, Mars, Jupiter, the other planets, and even distant suns are inhabited by peoples with their own civilizations and unique planetary characteristics. As Swainson puts it, Harris

makes such stupendous claims that, on first acquaintance, one naturally feels skeptical as to the truth of much that he asserts. Even after a more or less comprehensive study of his writings it is difficult to bring oneself to accept many of his statements.²⁸

What distinguishes Harris's visionary experiences is the pivotal role that he himself plays in the invisible worlds or dimensions. He was often referred to by his disciples as the "Primate," sometimes as the "Faithful," or even as "Primate Pivotal Twain-in-One"; and he described himself as "the pivot." His disciples regarded him more or less the way Sufi disciples are said to regard their shaykh. He consistently believed himself to intervene not only in local or regional metaphysical dimensions, but also on a national and international as well as cosmic scale. Account after account by his contemporaries and by Harris himself has him struggling with demons, exorcising them, and curing the possessed or afflicted, to such an extent that Schneider and Lawton are unable to resist poking fun at him—as when, late in his life, Harris's wife makes a skin rash into an outbreak of the hells on earth. There are parallels with Gichtel and (to a lesser extent) with Pordage, as well as with, more recently, the magical order of Dion Fortune or the writings of Kyriacos Markides about the Magus of Strovolos. Common in many of these

²⁷ See Swainson, *Thomas Lake Harris and His Occult Teachings*, 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

cases is the idea of a band of magi who intercede spiritually in order to combat what Harris called “inversive” forces.

Given that Harris’s community was very much an esoteric one, it is important to look not only at his own writings, but also those of his disciples. Quite direct and revealing is a narrative called “A Sister in the New Life,” from letters written by an anonymous young woman who came to the Harris community in 1881. This gives a very lucid portrait of what it was like to enter into the Harris circle. The narrative is phenomenological: it is filled with descriptions of the author’s inner states in relation to Harris. There are also references to Swedenborgians, like the following: “I was told one thing by him [Harris], that Swedenborgianism, more than any other -ism, destroyed truth and goodness. All the greatest troubles and worst lies that have been sent by the evil powers against him, have come through that sect.”²⁹ But much more characteristic is the author’s descriptions of her inner experiences, which shed much light on the experiential dimensions of Harris’s esoteric teachings.

The letters have no author’s name, but they exist in a number of versions with titles like “From a Lady in San Francisco to a Friend in England.” The narrative begins almost immediately with descriptions of unusual inner sensations and phenomena. She writes of a peculiar vibrating sensation in her arms, which gradually extended throughout her body.

The first time that it came into my body, that is the trunk, it seemed to enter through the generative organs, and with it came the thought, this is like sexual intercourse, only infinitely more so, in that every atom of your frame enters into union with another atom to the furthest extremity of your body.³⁰

She felt “infinitely calm and peaceful, nothing turbulent and passionate about it, and my only desire was to constantly pray in thankfulness.” The next day (17 May 1881), she felt as if “little wings” were moving in her breast, along with great exhaustion and a sense of joy.

The erotic dimension of these experiences is obvious. Already by May 23, she felt her counterpart within her, referring to him as her inner husband or angel, and she realized with “reverence” “the Mother’s temple within myself,” and that “the womb and life-giving organs

²⁹ Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 518. See also 527.

³⁰ Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 511.

must be very holy.”³¹ Both the author and her sister felt an associated change in breathing, and sometimes when the vibrations began they gripped one another in order to feel what was going on, “and she can feel something like electricity almost.”³² She later writes (5 June 1881) how “very strange” was the feeling of her counterpart, which began with “a strange sensation in my arms,” “gradually extending all over.”³³ This was a “delightful” sensation, yet she became

so utterly exhausted and worn out that I feel at times as if I could not endure it. I never used to have a conscious sensation about my body, and now it is all changed. The breathing, the circulation, rushing, flutterings, turnings, and I scarce know what, make me never free from a consciousness of my body all the time.

Needless to say, all of this activity gave her insomnia, but if exhaustion was a price she had to pay, the purchase was a sense of “ecstasy” and of dissolving into an invisible other.³⁴ She felt a movement in her “bowels” or womb, and at times her spine seemed to vanish.³⁵ She feels, by December 3, “currents of life flowing into me continually, and Father [Harris] says they are from him.”

Harris’s doctrines included a belief in faeries, and in this regard he continues a tradition that has predecessors in such quasi-Rosicrucian works as Abbé N. de Montfaucon de Villars’s *Comte de Gabalis* (1670) and, of course, in British traditions concerning faeries. Faeries, or the “fay,” as Harris and his community called them, play a significant role in “A Sister in the New Life.” Harris acted as a medium for “fairies,” on one occasion “talk[ing] for over an hour” and “answer[ing] all sorts of questions in the loveliest soft lisp[ing] notes, they are mostly vowel sounds.”³⁶ The sister’s account includes numerous references to small voices and to beautiful little people, who sing little refrains within her, for example, “This is love and love is bliss; life is love and love’s a kiss.”³⁷ Here is the entry from 9 June 1881, at Fountain Grove in Santa Rosa:

³¹ Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 514.

³² Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 515.

³³ Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 523.

³⁴ Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 524.

³⁵ Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 531.

³⁶ Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 531.

³⁷ Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 521.

They told me about the fays while I was up at Fountain Grove; how at first a little “Two-in-one” would move into a person’s breast as soon as they could find entrance, and then clearing a space would begin to build their house; soon they would have a garden and plant fruit-trees; and then little baby fays would be born. The fays have many babies, and so they keep and keep on enlarging the spaces and filling them full of beautiful houses, gardens, and groves, till at last the whole being, to the very extremities of fingers and toes, is all a fairy universe, a world of loveliness. Just think of having lovely little fays bathing in the veins.³⁸

There is something charming about this little story, to be sure. What makes the account particularly unusual is that the fay are experienced as bodily phenomena: they are accompanied by particular sensations (“flutterings”) as well as by inner songs. From this detailed personal narrative by “A Sister in the New Life,” we can gain at least some sense of how Harris’s abstract concepts in *Arcana of Christianity* and elsewhere manifested themselves in individual experiences within his esoteric community.

An obliquely critical portrait of Harris is visible in Laurence Oliphant’s two-volume novel *Masollam* (1886). Oliphant, a wealthy English nobleman and member of Parliament, had become a disciple of Harris’s in the fall of 1867, and at least half of the Brocton community holdings were purchased with Oliphant’s money. Later, Oliphant and his wife left Harris’s community in a very public and ugly falling-out, with many mutual recriminations. In *Masollam*, Harris’s erstwhile disciple depicts himself as the hero, with the transparently obvious name of “Santalba” [implying “holy” and “white”] whereas Masollam (Harris) is depicted as a man who has originally had real spiritual experience and insights but has gone astray. Given Oliphant’s and Harris’s public and bitter parting of the ways, it is not surprising that the same thing happens in the novel. While the novel is prolix—it could have been less than half its length—it does include some very interesting indications of Harris’s teachings.

In the middle of the second volume, Santalba gives the following set of teachings to a Druse shaikh, referring to a young woman named “Anima,” who had been raised and trained by Masollam. Santalba tells the shaikh that

³⁸ Schneider & Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim*, 525.

the world's deliverance has come, and it has come in the form of a woman. It could not be delivered hitherto, because the sexes were divided; but in union is strength. It is only when the sexes are united according to the divine intention that the redemptive forces for the world's deliverance can play through them; and it is through the operation of the divine feminine that this union must be achieved. This is the interpretation of your vision of the twofold Word. Regard women, therefore—but especially the woman by your side [Anima]—in a different light from what you have hitherto done.³⁹

Soon after, Sheikh Mohanna tells Santalba:

You have said that the highest form of inspiration could only descend by means of the operation of a conjunction of masculine and feminine elements; and that therefore its most fitting receptacle was an associated pair.⁴⁰

But, he goes on to inquire, what if one's partner has died, as happened to Santalba [and in real life, to Oliphant]? Santalba replies:

She who was my associate on earth, and who has passed into higher conditions, is not prevented thereby from co-operating with me. . . . due to the fact that during our external union we had, by long and arduous effort and ordeal, arrived at a consummation, whereby an internal and imperishable tie had been created, the mystery of which I dare not enter upon now.

Suffice it to say, Santalba notes, that his “consociation” with his dead wife is not mere mediumship but “a permanent condition of free and independent mental association, with a pure intelligence of the upper region.”⁴¹ In ordinary spiritualism,

the bodily health is injured, the intellectual faculties are enfeebled. . . by the invasion of influences which torture the mind and body which they have made their abiding-place, and which cannot be ejected. It is the penalty which poor mortals pay for attempting to pry, by disorderly methods, into the secrets of nature, which they are not meant to penetrate.

By contrast, this higher union results in

increased mental vigour and bodily strength, a consciousness of moral and intellectual freedom and spontaneity. The individuality, instead of being suppressed, is reinforced. With every accession of power there flows

³⁹ Oliphant, *Masollom*, II.123.

⁴⁰ Oliphant, *Masollom*, II.128–129.

⁴¹ Oliphant, *Masollom*, II.130.

in a rushing current of love for the human race, and a desire to serve it. There is no longing to pry into mysteries, because knowledge seems to ripen in the mind more rapidly than it can be acted on.⁴²

One could object that what we see above are Oliphant's teachings, not those of Harris. But earlier in the novel, Masollam [Harris] tells the young Anima that

alone I am powerless; that it is only a woman who can feed me with the elements which are essential to the ultimatum of my forces, which need this conjunction to render them operative. . . . For the rule of the man is naught without the woman.⁴³

Both characters, Santalba and Masollam, teach that the spiritual union of man and woman is essential, and this is a direct reflection of their theology of a male-female God. The male-female nature of God is the secret discerned by Santalba's Druse chieftain friend Sheikh Mohanna, and it is central to the themes of the novel as a whole.⁴⁴ Those who go astray in the novel—notably Masollam and his wife—do so by detours away from spiritual union and divine service into passion or ambition. The novel is not flattering to Harris, but it does nonetheless reflect some of Harris's most characteristic and central teachings.

Alice Bunker Stockham

While Noyes and Harris were more widely influential—both because of their writings and because of their utopian communities—one final figure must be mentioned here as exemplary of what I have termed

⁴² Oliphant, *Masollom*, 130–131.

⁴³ Oliphant, *Masollom*, I.253.

⁴⁴ Oliphant, *Masollom*, II.111–112, where Sheikh Mohanna tells Santalba that he “now perceived, what has been hidden from the faithful till now, that the ‘Eternal Word’ was twofold, masculine and feminine, and the feminine principle was shown to me that I might understand this, and I was further made aware that my apprehension of this truth would constitute my deliverance.” He sees a female figure in blinding light, who places a warning finger on her lips. His first experience “of intercourse with the gross and superficial beings in the unseen world” “helped me to work wonders and perform acts of healing.” His “second experience” was “of those profounder and subtler intelligences of a more nether sphere, who delude men with the specious phraseology of occult science, and seek to draw them away from the practice of true religion, by the substitution for it of esoteric dogmas.” Now he perceived the “difference between the true and false” but found it “impossible to describe,” to be “apprehended only by experience; and . . . as my people were not yet ready to receive this truth, I must be silent in regard to it.”

American esoteric pragmatism: the remarkable Alice Bunker Stockham (1833–1912).⁴⁵ Stockham founded no utopian community, and like Harris she has been overlooked by scholars, but she was a significant author whose work continues and develops the Noyesian tradition of *coitus reservatus* in marriage. One of the first female M.D.s in the United States, trained as an obstetrician/gynecologist whose practice was based in Chicago, Stockham writes in a manner that reflects her medical training and perspective. In this work, we do not find evidence of the Swedenborgian/Böhmean current of androgynic mysticism that we encountered in Harris's teachings. What we do find is typical of what we might call a more secular sexual mysticism of human creativity.

Although Stockham did visit India, it is highly improbable that as a tourist who did not speak the requisite languages, and as a woman, Stockham could have been initiated into an actual Tantric sect in India. In fact it is very clear that her work derives directly from the previous writing of John Humphrey Noyes. In her most important work, *Karezza* (1896), she includes corroborating testimony that cites without attribution Noyes's well-known description of how *coitus reservatus*

may be compared to a stream in three conditions, viz.: 1. a fall; 2, a course of rapids above the fall; and 3, still water above the rapids. The skillful boatman may choose whether he will remain in the still water, or venture more or less down the rapids, or run his boat over the fall.⁴⁶

Although his name is never mentioned, not only is the description uniquely Noyes's, but so too is Stockham's sexual theory of *karezza* (sexual intercourse without male ejaculation), right down to the description of its health benefits for both men and women.

This having been said, one also has to acknowledge the unique dimensions of Stockham's own work. Harris's teachings were truly esoteric, and even Noyes's teachings were intended primarily for the benefits of his followers, but Stockham sought to disseminate the idea of *coitus reservatus* as widely as possible. Her books, especially *Karezza*, are filled with the spirit of proselytization for what she clearly saw as a possible, indeed, a necessary socio-sexual revolution. The relations between the sexes could be entirely transformed, if only husband and

⁴⁵ See Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 134–149. For some background information, see Sears, *The Sex Radicals*.

⁴⁶ See Stockham, *Karezza*, 121.

wife would begin to practice the ascetic discipline of occasional intercourse without ejaculation.

And Stockham went further, arguing that just as ordinary sexual intercourse leads to procreation, likewise spiritual intercourse conducted without ejaculation would lead to what she calls “procreation of thought” and to a higher union of male and female. While Stockham is exoteric in her desire to convey her sexual theory as widely as possible, she is drawing on a long-standing tradition of the androgyne in Western esotericism when she writes that “in every soul there is a duality, the male and female principle,” and that “though but one in spirit, in spiritual expression soul in every person is twofold, a blended male and female.”⁴⁷ Thus, she continues,

as sex is in the soul[,] it is not impossible, as spiritual unity is developed, that a procreation of thought may be accomplished—that is, a procreation on the spiritual plane, not of individuals, but of principles and theories that can be practically developed for the good of the world.⁴⁸

Hence even the more classically esoteric dimensions of Stockham’s thought—like the aspiration to androgyneity—are ultimately legitimated for her only by their exoteric consequences “practically developed for the good of the world.”

What we see in the work of Stockham is a particularly American kind of esotericism, one concerned largely with specific practices and with pragmatic individual and social results. Unconcerned with religious particularities, Stockham’s work stands in the long American tradition of universalism and pragmatism whose greatest representative is Emerson, a tradition with no lack of representatives through to Alan Watts, the human potential movements, East-West syncretism, New Age figures and sects, right into the present day. Like Noyes before her, like William James, Stockham was concerned with results and effects for the individual, as well as with the potential transformation of the whole of human society.

⁴⁷ Stockham, *Karezza*, 94.

⁴⁸ Stockham, *Karezza*, 95.

Concluding Remarks

One contemporary critique of both Noyes and Harris (though not of Stockham) was that they were not only perfectionists but also antinomians. As early as 1849, the Rev. Hubbard Eastman wrote of Noyes as “the great magician of Putney” and as no less “an impostor than the far-famed Arabian Prophet! Mahometanism, Mormonism, Perfectionism, and a long catalogue of other *isms*, are all of kindred character.”⁴⁹ The incensed Rev. Eastman also quotes a Mr. Pratt, whose local newspaper editorial gives a flavor of the time. Pratt asserts, in even more inflamed rhetoric than Eastman, that Noyesism is no less than a “monster of iniquity,” and that “each member of it holds to principles that justify theft, robbery, arson, and murder, and all other crimes his evil passions prompt; for he *cannot* sin, and his impulse is the only *law* he recognizes.”⁵⁰ Eastman quotes from a variety of such editorials and assessments of the perfectionists, and the gist of all of them is that perfectionism is a form of antinomianism. Likewise, Harris was predictably accused of being a libertine who justified his actions by way of a religious rationale.

In fact, however, there is no evidence that either Noyes or Harris were antinomians, at least if the word “antinomian” is taken to mean those who believe that they have the freedom to commit all manner of crimes. Indeed, Noyes was renowned as a shrewd and honest businessman—it is no accident that Oneida became a wealthy industrial community. And Harris’s various communities were likewise quite wealthy and, by most accounts, well-organized. His community at Brocton ran a restaurant and a hotel. His nearly eighteen-hundred-acre estate in California included a thriving vineyard and winery. Although their sexual theories were outside social norms, Noyes and Harris and their respective followers and communities were widely respected, and when their sexual theories and practices began to be revealed, a number of local people and newspapers expressed disbelief in the accusations.

Compare this record to the kind of antinomianism manifested in early modernity in the works and lives of Ranters like Abiezer Coppe (1619–1672), Tobias Crisp (1609–1643), and Lawrence Clarkson

⁴⁹ See Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 183.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 281, citing an editorial in the *Phoenix*, 7 January, 1848.

(1615–1667). It was Crisp who famously said that “to be called a libertine is the most glorious title under heaven.”⁵¹ And it was Coppe who put such a theory into action, preaching that he could “kiss and hug ladies, and love my neighbour’s wife as myself, without sin.” To serve God is “perfect freedom and pure libertinism.”⁵² Clarkson wrote in *A Single Eye* that “there is no such act as drunkenness, adultery and theft in God. . . . Sin hath its conception only in the imagination.”⁵³ Ranters, Christopher Hill observed, “deliberately aimed to shock the godly, to provoke them into rethinking their assumptions about religion and society.”⁵⁴ Deliberately “naughty and provocative” and asserting total freedom, Ranters represent also the clearest examples of antinomianism with which the present author is familiar.

In contrast, what we see in the works of Noyes and Harris, and to some extent Stockham, is not overt antinomianism, but rather very developed forms of related esoteric systems. All three authors affirmed a dual male-female divinity. All three encouraged and taught spiritual disciplines with sexual dimensions. Noyes and Harris were leaders of utopian communities at the center of which were esoteric doctrines. Both insisted, despite the various scandals and accusations, on religious and moral discipline in their respective groups. And finally, both generated industrious and successful communities that dissolved primarily under Victorian social pressure brought to bear because of the sexual dimensions of their teachings. Harris, in particular, presents one of the most complex and developed forms of sexual mysticism. It is easy to dismiss out of hand what Noyes, Harris, and Stockham taught and practiced, and indeed some of it does seem outlandish. But the more one studies them, the more intriguing they become as exemplars in the long tradition of American pragmatist esotericism or esoteric pragmatism.

⁵¹ See Hill, *Liberty Against the Law*, 215. Hill cites *Crisp’s Christ Alone Exalted, Being the Complete Works of Tobias Crisp*, J. Gill, ed., (1832), 122.

⁵² See Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll*, 86, 97.

⁵³ Clarkson, *A Single Eye*, 8–10; Hill, 218.

⁵⁴ Hill, *Liberty against the Law*, 328–32.

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PASCHAL BEVERLY RANDOLPH AND SEXUAL MAGIC

JOHN PATRICK DEVENEY

By the mid-nineteenth century, magic (and the occult generally) in the West were in parlous straits, paralleling those described in the surprising recent bestseller by Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*.¹ The novel is set in a fair approximation of early nineteenth-century England and depicts a world in which magic was venerated, indeed diligently studied, but in an antiquarian fashion only, with no thought of—and indeed a horror of—practical application of the trove of abstruse knowledge. Magic before the arrival of the mysterious Mr. Norrell is a bit of flotsam only, the debris of a once-great synthesis that survives solely to intrigue the curious. This is the description of the York society of magicians with which the book opens:

They were gentlemen magicians, which is to say they had never harmed any one by magic, nor ever done any one the slightest good. In fact, to own the truth, not one of the magicians had ever cast the smallest spell nor by magic caused one leaf to tremble upon a tree, made one mote of dust to alter its course or changed a single hair upon any one's head. But, with this minor reservation, they enjoyed a reputation as some of the wisest and most magical gentlemen in Yorkshire.²

The *real* magical world of the mid-nineteenth-century West was in a similar predicament. A generation of modern scholars has labored to descry the reality (and the practice) behind the hefty tomes and the intimations of the initiatic novels of the period, but to little avail. The secondhand formulas of Barrett's *The Magus* (1801),³ the Romantic pseudo-realism of Bulwer-Lytton's novels *Zanoni: A Rosicrucian Tale* and *The Coming Race*,⁴ and the Gothic labyrinths of Eliphas Lévi's disquisitions⁵ bring us little information on any underlying substrate of *real* magical practice and experience. Barrett was a dabbler, cribbing what

¹ Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ Barrett, *The Magus*. On Barrett, see King, *The Flying Sorcerer*.

⁴ On Bulwer Lytton, see Gilbert, "The Supposed Rosy Crucian Society."

⁵ See McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival*; Mercier, *Eliphas Lévi et la pensée magique au XIX^e siècle*.

he thought would sell; Bulwer Lytton (with the one famous exception of the supposed conjuration of Apollonius of Tyana, with Eliphas Levi) confined his practice to smoking vast amounts of opium and hiring young girls to scry for him;⁶ and Levi himself was as timid about the results of his labors as are the antiquaries of the York society of magicians:

[Levi] suffered so much from the effects of this Evocation that he never dare attempt it again, &, I suppose, he did nothing but make books, teach Occultism for money, & buy & sell old China.⁷

That last sentence could serve as an epigram for the study of magic in the early nineteenth century. Bookish antiquarianism is the occupational hazard of the student of magic: the delight of unearthing the deliberately obscure becomes its own reward—a secret, miser-like delight in minutiae known only to the student and, most importantly, *not* known to competitors.⁸ Examples abound, and they could be multiplied ad infinitum. We look in vain for solid evidence of practical magic or lived experience. Even Mesmerism, which by mid-century had incorporated elements of traditional magic and produced rather astonishing experiences, suffered almost universally from the bane of secondhand experience: the entranced seeress (for it was usually a young girl) saw visions, while the mesmerist could only look on and wonder at her descriptions.⁹ The most detailed description we have of what

⁶ “There is another thing not generally known as to the late Lord Lytton. He was an Opium eater. A Baronet, Sir Henry Willoughby, assured me, that in the House of Commons, Sir Bulwer made a circle of air around him redolent of the odour of Opium, such large quantities did he take within wh[ic]h circle, no one would enter, unless compelled. His later works must have been written in an ecstasy the result of Opium, & many of the curious things enunciated by him, he must have got at thro’ his Clairvoyantes. I think now I have given you some slight idea of what the late Lord Lytton’s Occultism was.” William Alexander Ayton to unnamed American correspondent, January 22, 1886 (private collection). Ayton constantly bemoaned his own failure to achieve what magic had promised, and ended up in his advanced old age moving his efforts first into the H.B. of L. and then into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

⁷ William Alexander Ayton to unnamed correspondent, May 18, 1885 (private collection). “You mention Eliphas Levi. He was the first who really enlightened me after years of futile searchings thro’ the old Occult books which only mislead. It may be a matter of doubt how far even E.L. is misleading. . . . I also know intimately another Frenchman, an Oriental Initiate, a great friend of E.L.’s and from him I have learned the most of him. . . . He told me that E.L. had not the nerve or courage to carry out practically what his good knowledge told him were the means to use.” Same to same, February 26, 1884.

⁸ See Deveney, “Why Do We Do What We Do?”

⁹ See, e.g., Anonymus, *The Celestial Telegraph*, a partial translation of Cahagnet’s

purported to be real magical groups near mid-century is that of the “Berlin Club” and the “Orphic Circle” described by Emma Hardinge Britten.¹⁰ The members used drugs, crystals, and magic mirrors to separate the “flying souls” (astral projections) of their young subjects and send them on occult missions about the earth, or on clairvoyant journeys into the vast celestial hierarchy. But it was the entranced seeress, not the occultist/magician himself, who beheld the wonders of the universe. *His* experience was secondhand: he was reduced to hearing (or reading about) the experiences of another.

All of this has always seemed to me to be a choice made *faut de mieux*, the replacing of one thing with a (lesser) substitute, a transposition caused by the unavailability of that which was really and indeed sought: direct vision and experience. The literature abounds with examples of true, burning desire for spiritual or psychical achievement and attainment. But it also abounds with stories of failure, and diversion of interest to lesser, more attainable interests. It was this mid-century world of antiquarianism, empty ritualism, and secondhand experience that Paschal Beverly Randolph transformed.

The facts of Randolph’s life and deeds are well established and need not be rehearsed here in detail.¹¹ He was a black man, born free in New York City in 1825. Without father, mother, or family, from an early age he managed to survive on the streets of the “Five Points,” the lowest slum of New York at the time, and succeeded in obtaining a modicum of education that permitted him in his early twenties to take up the profession of barber in Upstate New York. That might have been the end of his story; but in 1848, also in Upstate New York, the Fox Sisters learned how to communicate with what they came to learn were the spirits of the departed and, in the process, gave birth to modern Spiritualism. Randolph adopted the new revelations with fervor and promptly became a medium himself. Unlike many of his contemporaries who saw the advantages of exploiting the theatrical side of Spiritualism (levitation, floating tambourines, spirit painting, and

Arcanes de la vie future, 3 vols. (1848–54), 180 (neither DeLaborde, Dupotet, Cagliostro, nor the sorcerer Léon—an eighteenth-century Jew whose magic mirror Cahagnet describes—actually saw visions themselves).

¹⁰ Britten, *Ghost Land*. Britten was in a good position to describe the doings of the groups since she almost certainly functioned as a “flying soul” for the Orphic Circle in her youth. On Britten, see now Mathiesen, *The Unseen Worlds of Emma Hardinge Britten*.

¹¹ See Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, and “Randolph, Paschal Beverly.”

disembodied voices from the rafters), Randolph quickly became, and remained, a trance speaker, at first mediating for the famous patriotic American dead—Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and the like—but soon speaking for more illustrious figures, such as Zoroaster, and for mysterious personages such as “Thotmor.” He also began recounting his own visionary travels and experiences in the spirit worlds. He soon moved beyond Spiritualism.

By the late 1850s, Randolph was beginning to acquire a name as a visionary but also a reputation as a mad man—a reputation that even he himself, at times, admitted was accurate, as his mind was buffeted by the influence of the various “controls” he encountered in his trances. In 1855 and 1857, he made the first of his trips to Europe and to the Near East, where he learned the marvels of Mesmerism and of mirror magic (employed, usually secondhand, by the likes of the Orphic Circle and others), and of hashish, which he saw both as a torment and as his liberator from the possession of his controls.

From what he learned during his travels Randolph also acquired a framework upon which to hang his visionary experiences. Derived initially from the works of the Spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis, and then supplemented by the more sophisticated and literary magical tradition of Europe, Randolph’s cosmology and worldview were in no sense original. But, as vivified by his experiences, they were adequate to his purposes and were, in any case, decidedly secondary to the practical methods he began to teach to enable others to experience the visionary worlds for themselves.

All of this came together when he published *Dealings with the Dead* (1861),¹² in which he for the first time clearly describes his vision of a vast cosmos of worlds, universes, and entities coruscating out hierarchically from the grand Central Sun of being.¹³ From this divine source “light” in all its forms flowed outward: mere matter, then the all-pervading fire fluid of the Mesmerists, and finally a never ending stream of “soul monads,” “scintillas or parts of this third great thought of the Mighty Thinker, God...coruscations from The Over-Soul.”¹⁴ These sparks of divine light are sprinkled through the planes of the infinite universes in a vast hierarchy that far outstrips the contem-

¹² Randolph [“The Rosicrucian”], *Dealings With The Dead*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5, 134, 204.

porary accounts of the Spiritualists: men, angels, Seraphs, Arsaphs, Eons, Arsasaphs, Arch-Eons, Antarphim, and other exalted entities, all existing and acting in the fire fluid (which Randolph called “Aeth”) and all seeking to re-ascend to their divine source. Man begins this vast pilgrimage as an unconscious monad, the “germ of an immortal soul,” putting on and casting off forms of matter until reaching the human state.¹⁵ Here the monad as such ceases to be, and in its stead stands an immortal soul, an individualized being, more or less awakened but “self-existent to all future states”¹⁶ and capable now of joining the great cosmic parade. He functions now in the “soul world” and can begin his asymptotic re-ascent.

Randolph’s description of becoming aware of himself as an individualized being, coursing through the soul world as a “globe of resplendent white light” is beautiful and ecstatic:

The eye did not see, but I was all sight. There was no organ of locomotion...but my spirit seemed to be all motion, and it knew instinctively that by the power of the thought-wish it could reach any point within the boundaries of earth where it longed and willed to be.¹⁷

Accompanying this experience was the perceived ability to visualize and utilize the Aeth—Randolph’s term for the “boundless, undefinable, and unimaginable ocean of Liquid Fire” which Andrew Jackson Davis called the Univercoelum—that filled and animated creation and formed the basis of all magical power.¹⁸ The soul world also brought Randolph into connection with other, more elevated and exalted entities of the cosmic hierarchy, both human and never-human, whose power, knowledge, and wisdom he participated in through the mysterious experience called

¹⁵ Ibid., 46–47.

¹⁶ Ibid., 257. This, of course, is a form of conditional immortality, a concept that has a long and involved history in occultism. Massimo Introvigne has concluded that from the eighteenth century on, most, though not all, initiatic groups practicing a form of “internal alchemy” (as did Cagliostro and his followers) were based upon the doctrine of conditional immortality—the idea that not all men were immortal—and coupled this with techniques to construct an immortal soul, a “body of light” or “interior child” as it is frequently called, that would be immortal. See Introvigne, *Il capello del mago* and “Cagliostro.” In Cagliostro’s case this quest for “physical immortality” was certainly a goal, pursued during his two forty-day retreats. These (probably in his case, and certainly in those of his various later disciples) involved sexual techniques involving the retention of semen or its internal re-circulation. See, e.g., Introvigne, “Arcana Arcanorum.”

¹⁷ Ibid., 174–79.

¹⁸ Ibid., 180–82, 188.

“Blending”—the merging, as it were, of personalities in a process with more than a passing resemblance to sexual union:

[B]y slow degrees I felt that my own personality was not lost to me, but completely swallowed up, so to speak, in that of a far more potent mentality. A subtlety of thought, perception and understanding became mine at times, altogether greater than I had ever known before; and occasionally, during these strange blendings of my being with another, I felt that other’s feelings, thought that other’s thoughts...¹⁹

Randolph had first experienced this state of Blending (or “Atrilism” or “mixed identities”) in his purely Spiritualist days, when he “blended” in vision with the spirit of a deceased lover, but over the years he came to see that the process was universal and that in it lay the secret of communication with the exalted entities above man in the cosmic hierarchy. He also realized that the key to the process, and indeed the key to all the secrets of the universe, lay in sex.

We hold that no power ever comes to man through the intellect... Power comes only to the Soul through LOVE (not lust, mind you), but LOVE, the underlying, Primal FIRE LIFE, subtending the bases of Being,—the formative flowing floor of the worlds,—the true sensing of which is the beginning of the road to personal power. Love lieth at the foundation, and is the synonym of life and strength... Thus it happens that a loving couple grow youthful in soul, because in their union they strike out this divine spark, replenish themselves with the essence of life, grow stronger and less brutal, and draw down to them the divine fire from the aerial spaces. (This now is by accident. We teach how to do so at pleasure).²⁰

All of this is quite wonderful, and there can be no doubt that Randolph’s descriptions accurately reflect his actual visionary experiences. But all of this is also, both for Randolph and for us, quite secondary. There is no end to genuine visionaries—Boehme, for example—but Randolph’s importance lies not in the myriad planes, universes, and worlds he describes but in the methods he taught to enable the reader to rise to the same experiences himself—to enter the soul world as a conscious individualized soul.

Some of these methods were openly advocated and described in his lectures and books beginning in the late 1850s. Drugs, for example, especially *Dowam Meskh*,²¹ an electuary of hashish and other inert or

¹⁹ Ibid., 11–12.

²⁰ Randolph [Anonymus], *The Ansairitic Mystery*.

²¹ Randolph [Anonymus], *The Guide to Clairvoyance, and Clairvoyant’s Guide*.

psychoactive ingredients like hyoscamine, were an important part of the process, and Randolph touted them as the secret of “the Alchemists, Hermetists, Illuminati, and mystic brethren of all ages,”²² though in more sober moments he warned of their perils. “Magic mirrors,” compound mirrors of sheets of convex glass sandwiching various magnetized liquids, also played a great role in this public exposition of Randolph’s magic, and the fruit of the conjoined use of drugs and mirrors was the exalted state of “clairvoyance.”

Clairvoyance, as the term was used by Randolph’s contemporaries, had usually meant an unprovoked state into which the seer (Andrew Jackson Davis, for example)²³ fell without preparation, except at times through magnetism, and in which he acquired special powers (such as intuition or diagnostic skill) and “vision”—the ability to view, like a tourist, the wonders of the spiritual world. For Randolph, not only was clairvoyance something that could be consciously attained by drugs and mirrors, but the state itself was far more elevated than commonly believed. In the highest degree of clairvoyance, the magician “sees, senses, feels, *knows*, by a royal power; is *en rapport* with a thousand knowledges.”²⁴ Clairvoyance was the

ability, by self-effort or otherwise, to drop beneath the floors of the outer world, and come up, as it were, upon the other side. . . . It is the LIGHT which the seer reaches sometimes through years of agony . . . together with a knowledge of the principia of the vast spirit-sea whereon the worlds of space are cushioned.²⁵

Clairvoyance, in other words, was the state in which the soul consciously took possession of itself and became aware of its ability to function in the soul world.

Beyond these public techniques was Randolph’s ultimate secret—sexual magic. From the early 1860s on Randolph touted in his openly published books the existence of vaguely hinted-at secrets and techniques. To the enquirer enticed by these hints and seeking deeper mysteries, he then privately circulated a bewildering variety of broadsheets, pamphlets, and letters providing more explicit details of his secret techniques. These culminated in the early 1870s in *The Ansairctic Mystery*.

²² Ibid., 47–48.

²³ See, e.g., Smith, *Lectures on Clairmativeness*.

²⁴ Ibid., 14.

²⁵ Randolph [“Count de St. Leon”], *Love and its Hidden History*, 166–67.

*A New Revelation Concerning Sex! A Private Letter, Printed, but not Published; it being Sacred and Confidential.*²⁶ Building on the ideas set out in *Dealings with the Dead*, Randolph clarified his fundamental intuition:

[N]o real magic (magnetic) power can, or will, descend into the soul of either, except in the mighty moment—the orgasmal instant of BOTH—not one alone! for then, and *then only*, do the mystic forces of the SOUL OPEN TO THE SPACES. . . . The eternal spark within us (and which never flashes except when the loving female brings to her feet the loving man in their mutual infiltration of Soul, in the sexive death of both—that intense moment when woman proves herself the superior of man—mutual demise!) was created by ALLAH—God himself—Billions of ages ago in the foretime, and finds its human body only when Sex-passion opens the mystic door for it to enter the man—through him, the woman, through her the world, through THEM the Spaces, and through it again Allah, God—not as a drop of infinite ocean of Mind, but as a Being in the Heavenly hierarchies!

* * *

Now, Man, being the chief work of Nature; allied to all that is; being the central figure upon which all forces play; and copulative union being the crowning act of his being—it follows that his moment of greatest Power is that in which Love unlooses the doors of his Spirit, and all his energies are in highest action; whence it happens that they who unitedly *Will* a thing, during copulative union and its mutual ending, possess the key to all possible Knowledge, the mighty want of White Magic.²⁷

Appended to *The Ansairitic Mystery* is a list of 122 powers obtainable through sexual magic, ranging from the paltry (beauty and business success) to the more profound (though vaguely described) secrets of Volantia, Decretism, Posism, Tirau-clarism, Oriental Breast-Love, Mahi-vapia, Zorvoyance, Æthævoyance, and including the power to “attach to oneself innumerable æthic, ærial, invisible assistants. (Arsaphism)”—Blending, in other words.

All this, in turn, was explained in Randolph’s last and greatest book: *Eulis*, published in 1874,²⁸ the year before he committed suicide. Here Randolph explains the three fundamental laws of all magic: Volantia, Decretism, and Posism. “Volantia” is “the quiet, steady, calm, non-turbulent, non-muscular exertion of the human Will”; and the elements of the will (attention, concentration and abstraction), he teaches, can

²⁶ Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, Appendix A.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Randolph, *Eulis!*

be developed by staring at a spot on the wall or at a disk placed on the magic mirror while trying to control the phantasms that appear. This power was also described as Tirau-clairism. “Decretism” is the “decreeing, ordering, commanding” power of the will. At the “*decretal instant*”—the moment of orgasm—this power “leaps from the soul like a flash of vivid white lightning, traversing space, centering on its object even though oceans flow between, or vast spaces divide.” “Posism,” finally, is the greatest of the powers of Randolph’s magic. It is the “placing [of] oneself in a *receptive* position, state, frame of body, mind and feeling.” On one level, this was meant quite literally. Taking the pose of repulsion, for example as one might do by stretching out one’s arm and forefinger in chastising a disobedient dog, augments and enables the result desired.²⁹ On a deeper level, Posism was what made possible complete intercourse—Blending—with the elevated denizens of the universe. Each of these entities had a “location” and a pattern, as it were, which, when reached and emulated by the magician, allowed contact and intercourse with them. In its highest phase, this was what Randolph called the “Sleep of Sialam,” Blending with the highest of the cosmic entities reachable by man, and drawing in their powers and knowledge:

The term Aeth signifies that fine essence which spirits breathe... which cushions the worlds...; it is inhaled by Æthereal people precisely as we of earth draw in the effluence of matter in its grosser and lower forms. No real, divine, or celestial, mental or loving energy can come until by patient and continued effort the Neophyte learns to inhale it; simultaneously with the firm fixity of the mind upon what is in and of it, therefore we contact the essence of power and the denizens of the ethereal and far-off countries and climes.

* * *

None of these [powers] spring up from within us, but all are reachable by us, and flow into us in our highest moments; and all or any knowledge or power the human being has a brain capable of holding can be drawn to it, if willed, wished, desired and commanded, as and when aforesaid; and it or they enter the soul *only* in the moment, at the very instant, of the holy, full, mutual and pure orgasm, or ejection of the three fluids and two auras... and the dual magnetism evolved.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., 90.

³⁰ Randolph [Anonymous], *Ansairctic Mystery*.

This indrawing of wisdom, power, and knowledge from the higher realms of the celestial hierarchy is the supreme achievement of Randolph's sexual magic, and its effects vivify and restore both the soul and the body:

[A]t the very instant his seminal glands contract to expel their treasures, at such instant his interior nostrils open, and minute ducts, which are sealed at all other times, then expand, and as the lightning from his soul darts from the brain, rushes down the spinal-cord, leaps the solar plexus, plunges along the nerval filaments to the prostate gland to immortalize the germinal human being; and while the vivific pulse is leaping to the dark chamber wherein soul is clothed in flesh and blood, at that instant he breathes in through the inner nostrils one of two atmospheres underlying, inter-penetrating—as the spirit does the body—the outer air which sentient things inhale. One of these auras is deeply charged with, because it is the effluvium of, the unpleasant sphere of the border spaces, where is congregated the quintessence of evil from every inhabited human world in the entire congeries of soul-bearing galaxies of the broad universe; else he draws in the pellucid aroma of divinity from the far-off multiple heavens.³¹

Directly related to this drawing in of the powers of the celestial hierarchy is the further mystery of implanting the seeds of those powers in a human foetus during the sexual act in order to create a superior child. Never made explicit in all this is the existence of actual sexual intercourse with celestial entities. The possibility certainly exists, given the ambivalence that permeates the idea of Blending in the first place: that is, mental interpenetration and sexual union. Randolph seems to have rung out the changes of this theme, at least to the extent of admitting the possibility of sexual intercourse with the spirit of a deceased human,³² and probably to the extent of believing that all Blending, even with the entities of the celestial hierarchy was sexual in nature.³³ All this puts Randolph in the select company of Thomas Lake Harris and the Abbé Boullan.

Lacking in this breathtaking recital of the possibilities of sexual magic are the explicit details of the sexual practice (postures, times, invocations, and the like) actually employed. These must have existed

³¹ Randolph, *Eulis*, 101.

³² See, e.g., [Randolph], "Randolph's Letters—No. 7".

³³ While Randolph is silent on the point, his disciple Maria de Naglowska obviously thought enough of the possibility to append to her *Magia Sexualis* a warning against the dangers of incubi and succubi, while Ruben Swinburne Clymer openly advocated the practice.

and been communicated by Randolph orally to his followers, but if they were ever committed to writing, they have not survived (except possibly in the later works of Maria de Nagłowska and others that purport to contain the specific techniques of the practice).

It is impossible to say where Randolph acquired these ideas and their astonishing application. Eros and its power are a standard *topos* in the Hermetic, Neoplatonic, and later magical literature,³⁴ and Randolph had some familiarity with those traditions;³⁵ but the practical application of Eros to magical achievement was seldom made in terms easily discernable through the veil of time, and Randolph is unlikely to have created his sexual magic from the pages of books. Randolph claimed at times that the idea came from the Near East, from the secret teachings of the Nusairi into which he had been initiated in Egypt or Syria, but in different moods he denied the idea and stressed his own creativity and originality as the sole source. While there are Near Eastern magical techniques based on sex that have some similarity to Randolph's,³⁶ the issue can not be resolved.

The power of sex, coupled with psychoactive drugs, was the genie that Randolph let out of the bottle and revealed to the book-bound would-be magicians of the nineteenth century; and once freed it could not be put back. Indeed it was this idea and its practical techniques (and not merely his visionary recitals) that Randolph bequeathed to posterity. While there are other streams of occult practical tradition in the nineteenth century (notably that derived from Cagliostro), Randolph is the main source of the revival that by 1900 transformed occultism and magic from antiquarianism to the almost exclusively practical matter that we know today.

There is pathetic evidence that Randolph tried to organize his groups and preserve his teachings in a formal way in order to pass something of value along to his infant son, but the attempts came to naught and his work passed to the next generation through the teachings of his few students (Freeman B. Dowd—the unheralded father of New Thought—most notably) and, most importantly, through his published and private writings. These gave rise a few years after his death in 1875 to the H.B. of L. (the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor), which copied

³⁴ See, e.g., Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*.

³⁵ He published, for example, the seventeenth-century translation of the Corpus Hermeticum by Dr. Everard (*Hermes Trismegistus: His Divine Pymander*).

³⁶ See, e.g., "Paul de Régla," *El Klab des Lois Secrètes de l'Amour*.

his teachings almost literally and, like him, ignored the theoretical side of occultism.³⁷ In France, his secret teachings appeared in the works of Maria de Naglowska in the 1930s, and they survived in the United States in the still-existing Brotherhood of Rosicrucians founded by Reuben Swinburne Clymer.

By 1900 the transformation that Randolph had set in motion was complete, and if occultists and magicians still perused the heavy tomes of the western magical tradition, it was with an eye toward discerning practical techniques rather than sterile nuggets of lore, and, surprisingly often, with an eye prepared to find and appreciate the role of sex in magical practice.

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THE KNIGHT OF SPERMATOPHAGY:
PENETRATING THE MYSTERIES OF
GEORGES LE CLÉMENT DE SAINT-MARCQ*

MARCO PASI

Do you want to know a secret? It is a secret that has been kept intact for centuries, but it is of supreme importance, actually indispensable for understanding the real essence of Christianity and the hidden development of Western culture. It can give you the key to penetrating the core of all religious traditions in the world. Here it is: during the Last Supper, it is not bread and wine that Jesus Christ gave to the apostles as symbols of his body and of his blood. What Jesus really offered on that occasion, which was to become the model for the central ceremony of Christianity for centuries to come, was his sperm. Since then the practice of spermatophagy (literally, the eating of sperm) has been the central, albeit hidden ritual practice of the Catholic priesthood. But references to this practice can also be found in all the religious traditions of the world.

What I have just described is, in a nutshell, the thesis that a Belgian spiritualist, the Chevalier Georges Le Clément de Saint-Marcq (1865–1956), presented to the world in a pamphlet first published in 1906, *L'Eucharistie*. Is it possible to think of anything more scandalous, outrageous, indeed bewildering for the average Christian believer, whatever his or her denomination? Yet Le Clément de Saint-Marcq was intimately convinced that he had discovered a truth of supreme importance for the progress and the welfare of humanity, and that it was his duty to spread it as widely as possible, using all the resources that his intelligence and his personal fortune could offer him. This he did, stubbornly and tirelessly, over a period that spanned most of his adult life. He had to pay a high price for it, but his unwavering, if eccentric, commitment has made him one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of modern Western esotericism.

* I wish here to thank William Breeze and Peter-R. König for reading a draft version of the present article and commenting on it.

There are two main reasons for this. On the one hand, his ideas have been interpreted in the framework of the development of “sexual magic,” a new phenomenon that emerged in occultism around the mid-nineteenth century.¹ As a result, Le Clément de Saint Marcq has acquired a kind of legendary status among authors interested in this topic. On the other hand, and despite this legendary status, scholars have not paid him enough attention, hence a veil of mystery still surrounds his figure and works.² Most of the authors who have written about him repeat a series of statements that, although not necessarily false, have never been proven to be true either. Le Clément’s biography remains largely uncharted territory, and his works still need to be seriously studied and analysed. He has been considered as a fundamental source for the development of sexual magic in twentieth-century occultism, but no one has yet attempted to reconstruct his intellectual profile or give a comprehensive overview of his ideas. In short, he has not been adequately understood, and his role in the history of modern western sexual magic still needs to be assessed. In this chapter I will offer a brief overview of the problems related to Le Clément’s role in the history of sexual magic. These are the first results of an ongoing research project on Le Clément’s life and works in which I am currently engaged.

¹ Apart from some of the essays collected in the present volume, scholarly studies that have tackled the subject as a phenomenon *per se*, even if focusing only on particular aspects or authors, are very few. We can mention here Introvigne, *Il ritorno dello gnosticismo*, Deveney, *Paschal Beverley Randolph*, Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, and Urban, “Magia Sexualis.” Urban’s book, *Magia Sexualis*, is now the most complete historical overview of the phenomenon of sexual magic from a scholarly point of view and offers many important insights into the subject. However, the picture it presents is also partial, focusing mostly on Anglo-American material and neglecting (with the exception of Julius Evola) some very significant developments of sexual magic in continental Europe (such as in France, Germany, and Italy). On a more popular level, Francis King’s book, *Sexuality, Magic and Perversion*, is now dated and also focuses only on the English-speaking area. S. Alexandrian’s work, *La Magie sexuelle* is, on the other hand, more comprehensive, and offers interesting insight and a useful overview of the topic. A comprehensive scholarly history of the phenomenon still has to be written.

² So far, the best scholarly treatment of Le Clément has been by Introvigne in his *Il ritorno dello gnosticismo*, 155–160. The same elements presented in that book have later been used by the same author for an article in French, “Le Clément de Saint-Marcq.” Before Introvigne, Helmut Möller and Ellic Howe had dedicated to Le Clément a couple of well-informed pages in their biography of Theodor Reuss, *Merlin Peregrinus*, 179–180. The “legend” of Le Clément has been built mostly on the basis of two contemporary sources: René Guénon, *L’Erreur spirite*, 321–327; and Pierre Geyraud (pseud. of Pierre Guyader), *L’Occultisme à Paris*, 109–120, to which we will return later. To this we should add a letter written in 1950 by the German occultist Henri Birven (1883–1969) to an ex-disciple of Aleister Crowley, Gerald Yorke (1901–1983), which has been quoted at length in Möller’s and Howe’s biography of Reuss referred to above (180).

A Short Biography

At one point in his life Le Clément became a figure of some public importance in his country, and this was not only due to his controversial ideas about the Eucharist. Yet, he has been almost completely forgotten after his death. In order to obtain a more precise picture of his life and career it was therefore necessary to search for contemporary sources, either printed or in archives. The turning point in my research was the identification of some of his descendants who kindly assented to an interview.³ They have also put at my disposal their private collection of documents and books related to their ancestor. These have proven invaluable.⁴

Georges-Philippe-Alphonse-Marie-Alexandre Le Clément de Saint-Marcq was born in Jodoigne, Belgium, on May 12, 1865 to Alexandre Joseph II (1829–1873) and Anne-Catherine Staes (1833–1913). His father belonged to an aristocratic family with a military background. He was a cavalry officer in the Belgian army. His title of “Chevalier” (more common in Belgium than in other European countries) had been confirmed by William I, King of the unified Netherlands, in 1827, that is, a few years before Belgium became an independent state.⁵ We do not know where Georges spent the early years of his life.

³ The two brothers and one sister I have interviewed descend directly from one of Le Clément’s daughters, Madeleine-Jeanne (1888–1972), who in 1908 married Regnier (or René) Vivario (1887–1970), a professor of toxicological chemistry at the University of Liège. After Le Clément’s death in 1956, the couple inherited his estate at Waltwilder, on which more will be said below. The estate was sold after Madeleine-Jeanne’s death. The descendants whom I have met and interviewed, Mr Michel Vivario, Mr Philippe Vivario, and Mrs Françoise Vivario-Roussaux (whom I wish to thank here for their generous support during my research), have all known Le Clément personally and lived in the same house with him, the older among them being 21 when Le Clément died. The interview took place on May 20, 2005, and will be referred to as “Interview with the Vivarios” (abbr. as IV).

⁴ Hereinafter referred to as “Fonds Vivario” (abbr. as FV). The collection appears to be incomplete, as it contains documents related almost exclusively to the period between Le Clément’s birth and the end of the First World War. Moreover, it unfortunately contains almost nothing concerning Le Clément’s involvement with occultism and spiritualism, although he played a very prominent role in those movements in Belgium for many years. His correspondence with friends or colleagues on these matters must have been very extensive, but no traces of it have survived in Le Clément’s own extant papers.

⁵ In the Belgian National Biography, there is an entry on Georges’ great-uncle, Philippe-Auguste-Joseph Le Clément de Saint-Marcq (1762–1831), who was one of the most important Belgian men-of-arms in the service of the crown of Spain before and during the Napoleonic wars, when Belgium lost its status as an Austrian dominion.

Georges' father died when he was only eight as the result of a horse fall, and his mother remarried in 1876. We do not know what effects these dramatic events had on young Georges and how they influenced his childhood. He first attended a private school in Brussels and at twelve entered the Athénée Royal, the standard secondary school in Belgium.⁶ He was a brilliant student, excelling especially in mathematics. After completing his secondary education, Le Clément opted for a military career. He entered the Ecole Militaire (Military School) in 1881 and remained there until 1886.⁷ Having completed his training, he was assigned to the Corps of Engineers (Régiment du Génie), where he would spend the rest of his military career. While attending the Military School, he was probably also following courses at the Ecole Polytechnique of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), where he studied mathematical and physical sciences and received a doctorate in 1885.⁸ In 1886, he married Marie van Cauwenberghe (1862–1943), from whom he would have three children: a boy (who died in infancy) and two daughters, Madeleine and Jeanne. His wife was a devout Catholic and hardly approved of the interest that her husband would

See van Arenbergh, “Le Clément de Saint-Marcq.” An overview of the genealogical tree of the family of Le Clément, with all its various lines and branches, can be found in Coomans de Brachène, *Etat présent de la noblesse belge*, 217–228. Clerbois, who quotes from an earlier edition of the same book, erroneously assumes that Le Clément's title of Chevalier dated back only to Georges' grandfather (*Contribution à l'étude*, 150). In fact, it appears from both sources quoted above that the title of the family was significantly older, dating back at least to the time of Louis XIV.

⁶ In FV are preserved Georges' school report for the private school (“Institution Libre”) in 1876–1877, and two booklets (*Procès-verbal de la distribution des prix faite aux élèves*) containing the records of the best students of the Athénée Royal of Brussels in 1879 and 1880. Le Clément's name is mentioned there several times.

⁷ See his “Extrait de matricule,” of the Régiment du Génie, archives of the Koninklijk Museum van het Leger en de Krijgsgeschiedenis (KMLK), Brussels. I wish to thank Arjuna Ruiz Sanchez for providing me with a copy of the file on Le Clément's military career preserved in these archives. The dates 1881–1886 are also to be found hand-written on a photo of Le Clément taken during the period of his training, which shows young Le Clément, probably not yet twenty, in a military uniform (FV). The hand-written note has clearly been added much later, probably by one of his descendants. Other pictures from the same family collection, dating from the same period, portray him with his young comrades of the Military School.

⁸ See the “Notice biographique,” in Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *La Science de l'Immortalité*, 3. This biographical note, very probably written by Le Clément himself, is one of the most important direct sources for his early life. Concerning Le Clément's possible studies at the ULB, the author hiding himself under the pseudonym of “Dédale,” in “La Compagnie des Aéroliers,” 12, refers to Le Clément as a “brillant polytechnicien.”

soon develop for Freemasonry, occultism, and spiritualism, not to mention his ideas about spermatophagy.⁹

Le Clément was clearly not an average officer in the Belgian army. He was brilliant and ambitious and developed a special interest in the possibilities of human flight, about which he was trying to develop new ideas. In the 1880s, when Le Clément began to get involved in the related experiments and studies then conducted by the Belgian government, human flight still consisted mostly of relatively short ascensions with inflatable balloons or dirigibles. One of the aims of the experiments was, unsurprisingly, to test the possibility of its military application. In 1888, when Le Clément was twenty-three, he was put in charge of a section of the Corps of Engineers specialising in captive balloons,¹⁰ which at this time mostly had the task of determining the enemy's position and assessing his strategical defences.¹¹ Not only did Le Clément participate actively in the experiments, he also contributed to the theoretical study of the problems related to human flight. His researches and experiments were presented in a thorough essay, *Applications des procédés de station et de navigation aériennes à l'art de la guerre* (Applications of the Procedures of Aerial Station and Navigation to the Art of War), published in 1893 as a special issue of the *Revue de l'Armée Belge*. Two years later, he edited a volume on human flight published under the auspices of the Société Royale de Géographie d'Anvers, of which he had been appointed general secretary.¹² In the following years, while his military career advanced steadily, Le Clément continued studying the topic, and in 1907 he announced the conception of "a new airship on a new principle."¹³ Although the announcement was bold enough to attract the attention of the international press, we do not know what became of this new invention or if it ever reached the stage of actual construction.

⁹ IV.

¹⁰ "Captive balloons" were aerostatical balloons which remained tied to the ground by one or more ropes, thus avoiding their uncontrollable drifting caused by the winds. They are still used today for meteorological purposes.

¹¹ "Dédale," "La 'Compagnie des Aéroliers'" (1977), 10.

¹² Le Clément de Saint-Marcq (ed.), *Congrès de l'atmosphère*. He also contributed a chapter to the volume, "Expériences et théorie sur les hélices aériennes," in which he reported the results of his experiments with propellers applied to dirigible balloons.

¹³ The news was reported in the European edition of the *New York Herald Tribune*, Dec. 5, 1907. FV contains a cutting from the same journal, dated Dec. 5, 1957, where the paragraph is reprinted in a section titled "Fifty Years Ago in the European Edition." I have not been able to consult the original version.

In 1887, Le Clément entered Freemasonry. He was initiated in the Antwerp lodge of the Belgian Grand Orient, “Les Amis du Commerce et la Persévérance Réunis,” and in 1888 he received the degree of Master Mason.¹⁴ At the time when Le Clément joined the Antwerp lodge, Belgian Freemasonry was recruiting its members almost exclusively among those who shared progressive, liberal, and anticlerical views.¹⁵ Le Clément’s decision to become a Freemason therefore gives us a clear indication as to his ideas and attitudes at the time. These turn out to be, as a matter of fact, all but consistent with his later views on religion and politics, as he would express them in his numerous writings.

In the following years, Le Clément’s masonic career, like his military one, progressed steadily. In 1890 he entered the Antwerp chapter of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, the “Vaillants Chevaliers de l’Âge d’Or” (attached to the Grand Orient lodge of which he was already a member). In April 1904, he was promoted “Chevalier Kadosh,” 30°; and finally, in March 1910, he was elected to the highest degree of the Rite, the 33°, thereby joining the national Supreme Council.¹⁶ With this last achievement, coming only two years before the storm provoked by his pamphlet on the Eucharist, Le Clément became a member of the very restricted masonic elite of his country.¹⁷

According to his own account, it was in 1893 that Le Clément began to develop a serious interest in spiritualism, which, apart from his professional duties, would become his main preoccupation for the rest of his life.¹⁸ He first got involved in the occultist milieus that developed in Belgium during the 1890s, especially under the influence of contemporary French occultist authors such as Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865–1916), Stanislas de Guaita (1861–1897), and Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918).

¹⁴ See the masonic chart dated Dec. 4, 5888 (corresponding to 1888, according to masonic usage), in FV.

¹⁵ See Brodsky, “Belgique,” 72.

¹⁶ All the information on Le Clément’s masonic career given here has been gathered from his masonic diplomas preserved in FV.

¹⁷ This had also been noted by René Guénon, who referred to Le Clément as a “haut dignitaire de la Maçonnerie belge” [a high dignitary of Belgian Masonry] (Guénon, *L’Erreur spirite*, 324). It is unclear what were his sources on this point, although it is likely that he used information found in the anti-masonic press. In 1913, when the scandal about the *L’Eucharist* was already in full swing, the *Revue Internationale des Sociétés Secrètes* included Le Clément’s name in a partial list of members of the Belgian Supreme Council. See “Index documentaire maçonnique,” 4358.

¹⁸ See “Notice biographique,” in Le Clément de Saint-Marçq, *La Science de l’Immortalité*, 3.

Sébastien Clerbois has shown how important this movement was for the development of Belgian symbolism.¹⁹ In some of the circles that were then at the centre of artistic activities in Belgium, the esoteric and occultist ideas coming from Paris were taken very seriously and were hotly debated. In 1890, a Belgian section of the Groupe Indépendant d'Études Esotériques (GIEE) was created in Brussels under the name Kumris (or Kvmris).²⁰ The GIEE was a sort of “occultist university”²¹ that had been created only a few months earlier, in December 1889, by Papus.²² Many French occultists of the period were involved in this group, which offered to its members classes on all “occult” subjects, such as kabbalah, magic, hermetism, alchemy, astrology, and so on. Experiments in psychical powers and spiritualist activities were also allowed, although Papus considered spiritualism to be different from, and inferior to, occultism. But the main purpose of the GIEE was to serve as a kind of recruiting platform for other organisations, reserved for an elite of dedicated members whose esoteric activities would be more discreet than those of the GIEE. These were the neo-rosicrucian

¹⁹ See Clerbois, *Contribution à l'étude*; id. “Symbolisme et franc-maçonnerie” and “L'influence de la pensée occultiste.” Clerbois has also shown how the tensions that soon arose between de Guaita and Papus on the one hand, and Péladan on the other, influenced their disciples and admirers in Belgium, who often decided to support one or the other of the two camps.

²⁰ As noted by Clerbois, the foundation of this Belgian branch was announced in Papus' journal *L'Initiation*, in the August 1890 issue (p. 468). See Clerbois, *Contribution à l'étude*, 146. As we will see, the name of this group has been repeatedly associated with that of Le Clément and has acquired a kind of mythical status. What has been missed by most authors so far is that the history of Kumris falls apart into two separate periods, and that Le Clément himself appears to be the only (indirect) link between the two. In his dissertation, Clerbois has provided the most reliable and complete historical account of the first period of the group (see *ibid.*, 145–187), but he seems unaware of the existence of a second period. A history of the second Kumris remains to be written and is made particularly difficult by the scarcity of relevant primary sources. In 1940, the famous French bookseller Louis Dorbon listed and shortly described, in his famous sale catalogue of esoteric works, a very important set of documents related to the first period of Kumris, which had been collected by the secretary of the group, Nicolas Brossel. See “Kvmris.” (I wish to thank Dominique Clairembault for having drawn my attention to this source) The present location of this collection is unknown, but it is obvious that our knowledge of the history of the first period of Kumris would be greatly improved if it were made available to scholars. According to Clerbois, the name Kumris was derived from Celtic mythology (or, more correctly, from the name of an ancient Celtic population), see *ibid.*, n. 603. Also *ibid.*, Clerbois notes an apparent mistake by Papus' biographer, Beaufils, who oddly locates Kumris' headquarters in Antwerp instead of Brussels (see André & Beaufils, *Papus biographie*, 91).

²¹ Laurant, “Papus,” 914. See also Laurant, *L'Esotérisme chrétien*, 140.

²² See André & Beaufils, *Papus biographie*, 68.

Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix, founded in 1888 by de Guaita and Péladan, and the Martinist Order, created by Papus around 1889.²³ The latter initiatic body was mainly based on the teachings of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803) and of his mentor Martinès de Pasqually (1727?–1774).²⁴ The journal *L'Initiation*, founded and edited by Papus, served as an official organ of the GIEE, as well as of the other organisations created by him and his associates.

What was Le Clément's role in Kumris? It has been suggested that he had a leading role in the group,²⁵ but this calls for some qualifications. Certainly Le Clément moved in the occultist circles that were taking shape in the early 1890s in Brussels, including Kumris. Yet while Kumris' activities took place in Brussels, it would appear that Le Clément spent much more time in Antwerp, where his regiment was posted.²⁶ As we have seen, it was also in an Antwerp lodge that he had been initiated into Freemasonry. His activities would be mainly centred in that city at least until the outbreak of the First World War.

If Kumris was the Brussels branch of the Papusian movement, in March 1892 a new Belgian branch was created in Antwerp under the name "Viscum."²⁷ It is especially in this branch that Le Clément was involved. As a member of this group, Le Clément took the pseudonym "Michaël." At the beginning, the group was lead by G. de Rosport, who died in 1895 during a scientific expedition in Congo (which was then being colonized by the King of Belgium, Leopold II). During de Rosport's absence, the direction of the group was given *ad interim* to Rosport's father, but after his death it passed on to young Le Clément.

²³ See André & Beaufiles, *Papus biographie*, 57.

²⁴ Papus claimed to have received, from two different sources, an initiation that had its ultimate origin, through an unbroken chain, in Saint-Martin himself. The story of Papusian and post-Papusian neo-Martinism is extremely complicated. As an introduction, see Introvigne, "Martinism: second period," and the sources mentioned in its bibliography. The latter does not include the recent work by Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, which provides a comprehensive (and sometimes problematic) treatment of Martinism as a whole, with special attention to its political implications.

²⁵ See, for instance, König, *Der O.T.O. Phänomen Remix*, 501, n. 2766. Part of the ambiguity derives from the fact that, as already pointed out, the difference between the two periods of Kumris has been missed by most authors so far.

²⁶ His military record says that in September 1894 he was appointed "Adjoint au Commandant du Génie de l'enceinte d'Anvers," but it is likely that Antwerp was his place of residence also before that date. See the "Extrait de matricule," KMLK, Brussels, quoted above in note 7.

²⁷ See "Groupe Indépendant d'Etudes Esotériques," 271–272; and Vurgey, "Rapport du Délégué Général," 75. See also Clerbois, *Contribution à l'étude*, 166. Later on, another branch was created in Liège, with the name "Pollux." See De Selliers de Moranville, "Kumris"; and Fiévet, "Pollux."

When Le Clément took up the leadership of Viscum, the main branch in Brussels, Kumris, had already been shaken by dissension and personal strife. As we have noted, this was partly a local reflection of the conflict that was occurring at the headquarters in Paris after Péladan had chosen to distance himself from his friend de Guaita and from the Papusian movement.²⁸ In this delicate situation, Vurgey, the head of Kumris but also the general leader of the Papusian movement in Belgium, chose to side with Péladan and consequently had to resign. Kumris did not survive for long after these events. It was dissolved between the end of 1895 and the beginning of 1896. Around the same time that Kumris disappeared from the scene, Papus appointed Le Clément as his general delegate for Belgium for the GIEE and the Martinist Order. Clearly, Le Clément's qualities as leader of Viscum had impressed Papus.²⁹ At his relatively young age, he now found himself head of the whole Papusian movement for Belgium. However, Le Clément did not maintain this position of leadership for a long time, for in February 1898 the position of general delegate was transferred to someone else, probably Jules Fiévet.³⁰

We do not know what became of the Papusian movement in Belgium after this date. In any case, Le Clément's career in it had clearly come to an end. He may have realised at one point that occultism and spiritualism were two different paths, and that a choice between the two had to be made. He chose for the latter and would never consider himself

²⁸ See above, n. 19. On the situation in Paris, see also Laurant, *L'Esotérisme chrétien*, 140–143.

²⁹ Papus' positive impressions were confirmed when he received the detailed report of the activities of Viscum for the year 1895–1896, already quoted above. After reading it, he decided it deserved special praise in the pages of *L'Initiation*: "Par décision spéciale... la branche Viscum d'Anvers... recevra un Grand diplôme d'honneur pour le résumé et la publication des travaux de la Branche durant l'année 1895–1896." [By special decision... the branch Viscum in Antwerp... will receive a grand honorary diploma for its report and the publication of the workings of the branch during the year 1895–1896] (Papus, "Ordre du jour du Centre"). But Le Clément himself also deserved a personal token of consideration for his commitment: "Le délégué général pour la Belgique, Michaël, recevra un diplôme d'honneur pour le succès avec lequel il a dirigé le mouvement ésotérique en Belgique, depuis sa nomination" [The General Delegate for Belgium, Michaël, will receive an honorary diploma for the success with which, since his nomination, he has led the esoteric movement in Belgium] (*ibid.*). Alas, the mentioned diploma, if it was ever sent, has not survived among Le Clément's papers preserved by the family.

³⁰ See "Ordre Martiniste," 209. The report says that the new general delegate is in Liège and that his name is "Tékel." The leader of the Liège branch Pollux was Jules Fiévet, about whom we do not have further information. It is likely that he is the person hiding behind that pseudonym.

an occultist again in his life. Whatever may have been his reasons for distancing himself from the Papusian movement, Le Clément's commitment to heterodox spirituality did not end there. Quite the contrary, it is likely that part of the Antwerp group that he was leading under Papus continued to exist and to follow his leadership in the years that followed, while its activities were being reoriented towards an exclusive interest in spiritualism and all occultist or esoteric pursuits were being abandoned.

Le Clément put much energy in establishing an organised movement of spiritualism in Belgium.³¹ His efforts were appreciated to the extent that, around 1905, he became president of the *Fédération Spirite Nationale Belge*, which comprised most of the local spiritualist organizations in Belgium and became by far the most important spiritualist body in the country. Then, in 1906, he issued a first edition of *L'Eucharistie*, which apparently did not at first circulate in Belgium.³² It was only when it began to be distributed in his country six years later, around 1912, that Le Clément's problems began. The pamphlet created a huge scandal, both in spiritualist circles and in Catholic ones. Belgian spiritualism, which had been unified and organised under Le Clément's leadership, underwent a schism. The great majority of Belgian spiritualists opposed the ideas expressed in the pamphlet and went their own way, while a tiny minority preferred to side with Le Clément. Later, further schisms ensued and conflicts kept emerging in Belgian spiritualism until well after the First World War. It would be fair to say that the movement never recovered from the shock. In order to propagate his ideas, Le Clément had created a journal, which was first called *Bulletin mensuel du Bureau permanent d'étude des phénomènes spirites* [Monthly Bulletin of the Permanent Office for the Study of Spiritualist Phenomena] but in 1913 changed its name to *Le Sincériste*. This monthly periodical continued to be published, filled almost single-handedly by Le Clément, until 1947,

³¹ The only study of Belgian spiritualism of which I am aware is an unpublished Master thesis: van Branden, *De receptie van het spiritisme*. It is informative but given its purpose it offers obviously a very partial overview of the subject, and, strangely enough, neglects almost entirely Le Clément's fundamental role in this story.

³² A copy of the first (undated) edition is at the French National Library (shelfmark: D2-17805), bearing a library stamp dated June 7, 1906. It is possible that Le Clément himself sent the copy to the library. I have made no systematic attempt at finding other copies of this edition of the booklet in other French or European libraries. Significantly, I have found no copies of this first edition at the Royal Library in Brussels. The criterion followed by Le Clément in distributing his pamphlet remains unclear, although it seems certain that Belgium was at first excluded.

that is, only seven years before his death. The journal experienced only two interruptions during the two world wars.

It is likely that the scandal of *L'Eucharistie* did not have effects simply on Le Clément's leadership of Belgian spiritualism. It appears, in fact, that his career in both Freemasonry and the army also ended around the time of the scandal. No evidence has surfaced so far to indicate that all these events were related, but the chronological coincidence is highly suggestive. Around 1910, Le Clément was the most prominent figure of Belgian spiritualism, a high-ranking Freemason, and an army officer with excellent career prospects. By the time of the outbreak of the First World War all of this had gone, and it is hard to imagine that the scandal caused by *L'Eucharistie* did not play a major role in this abrupt end to Le Clément's fortunes. Obviously, he paid a high price for his stubborn conviction of having discovered in spermatophagy the most important secret in the history of humanity.

We do not know much about Le Clément's life after the beginning of the First World War. We know that he was recalled in the army and was involved in the first military operations after the German invasion of his country but was soon discharged again. After the war, he retired and lived in the small village of Waltwilder in the Belgian province of Limburg, where he owned a property and where he would spend the rest of his life with his family. Having retired, he could devote most of his time to his studies and publications. He remained very active and, apart from his journal *Le Sincériste*, continued to publish books and pamphlets on spiritualism and other subjects, such as the history of religions, in which he often defended and expanded on his ideas about the Eucharist.³³ Apparently, he remained in Waltwilder during the Second World War and was not particularly affected by the events. He does not seem to have published anything after the war, apart from *Le Sincériste*, and in 1947 even this came to an end. Le Clément de Saint-Marc died in 1956 at the age of 91.

Seminal Ideas

As we have seen, the fundamental idea contained in *L'Eucharistie* is that the main liturgical ceremony of Christianity hides a secret. Bread and

³³ See, for instance, Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *Spiritisme sincériste, Histoire générale des religions*, and *Le Spiritisme et ses adversaires*.

wine are supposed to be symbolic representations of the actual substance that had been consumed during the Last Supper, that is, Jesus Christ's semen. The starting point of Le Clément's argument is a passage in the Gospel of John that is considered as one of the scriptural foundations for the institution of the Eucharist.³⁴ In this passage, taken from the discourse held in the synagogue of Capharnaum, Jesus describes himself as the "Bread of Life" sent by his Father (John 6:47–55). He tells his disciples that only those who will eat his flesh and drink his blood will receive eternal life. Le Clément takes the passage quite literally and asks his readers how Jesus could let not only his disciples but the whole of humanity eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to give them eternal life. This seems a physical impossibility. Traditional Catholic theology has answered the question by postulating the real presence of Christ in the host during the Eucharist, while the Protestant churches have generally opted for a symbolic interpretation of this presence.

But in Le Clément's view, they are both wrong—or, more correctly, they have both lied, for they knew that the truth was different. For Le Clément, the only way of making sense of the Gospel passage is by supposing that Jesus was thinking of a real substance that came from his body and could function as spiritual nourishment for his disciples. That substance was his semen. For Le Clément, this solution makes perfect sense. Semen is comestible, half-liquid and half-solid, and, being the vehicle of human procreation, is related to both blood and flesh. On the other hand, it can be offered to others repeatedly without inflicting injuries upon one's own body or killing oneself (which would be the case if one were to literally give one's flesh and blood). The transmission of semen would also explain the apostolic succession. By ingesting Jesus' semen, a product of his physical body, his disciples were linked to him. By giving their own semen to others in turn, they could therefore provide an indirect link to Jesus that could be transmitted indefinitely through the ages. Thus the apostolic succession was not just spiritual, but physical as well, since it was based upon the chain-transmission of this substance. Finally, it would also explain the promise of eternal life made to Jesus' followers: they had seen that he had conquered death,

³⁴ For what follows, see Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *L'Eucharistie*, 11–13. For a summary of modern exegetical interpretations of the passage, in relation to the institution of the Eucharist, see de Jonge, "The Early History of the Lord's Supper," 220–221.

and now, being united to him, could have faith in a similar destiny for themselves.

This is Le Clément's basic idea concerning the relationship between the Eucharist and spermatophagy. But there are interesting, and important, corollaries. One question concerns Jesus' choice of offering precisely his semen to the apostles. Why semen? It turns out that, for Le Clément, this choice was not original with Jesus. In fact, he claims that all traditional religions were already based on the transmission of sperm even before Jesus Christ appeared on the scene.³⁵ This is, of course, a startling revelation and an important aspect of Le Clément's argument. He claims that the religious practice of spermatophagy has always been universal:

There is no country in the world, and not a single race with a glimmer of religious civilization, which has not known these mysteries and where the habitual communion between priests and gods has not been consummated according to this rite.³⁶

In order to demonstrate this, Le Clément refers to passages from the Old Testament and from the Bhagavad Gītā that supposedly confirm his thesis. Other evidence can be found in the religion of ancient Egypt and in the traditions of the Druids, of China, Africa, and ancient Mexico. All this, he claims, can only be explained by the fact that the ritual transmission of semen has always been perceived as a convenient means of communicating (in the literal sense of the word, and also the religious one of "communion") with the divine. Why? Le Clément does not give a clear answer to this question, important though it obviously is, nor does he expand on the intrinsic virtues of human semen that might justify the universality of religious spermatophagy.

But another crucial question immediately arises. Le Clément clearly sees the teachings of Jesus as a major turning point in the history of religions. According to him, at the beginning Christianity conveyed a revolutionary message.³⁷ But if spermatophagy was already so universal before Jesus Christ, then what would be so new about Christianity? Why

³⁵ For what follows, see *ibid.*, 13–19.

³⁶ "[I]l n'est pas une contrée au monde, pas une race ayant eu quelque teinte de civilisation religieuse, qui n'ait connu ces mystères et où la communion habituelle entre les prêtres et les dieux n'ait été consommée selon ce rite." *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁷ In *L'Eucharistie* Le Clément speaks of the "souffle niveleur et révolutionnaire de l'Évangile" [egalizing and revolutionary breath of the Gospel] (*L'Eucharistie*, 7). See also Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *Dieu*, 143–144.

would those hints in the discourse at Capharnaum and Jesus' words and actions during the Last Supper be so original or remarkable? This question is not clearly answered in *L'Eucharistie*, although its premises are already there. It is only in later texts that Le Clément, probably pressed by the criticism of his adversaries, develops it fully.³⁸

The point is that, according to Le Clément, spermatophagy, no matter how universal, had been kept hidden by the priests of all previous religious traditions in order to exploit and dominate the rest of humanity. Jesus decided to make this practice public in order to put an end to their oppressive authority. In so doing, he sparked a revolution that might have had far-reaching consequences, leading to the emancipation of humanity from the lies and the falsities of older religions. But, in the end, his attempt was frustrated by those who institutionalized the Christian movement after his death, that is, of course, by the clergy. Taking control of the movement, they again concealed the secret that Jesus had wanted to unveil before the eyes of the world.³⁹ However, like the clergy of all other religious traditions before them, the Christian clergy were not against spermatophagy as such, but only against it being revealed to the world. This is why the practice was continued secretly in monasteries and among the priests, while for the public liturgy of the Church the innocuous use of bread and wine was adopted. The history of Christianity has therefore been made of two parallel cults: a secret and a public one.⁴⁰

At this point, some remarks must be made about Le Clément's supposed revelations. First of all, he clearly gives a positive evaluation of Jesus, presenting him as a historical figure who tried to bring about a revolution that could have democratized religion.⁴¹ In his works, Le Clément shows admiration, respect, and even veneration for the figure of Jesus Christ.⁴² Ironically, it would not be absurd to define him, despite his very heterodox position, as a Christian thinker and theologian. But

³⁸ See particularly Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *Dieu*, 141–150.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 148–150.

⁴⁰ Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *L'Eucharistie*, 9, 26–27.

⁴¹ “L'objectif final, en vue duquel Jésus a calculé ses actes et ses paroles, semble être l'affranchissement de l'humanité, subjuguée, dominée, exploitée et asservie par la coalition infernale des riches, des prêtres et des rois” [The final goal, in view of which Jesus has calculated his actions and words, seems to be the liberation of humanity, which has been subjugated, dominated, exploited, and enslaved by the infernal coalition of the rich, the priests, and the kings] (Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *Dieu*, 143).

⁴² See for example the chapter “La Tentation de Jésus,” in Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *Dieu*, 132–140.

there is, of course, an obvious paradox in the history of Christianity according to Le Clément. Although Jesus wanted to create a movement that would oppose traditional religions and break the domination of their clerics over humanity, this movement ended up in being as bad as any religion that preceded it. Le Clément clearly admires Jesus' attempt at exposing the mysteries and democratizing religion but has to concede that his efforts ended with total failure, because the Christian clergy in the end frustrated Jesus' revolution.

This sharp distinction between Jesus and the clergy of institutionalized Christianity, between the good intentions of the former and their perversion operated by the latter, is obviously not original with Le Clément. It belongs to an old tradition, which had its roots in medieval movements of reform and had been one of the driving ideological forces of the Reformation. Later on, it became a commonplace of Protestantism in its various denominations and was widely adopted by the Enlightenment and by Deist thinkers in the eighteenth century. Le Clément attacks the Catholic Church because of its reactionary, anti-democratic domination of the masses, which should be emancipated from its influence. Its doctrine has perverted the real teachings of Jesus and the purity of the early Christian communities. The Church has hidden the real teachings of Jesus Christ, and it is a moral duty for those who see the truth beneath the veil to expose the abuse. This will put an end to the priestly domination of Catholicism and lead to a great progress of humanity.

This description perfectly fits the position of the authors discussed by Jonathan Z. Smith in the first chapter of his remarkable book, *Drudgery Divine*.⁴³ Smith describes the "Protestant anti-Catholic apologetics" of authors such as Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), who attributed the perversion of the original teachings of early Christianity to the influence of Platonism and of Greek philosophy, and hence found it difficult to even conceive the possibility of a comparison between early Christianity and the mystery cults of late Antiquity. Despite all the considerable differences between Le Clément and the authors discussed by Smith, it is interesting to note that in Le Clément's work as well we find an emphasis on the problematic relationship between early Christianity and the Mysteries. One significant difference (apart from the emphasis on Platonism and Greek philosophy, which is absent in Le Clément)

⁴³ "On the Origins of Origins" in Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 1–35.

is that the Belgian author has also some criticism for Protestantism, which he finds as hypocritical as the Catholic Church. The reason is that Protestantism has insisted on the difference between the host and the actual body of Christ, which, for Le Clément, amounts to denying the effective value of the spermatoc transmission.⁴⁴

It is interesting to note that this distinction between the original teachings of Jesus and the later perversions of the Church was developed in the nineteenth century, particularly within liberal Protestantism, Unitarianism, Deist Freemasonry, and more generally in anti-Catholic and anticlerical circles. In Belgium at the time of Le Clément, these assumptions were widespread not only in Freemasonry, but also in spiritualism.⁴⁵ In this respect, except for the reference to spermatophagy, Le Clément's ideas were consonant with the ideas dominant in those movements. It should then come as no surprise that, prior to his revelations on spermatophagy, Le Clément could have been a very prominent figure in both. At the same time, the idea of spermatophagy, wherever it was coming from, was a radical departure from the kind of arguments advanced in those circles, and, but for a few interesting exceptions, led to a general condemnation of Le Clément and the end of his personal career as a public figure. It just went too far.

The second remark concerns Le Clément's vision of history. For him, the whole history of religions, and indeed of humanity, is based on a gigantic lie, a "monstrueux et séculaire complot" [a monstrous and secular conspiracy]⁴⁶ that he alone has discovered or is willing to expose, probably for the first time since Jesus Christ himself (and, he surely hopes, with better chances of success). Humanity is divided between "sincerists" (*sincéristes*) and "mensongists" (*mensongistes*).⁴⁷ The sincerists are those who, like Le Clément, have discovered the truth of

⁴⁴ Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *L'Eucharistie*, 28–30.

⁴⁵ Within Belgian Freemasonry these ideas had had a significant development in the first half of the nineteenth century, notably in the works of M. Reghellini de Schio (1766–1858) (see Cazzaniga, "Les origines de la Franc-Maçonnerie"). In Reghellini's works, one finds the idea that Catholic priests have perverted the true message of Christ (*ibid.*, 20), and that against this "religious imposture" freemasons "s'organisent dans la tradition des sociétés secrètes pour éduquer le peuple et pour bâtir une société d'hommes libres et égaux" [organize in the tradition of secret societies in order to educate the people and build a society of free and equal men] (*ibid.*, 22). It is significant that a book by Reghellini, *Examen du Mosaïsme et du Christianisme* (1834), is listed by Le Clément in the bibliography appended to *L'Eucharistie*.

⁴⁶ Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *Dieu*, 60.

⁴⁷ Hence the title of his periodical, *Le Sincériste*.

spermatophagy and, being honest (*sincères*), are willing to spread the news to the rest of the world. The mensongists are all those who have an interest in keeping the truth hidden from the world and spread the web of lies (*mensonges*) that holds religious institutions alive. Between these two camps there are the simple-minded persons, the vast majority of humanity, who are unaware of the whole issue and who are willing to believe the lies of the mensongists without asking too many questions.

This vision is not far removed from the type of conspiracy theories that have recently been made popular by books such as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* or *The Da Vinci Code*.⁴⁸ In all these fictionalized accounts of history, the real protagonist is a tremendous secret, known by a tiny minority of persons divided into two groups: those who exploit it in order to achieve and preserve power, and those who want to reveal it and bring to an end the worldly domination of the other party. According to Le Clément, the revelation of the secret of spermatophagy should bring about a new age of peace, understanding, and prosperity, by democratizing religion and society and by breaking the spell cast by the clergy over the vast majority of humanity.

This leads us to another important point. In Le Clément's vision, being a "sincerist" means being against "mysteries," of whatever kind. This is the reason why, in his writings, the words "mysteries" and "initiates" often have a negative connotation: "There exists . . . in the Church and in Religion a principle, and habits of duplicity, which distort their moral influence; this failing results from what one calls the mysteries of Religion."⁴⁹ These mysteries are actually the basis for the priestly domination over the ignorant masses, and they should all be dispelled: "Only . . . the complete and public divulgation of the mysteries can put a final end to this deplorable situation."⁵⁰ We find in Le Clément's work no appreciation of the value of initiation, or of the idea that initiatic wisdom should be conferred only to those who deserve it and who have been prepared to receive it. Disclosing the mysteries is a matter

⁴⁸ Baigent, Leigh & Lincoln, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*; Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*.

⁴⁹ "Il y a [...] dans l'Eglise et dans la Religion un principe et des habitudes de duplicité qui en dénaturent l'influence morale; ce défaut résulte de ce que l'on appelle: les mystères de la Religion" (Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *Dieu*, 108; see also 57).

⁵⁰ "Seule [...] la divulgation complète et publique des mystères peut apporter un terme définitif à cette situation déplorable." *Ibid.*, 148.

of universal emancipation, especially of the lower classes, who have been the most obvious victims of priestly domination.

This hostility towards initiation and the “mysteries” is an interesting aspect, because it seems hardly compatible with the common language of esotericists and occultists, where the same terms have rather positive connotations. On the other hand, it does fit the kind of rhetoric that was widespread among spiritualists. Spiritualism in fact often criticized occultism for its love of mysteries and was against an elitist view of spiritual wisdom. In this sense, it saw itself as more “democratic” and more “progressive” than occultism.⁵¹ This makes of course even more apparent that Le Clément made a significant choice when he distanced himself from the Papusian movement.

Another significant element is the fact that, in his books and his journal, Le Clément underscores again and again the importance of sexual reform and sexual education, especially for children. In short, Le Clément’s sincerism goes beyond a simple affirmation of the truth of spermatophagy and also includes a progressive, even radical vision of sexuality, which has important social implications. It should be noted that, on this point at least, Le Clément was close to figures like Paschal Beverly Randolph, Theodor Reuss, and Aleister Crowley, who have not only been major characters in the modern history of sexual magic but also held similar views on sexuality.⁵² At the same time, Le Clément also found himself close to some of the more radical currents of spiritualism, which became outspoken advocates of sexual liberation.⁵³

A final point concerns the ambiguous value attached to spermatophagy. It is important to emphasize that priests are condemned by Le Clément not because they indulge in spermatophagy, but because they do it secretly. The implication seems to be that a positive value is attached to spermatophagy, and that once the secret has been disclosed, everybody could or should practice it. This, at least, is what might be gathered from the text of *LEucharistie*. At one point Le Clément remarks that if all religions in the world have believed that it was possible to establish a contact with the divine through spermatophagy, there must be some truth in it: “Therefore it is not at all just a superstition that

⁵¹ On this point, see Pasi, “Occultism.”

⁵² On this point, see Deveney, *Paschal Beverley Randolph, passim*; Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 7–12; Pasi, “Ordo Templi Orientis”, and “Crowley, Aleister.”

⁵³ See Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 56–81, 117–141.

this universal belief is able to establish a link between man and God by means of spermatophagy.”⁵⁴ If religious traditions are not all the result of some kind of universal folly or of a collective mental disease (a possibility that Le Clément seems to exclude), there is only one other possibility: that “at the bottom of these practices there is some serious element, grounded in the nature of things, and that it should be brought to light in a definitive and irrefutable manner.”⁵⁵

One may also wonder if any special connection is made by Le Clément between spermatophagy and the practice of spiritualism. He does not say explicitly that spiritualism should make use of spermatophagy, although in *L'Eucharistie* he comes very close to doing so. He remarks in fact that in all countries and in all periods of history there seem to have existed men who preferred to live their life separated from the rest of society, and especially from women. Very often they have claimed to be in contact with spiritual entities, whose existence is nowadays demonstrated by spiritualism:

These men devote themselves to meditation and, to judge from what they say, are in contact with another spiritual population of this world, which is not perceived by our senses but the existence of which seems to be proven by the spiritualist phenomena that are being studied more and more frequently in our days.⁵⁶

Judging from the context in which Le Clément brings this point in, the implication seems to be that the isolated condition of these men was related to the practice of spermatophagy, and that this practice was used to achieve their goal.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ “Ce n’est donc point une superstition totale que cette croyance universelle à la possibilité d’établir un lien entre l’homme et Dieu par la spermatophagie” (Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *L'Eucharistie*, 18).

⁵⁵ “il y a au fond de ces pratiques un élément sérieux, fondé dans la nature des choses, et qu’il conviendrait de mettre en lumière d’une manière définitive et irrefutable” (Ibid.).

⁵⁶ “[C]es hommes se livrent à la méditation et semblent en rapport, selon leurs discours, avec une autre population spirituelle de ce monde que nos sens ne perçoivent pas, mais dont l’existence semble prouvée par les phénomènes spirites de plus en plus étudiés de nos jours” (Ibid., 18–19).

⁵⁷ We should note here in passing that this reference to isolated men practising spermatophagy, seems to have obvious homosexual connotations. We will return to this aspect in the final part of this chapter. We should also add that, from what is known of Le Clément’s life there are no reasons to believe that he ever had homosexual experiences or inclinations.

Thus, one could ask, why should Spiritualists not do the same in order to communicate with the spirits? This question is very important in order to assess the concrete possibility that a ritual use of spermatophagy was practiced or encouraged by Le Clément himself. Whatever his ideological disagreements with occultism, this would of course bring him very close to the practice of a kind of “sexual magic.” Unfortunately, there is no clear answer to this question. First of all, the correlation drawn between the practices of traditional religions with respect to spermatophagy, on the one hand, and spiritualism on the other, is always indirect and never explicit, as, for example, in the passage quoted above. Secondly, at the current state of research we have no evidence whatsoever that Le Clément ever practised spermatophagy himself. Thirdly, if spermatophagy really helps human beings to establish a contact with spiritual entities, Le Clément does not make clear how this is supposed to work. Is it because of some intrinsic power of semen? Does it have to do with certain notions of biological and/or spiritual physiology? Le Clément has left us with no clues as to his views about such questions. Moreover, in other writings he professes to have doubts concerning the practice of spermatophagy and even explicitly rejects the idea that it should be practiced today.⁵⁸ In a sort of catechism of sincerism he writes:

Q. Since the Eucharist has such great virtues, should we practice it?

R. No.

Q. Why should we not put into practice the command of Jesus Christ?

R. Because today it is possible to propagate by words ideas that in the past could not find their way into the world otherwise than by practicing the work of the Eucharist.

Q. Why is it preferable to have recourse to verbal propagation?

R. Because in that manner one can better clear up people’s minds, openly attack false ideas and immoral institutions, the destruction of which was prepared by the Eucharist, and thus act much more efficiently in the interest of the salvation of humanity.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ For the first point, see Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, ...*Et lux erat!*, 2; for the second, see his “Faites votre salut.”

⁵⁹ “D. Puisque l’Eucharistie a des si grandes vertus, faut-il la pratiquer?/R. Non./ D. Pourquoi ne doit-on plus mettre en pratique l’ordre de Jésus-Christ?/R. Parce que actuellement, il est possible de propager verbalement les idées qui ne pouvaient cheminer autrefois dans le Monde que par la mise en action de l’œuvre eucharistique./ D. Pourquoi est-il préférable de recourir à la propagation verbale?/R. Parce que de cette manière, on éclaire davantage les esprits, on attaque ouvertement les idées fausses

Is Le Clément being entirely sincere here? If so, we should conclude that by declaring spermatophagy as inappropriate and superfluous for modern man, Le Clément is also excluding any possible use that might be made of it as a ritual technique in the context of sexual magic. In the end, given Le Clément's reticence in giving his personal opinions as to the actual use of spermatophagy, the question remains open.

The Enigma of Le Clément's Eucharist

Le Clément's work represents an enigma for the scholar. His claims seem to be so patently absurd, at least in their grandiose historical implications, that one might be tempted to question his mental sanity. How is it possible that someone of his intelligence and education, someone highly appreciated for his intellectual qualities by his colleagues in all the fields in which he was involved, came to develop such a stubborn conviction about the universal secret of spermatophagy?

It is important here to note that Le Clément's claim was also of a historical nature. It is not his belief in the existence of a spiritual dimension or in the possibility of communicating with the spirits of the dead that is at issue here. Such beliefs might be considered "irrational," but could hardly be a sufficient basis for making any statement concerning Le Clément's mental health. The implications of Le Clément's ideas go much farther than that, as they assume the universal presence of a practice, spermatophagy, for which no apparent evidence seems to be available. Yet Le Clément wants to convince his readers that this evidence can be found everywhere, and that nobody else has seen it before him. That spermatophagy has been practised in certain particular historical contexts may be considered a fair assumption. But that it is the basis of all religions since the origins of humanity seems patently absurd.

One could imagine that Le Clément was essentially a "rabid anticlerical," whose scandalous ideas were just an (admittedly odd) excuse for attacking the Catholic Church, a kind of smokescreen for his real, hidden agenda.⁶⁰ Perhaps by spreading these rumours he

et les institutions malsaines dont l'Eucharistie ne faisait que préparer la ruine, et on agit ainsi d'une façon beaucoup plus efficace pour le salut de l'humanité" (Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, "Faites votre salut," 2).

⁶⁰ The definition of Le Clément as a "rabid anticlerical" ("anticlericale arrabbiato")

was just hoping to harm the reputation of the Catholic Church but himself did not really believe in their truth. If we were to follow this line of interpretation, we would be obliged to think that Le Clément's appeals for sincerity and against falsehood were but an ironic twist in his deliberate program of deception.

It is true that in the history of anticlericalism we find a number of examples of this sort of duplicity. A quite obvious case was chronologically close to Le Clément and could provide us with a good term of comparison. I am referring to Léo Taxil's (ps. of Gabriel Jogand-Pagès, 1854–1907) complicated sequence of deceptions and revelations, whose final aim was to render the anti-masonic attitude of the Catholic Church ridiculous.⁶¹ After having been active in anticlerical circles, Taxil had in fact claimed to have converted to Catholicism and then published a series of revelations on a world-wide satanic conspiracy of freemasons. These publications were quite successful, and despite the improbable details found in some of them, they were taken for absolute truth by a large number of unsuspecting Catholics. Eventually Taxil announced publicly that he had been inventing his stories from scratch, with the sole purpose of showing how gullible Catholics could be. There is, however, at least one important difference between the two stories. Le Clément, much unlike Taxil, publicly defended his ideas, with remarkable consistency, during a considerable period of time. At least from 1906, when his pamphlet on the Eucharist was first published, until his last publications forty years later. There is no evidence that Le Clément ever doubted the truthfulness of his claims, and he did not significantly modify them during his life.

If we suppose that Le Clément really believed in his ideas, and that the real impulse behind his publications was a candid, honest belief in their truthfulness, the problem remains unsolved. What might lie at the origin of Le Clément's sincere beliefs? Was it erudite research? A connection between the rite of the Eucharist and spermatophagy had been made before, by early Church heresiologists such as Epiphanius of Salamis but was attributed to a "gnostic" sect, the Phibionites, or

is by M. Introvigne (*Il ritorno dello gnosticismo*, 156). He relates Le Clément's discourse, among other things, to the virulence of the polemics of Belgian Freemasonry against the Catholic Church.

⁶¹ On this point, see Weber, *Satan franc-maçon*; and Introvigne, *Enquête sur le satanisme*, 143–208.

Borborites.⁶² The idea may have come from there, and Le Clément does indeed quote Epiphanius in his *L'Eucharistie*. He argues that Epiphanius, like other early Christian authors, had attributed to the gnostics a practice that was in fact widespread among Christians as well, because by that time the clergy had already taken over the movement founded by Jesus Christ and had betrayed his original message. Christian authors were therefore ashamed to admit publicly what they did in secret and tried to scapegoat the gnostics for this:

St. Epiphanius gives a complete description of the eucharistic ceremony, but he attributes it exclusively to the gnostics, and takes care to present it as an aberration unworthy of true Christians; in their meetings, he says, men and women both eat the semen that reproduces the human species while turning towards the altar and saying "Offerimus tibi donum corpus Christi," "*We offer you as sacrifice the body of Christ.*" But on the one hand, while the scribes paid by the Church thus attempt to save its reputation by projecting the bad reputation of the secret cult onto the heretical sects, on the other hand, the authorities that direct this great social movement make an effort to discipline the meals, impose order on them, and make them less scary for the faithful, so that the idea of the sacrifice that they are going to offer to God will be more present to their minds.⁶³

Still the question remains: why then apply the practice not only to the Catholic Church, or even generally to Christianity, but to the whole of humanity?

A definitive answer seems impossible at the present state of research. However, we may come to better understand how Le Clément developed his convictions by considering a detail that has escaped the attention of all previous commentators so far. In 1913, one of Le Clément's spiritualist opponents, one Van Geebergen, publicly stated his opinion that the origin of the ideas presented in *L'Eucharistie* lay in demonic inspiration.

⁶² See van den Broek, "Borborites."

⁶³ Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, *L'Eucharistie*, 25 ["*Saint Epiphane donne une description complète de la cérémonie eucharistique, mais il l'attribue exclusivement aux gnostiques et a soin de la représenter comme une aberration indigne des vrais chrétiens; dans leurs assemblées, dit-il, les hommes et les femmes mangent réciproquement la semence reproductive de l'espèce humaine en se tournant vers l'autel et en disant (au Très-Haut): "Offerimus tibi donum corpus Christi". "Nous l'offrons en sacrifice le corps de Jésus-Christ". Mais, d'une part, pendant que les scribes à la solde de l'Eglise essaient ainsi de sauver sa réputation en jetant sur des sectes hérétiques le mauvais renom du culte secret, d'autre part, les autorités dirigeant ce grand mouvement social s'efforcent de discipliner les agapes, d'y établir l'ordre, de les rendre moins effrayantes pour les fidèles, afin qu'ils aient plus présents à l'esprit l'idée du sacrifice qu'il viennent y offrir à Dieu*"] (author's emphasis).

In his reply, published in *Le Sincériste*, Le Clément denied the accusation, but only as far as the “quality” of the inspiration was concerned; in fact, he stated that the secret of spermatophagy had been revealed to him during a spiritualist séance.⁶⁴ Now if the ideas expressed in the brochure indeed had their origin in a spiritualist communication, the problem referred to above can be seen in different light.⁶⁵ The communication is not mentioned in the text of *L'Eucharistie*, but probably had a cognitive quality that helped Le Clément to overcome all possible doubts concerning the likelihood of the spermatophagical theory. Unfortunately, however, we lack any details as to the conditions under which this communication took place. We do not even know whether Le Clément was using a medium—and if so, who he or she may have been—or was acting as a medium himself.

For some reason, although Le Clément seems to have attached great importance to methodological skepticism in spiritualism, he became convinced that what had been communicated to him during a séance was a historical truth. Presumably it was only afterwards that he tried to “make sense” of the revelation and, to some extent, build a system on it. A comparison with another revelation of a similar kind, Aleister Crowley’s revelation of the *Book of the Law*, may be useful here.⁶⁶ In 1904, Crowley received from an entity called Aiwass the text of a book that should become the foundation for the universal religion of the future. The revelation itself gave a new meaning to Crowley’s life and made him feel that the spiritual world had charged him with a mission of supreme importance. After that date, Crowley spent the rest of his life “making sense” of the revelation he had received, writing

⁶⁴ See G. Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, “Rectification.” See also, . . . *Et lux erant!*, 8.

⁶⁵ It also provides a new perspective on Guénon’s discussion of Le Clément (see note 2), which seems to contain some allusions to Spiritualist communications as a background to Le Clément’s doctrine. For example, he discusses a Mr. Paul Pillault, leader of a spiritualist sect called “Fraternism,” who claimed that Le Clément was merely an “instrument very open to various psychoses” and concluded that “having been influenced, he had to write this brochure and publish it” (Guénon, *L’erreur spirite*, 323). According to Guénon, in the “Fraternist” terminology “the ‘psychoses’ are ‘invisible influences’ (they even use the barbarous word ‘influencism’), of which there exist good and bad ones, and all the séances of the Fraternalists begin by an invocation to the ‘Good Psychosis’” (ibid.). A thorough analysis and commentary of Guénon’s discussion would require more space than is available here.

⁶⁶ For a short introduction to Crowley’s life and ideas, with an essential bibliography, see Pasi, “Crowley, Aleister.” For an interesting discussion on the significance of the revelation of the *Book of the Law* for Crowley’s life, including comparisons with other similar “revelations,” see Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 133–140.

hundreds of pages in this enterprise. It is noteworthy that most of the time such revelations seem to confirm the ideas of the authors who receive them. They are consonant with their world-view, and this makes the task of “making sense” of them easier. At the same time, this task may become all-consuming and carry heavy costs for the personal life of the receiver of the revelation. Such was arguably the case with Crowley, and certainly with Le Clément.

The Influence of Le Clément's Work

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, several authors have hinted at the importance of Le Clément's role in the history of sexual magic. In what follows we will focus on the influence that Le Clément may have had on two of the most important authors in the history of sexual magic, Theodor Reuss and Aleister Crowley, while leaving a more detailed study of the Belgian and French groups that took shape around Le Clément's ideas for a future publication.

The connection between Le Clément and sexual magic was made quite early. We find it already, if only implicitly, in René Guénon's book, *L'erreur spirite*, in which he meticulously, and very critically, investigated the history and ideas of spiritualism. The connection was suggested by, and had some foundation in, the fact that one of the authors actually involved in sexual magic had found inspiration in Le Clément's booklet, Theodor Reuss, who in 1914 even wrote a letter to Le Clément in order to congratulate him with his publications and to assure him that the sexual secret of the Ordo Templi Orientis was in perfect accordance with what Le Clément has presented in *L'Eucharistie*. The letter had been printed by Le Clément in his *Sincériste* and was quoted by Guénon: “I'm sending you two brochures: Oriflammes [sic], in which you will find that the Order of Oriental Templars has the same knowledge that one finds in the brochure *L'Eucharistie*.”⁶⁷ In fact, Reuss had mentioned Le Clément's *L'Eucharistie* among the fundamental sources for the teachings of the O.T.O., that is, the “treasure-troves of the building-blocks for

⁶⁷ “Je vous adresse deux brochures: Oriflammes [sic], dans lesquelles vous trouverez que l'Ordre des Templiers Orientaux a la même connaissance comme on trouve dans la brochure *Eucharistie*” (Le Clément de Saint-Marçq, “Encore une confirmation”; see also Guénon, *L'Erreur spirite*, 324).

the O.T.O. temple” [Fundstätten der Bausteine zum O.T.O.-Tempel], at the end of his *Parsifal and the Mystery of the Grail Unveiled* of 1914.⁶⁸

Howe and Möller, in their biography of Theodor Reuss, remark that there certainly was a “spiritual affinity” between the two authors.⁶⁹ Even apart from the fundamental secret of spermatophagy, the ideas of sexual and social reform that were defended by Le Clément in his writings could only appeal to Reuss. Howe and Möller add that there is no evidence of a continued relationship between the two, apart from the letter quoted above, and that their contact probably went no further, perhaps because there was little that Reuss could obtain from Le Clément in terms of practical teachings.⁷⁰ With Le Clément, everything seemed to be entirely theoretical, while Reuss wanted to develop a system of workable sexual magic.

This conclusion seems sound enough, but it is still possible to suppose that Reuss took more inspiration from Le Clément’s book for the development of his techniques of sexual magic than one might think at first sight. Elsewhere, we have noted the interesting coincidence that the first signs of Reuss developing a system based on sexual teachings in the frame of his masonic enterprises appeared in 1906, the same year in which *L’Eucharistie* was first printed and circulated internationally (with the probable exclusion of Belgium).⁷¹

There are some interesting aspects here that should be highlighted. First of all, although spermatophagy as such is not necessarily a homosexual practice, the interpretation Le Clément gives of the Eucharist has obvious homosexual connotations. And secondly, nowhere in his writings does Le Clément hint at the possibility of mingling sperm with female bodily fluids (be it menstrual blood or vaginal secretions). Semen seems to be for him the only substance that really counts, the one that offers the key to understanding all religious traditions and emancipating humanity. Yet the kind of sexual magic developed by Crowley in the context of the O.T.O. out of Reuss’ original system was based on the idea of the ingestion of a *mixture* composed of both male and female bodily fluids,

⁶⁸ See Reuss, “Fundstätten der Bausteine zum O.T.O.-Tempel,” in *Parsifal und das Enthüllte Grals-Geheimnis*, 44–46, reproduced in Möller & Howe, *Merlin Peregrinus*, 279–285 (ref. to Le Clément on 281). Reuss also makes a passing reference to Le Clément and *L’Eucharistie* in the text of his book. See Reuss, “Parsifal und das Enthüllte Grals-Geheimnis,” 62.

⁶⁹ See Möller & Howe, *Merlin Peregrinus*, 179.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁷¹ See Pasi, “Ordo Templi Orientis,” 900.

which then had to be “energized” by means of mental concentration and other psycho-physical techniques. This again was significantly different from the kind of sexual magic that had been taught by Paschal Beverly Randolph and, in his wake, by the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor.⁷² Yet the latter were the immediate predecessors of the O.T.O. (both mythically and, perhaps, historically) in the development of the Anglo-American tradition of sexual magic. In fact, it would appear that neither Randolph nor the H.B. of L. gave particular importance to the use of sexual fluids in the practice of sexual magic, and there seems to be even less evidence that they ever imparted teachings involving the ingestion of them. The ingestion of sexual fluids in the context of modern sexual magic therefore seems to have been an innovation introduced by the O.T.O.,⁷³ and it could very well have been this very idea that Reuss took from Le Clément’s pamphlet. In this context, it is relevant that anything which has transpired about a sexual element in Reuss’ masonic activities, even before the O.T.O. came into existence, seems to have been of a homosexual kind.⁷⁴

Could it be, then, that the “secret” of sexual magic transmitted by Reuss to Crowley was of a homosexual nature as well? Since we know so little about Reuss’ practices and teachings within the O.T.O. before

⁷² On Randolph and his techniques of sexual magic, see the already quoted Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, and Deveney’s chapter in this volume. On the H.B. of L. and their techniques, see Godwin, Chanel & Deveney, *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor*.

⁷³ Introvigne has argued that there already existed a magical tradition involving the ingestion of sperm in western esotericism, pointing at documents originating in the eighteenth-century Golden and Rosy Cross, a German masonic group, and transmitted through Cagliostro’s secret instructions for his Egyptian masonic rite. Subsequently, this tradition is supposed to have followed three different lines of transmission in France, Italy, and English-speaking countries. Introvigne has presented this thesis especially in his articles “Arcana Arcanorum” and “Presenza di Cagliostro,” and see also his *Il ritorno dello gnosticismo*, 149–155. However, the various trajectories by means of which this transmission supposedly took place are far from being all historically demonstrated and seem to be based mostly on (sometimes purely external) analogies. Moreover, Introvigne’s conclusion that the ingestion of sperm was also part of this particular tradition is based on a speculative reading of the documents (particularly of Cagliostro’s instructions) that is not supported by internal or external evidence. It seems clear that in the twentieth century, some esotericists, particularly in Italy, have interpreted Cagliostro’s documents in a way that is compatible with certain techniques of “inner alchemy” or sexual magic, but this does not necessarily imply that Cagliostro himself (or his immediate successors) would have sanctioned this interpretation of his teachings. At this stage of research, I fail to see any clear evidence of magical techniques involving the ingestion of sexual fluids in the context of western esotericism before Le Clément.

⁷⁴ See Pasi, “Ordo Templi Orientis,” 900.

Crowley's involvement, this must remain no more than a hypothesis for the time being, but one that deserves serious consideration. From this point of view, it becomes particularly significant that the very first experiments involving sexual magic made by Crowley after having received the "secret" from Reuss were homosexual.⁷⁵ It has been assumed that this was a personal, heterodox interpretation of Reuss' teachings, to be explained in terms of Crowley's bisexuality.⁷⁶ Scholars considered it obvious that Reuss' system of sexual magic should be heterosexual. But what if it had important homosexual connotations from the very beginning?

This is certainly an interesting hypothesis which, for lack of first-hand evidence, will probably never be proved (or disproved, for that matter). But whether true or not, there are good reasons to assume that the influence of Le Clément's ideas on Reuss and on the development of modern sexual magic were very significant, and that he may ultimately have been responsible for introducing, at least in an Anglo-Saxon context, the very idea of the ingestion of bodily fluids. Whether Reuss' secret was of a homosexual or heterosexual nature has no direct bearing on the question of Le Clément's influence on him, although, if this secret were homosexual, it would make such an influence even more evident. On the other hand, it is perhaps ironic that Le Clément's universal revelation about the Eucharist was interpreted in terms of a magical "secret" by occultists such as Reuss and, possibly, Crowley. If we base ourselves upon Le Clément's rhetoric alone, we should conclude that for him, spermatophagy should be anything but secret and would not have anything to do with magic either.

Finally, a few words should be said about the possible influence of Le Clément on Aleister Crowley himself. Peter-R. König has argued that this influence is clearly visible in a chapter of *Magick in Theory and*

⁷⁵ This refers to the so-called "Paris Working," in which Crowley's disciple Victor Neuburg participated. This was the first systematic series of experiments of sexual magic made by Crowley after Reuss had revealed to him the secret of the O.T.O. The "Working" was carried out between December 1913 and February 1914. For Crowley's own account of it, see Crowley, *The Vision and the Voice*, 343–409. On the other hand, there is a record of an earlier experiment from 1912 (preserved in the first draft manuscript notebook of *Liber Agape*), which seem to refer either to autoerotic or heterosexual sex magic. In the same text, Crowley claims to have cured himself of a serious illness by its use. The diary is still unpublished, and I thank William Breeze for letting me know of the existence of this entry.

⁷⁶ See Symonds, *The King of the Shadow Realm*, 166.

Practice (1929), Crowley's *summa* of magical teachings.⁷⁷ The chapter is in fact titled "Of the Eucharist; and the Art of Alchemy" and contains hints to practices of inner alchemy certainly related to the ingestion of sexual fluids.⁷⁸ However, not only does Crowley not mention Le Clément explicitly, but he does not even give any particular prominence to the notion of spermatophagy. Clearly, Crowley does not refer to the ingestion of semen alone, but of a mixture of several bodily fluids, which is a significant departure from Le Clément's basic idea. On the other hand, it is true that in the 1930s, Crowley tried to develop a business for the sale of pills whose miraculous medical effect was supposed to be guaranteed by the presence of his own semen.⁷⁹ But again, there is no reference here to Le Clément or his ideas, and the context seems to be distant from Le Clément's discourse anyway. In the end, it is of course more than plausible that Crowley was acquainted with Le Clément's name or works, but it should also be noted that, to my knowledge, both the name of the Belgian spiritualist and the titles of his works are never mentioned in any of Crowley's published or unpublished writings. If there was an influence of Le Clément on Crowley, it is likely that it was indirect, through Reuss.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Not only is sexual magic a subject whose full history remains to be written, the same is true for the role of sexuality in occultism and spiritualism, and even Freemasonry. In the case of Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, we are dealing with a person who was centrally involved in these various contexts and who considered the essential "secret" as sexual in nature. As such, he is an excellent focus for research into the

⁷⁷ See König, "Correct Gnosticism." See also his "Birth and Development," 53–55.

⁷⁸ See Crowley, *Magick*, 267–269.

⁷⁹ Martin Starr has published the writings and documents related to this enterprise of Crowley: see Crowley, *Amrita*.

⁸⁰ Another possibility might be the Belgian painter Leon Engers Kennedy (ca. 1890–ca. 1970), who was born in Antwerp and became involved as a young man in Reuss' Ancient and Primitive Rite in London, and thereafter in the O.T.O. He may have been involved in the Belgian spiritualist or esoteric scene in his youth, or otherwise have encountered Le Clément. I thank William Breeze for drawing my attention to this. A portrait of Crowley made by Kennedy is now preserved at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

dynamics of esoteric culture in his time and its remarkable preoccupation with things sexual. His role as a central figure in the as yet largely unknown history of Belgian occultism and spiritualism still largely needs to be explored.

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THE YOGA OF SEX:
TANTRA, ORIENTALISM, AND SEX MAGIC
IN THE ORDO TEMPLI ORIENTIS

HUGH URBAN

In this time the East (which is now the mightiest representative of so-called Paganism) has conquered the West in bloody battle. After this Westerners can no longer sneer about “wild Pagans in faraway Asia,” rather they should think about the future when . . . the peoples of India . . . will knock at the doors of Europe. Then we will see if the Christian religion has left the people of the West enough belief in God and enough resistance to successfully reject the inrushing masses of Asia, who serve the sex cult. To give our European Christian people such an inner resistance . . . a new kind of belief in God must be rooted in their hearts. If in the place of today’s extreme unbelief a real living belief in a divinity could occur then it would not be bad if this belief was embodied in a phallus cult of some sort.

Theodor Reuss, *Lingam-Yöni* (1906)

[F]or the last 150 years . . . we have been orientalizing; in reality, it is precisely because the whole world is Westernizing that the West is becoming more permeable to Indian philosophy, to African art . . . to Arabic mysticism.

Michel Foucault (Interview, 1967)

Since their first discovery of the complex body of texts and traditions known as “Tantra,” Western authors have been at once horrified and tantalized, scandalized and titillated, by this seemingly exotic form of Eastern spirituality. Above all, Western authors have been particularly obsessed with the use of sexual rituals in Tantric practice—a phenomenon that was a source of disgusted revulsion for most Christian missionaries and Orientalist scholars, even as it was a source of erotic allure for many European esoteric groups. By the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, Tantra had begun to be appropriated by various European authors and increasingly fused with Western methods of sexual magic.

Today, if we browse the shelves of Barnes and Noble or surf the various occultist websites now saturating cyber-space, we find that sexual magic is very commonly associated, and often wholly identified, with Tantra. One need only run a Google-search on “sex magic” to come up with several hundred web-sites such as “SACRED SEX: Karezza, Tantra, and Sex Magic,” “TantraMagic.com,” and “Developmental Techniques for Tantra/Sex Magic,” most of which are based on a fundamental equation of Western sexual magic with Asian Tantra. In fact, the more erotically-challenged among us may now consult the *Complete Idiot’s Guide to Tantric Sex*, a fully-illustrated step-by-step manual for Tantric sex magic and its manifold benefits.¹ The more adventurous among us, however, might browse the much darker work by Nikolas and Zeena Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh*. Presented as a neo-Tantric left-hand path adapted to the needs of the twenty-first century West, *Demons of the Flesh* begins from the principle that “SEX IS POWER,” and promises to unveil the secrets of “Sadomasochism, Orgies, Taboo-breaking, Fetishism, Orgasm prolongation, Sexual vampirism, Ritual intercourse with divine and demonic entities, Awakening the Feminine Daemonic,” as well as “Erotic deprogramming and deconditioning.”²

But what, if anything, do the Asian traditions of Tantra have to do with sexual magic as it is understood in the modern West? Not much really, but quite a lot accidentally. By this I mean that the early forms of Tantra that emerged in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of India, China, Tibet, and Japan have little in common with the forms of sexual magic that emerged in Europe and America since the nineteenth century. And yet, since the late nineteenth century, the newly-imported forms of Tantra would be progressively melded and often hopelessly confused with Western forms of sexual magic.³

As most modern scholars agree, the term “Tantra” or “Tantrism” does not refer to a singular, monolithic, or neatly-defined entity; instead, it is a rather messy and ambiguous term used to refer to a huge array of texts, traditions, sects, and ritual practices that spread throughout the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain communities of South and East Asia

¹ “Sex magic is an advanced art of Tantric lovemaking... [T]he phrase technically refers to creating what you want through Tantric union” (Kuriansky, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide*, 196).

² Schreck and Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh*. This list is from the back cover advertisement.

³ See Urban, *Tantra*, chapter 6.

from roughly the fifth century onward. As André Padoux argues, the abstract category of “Tantrism”—as a singular, unified “ism”—is itself a relatively recent invention and in large part the creation of western Orientalist scholars writings in the nineteenth century.⁴ And surely the identification of Tantrism with “sexual magic” is a very recent idea. There is indeed a long tradition of sexual practice throughout the Indian Tantric schools since at least the fifth or sixth century; and yet these Indian sexual rites bear little if any resemblance to the various forms of “spiritual sex” and “sexual magic” now being marketed in New Age bookstores or on the infinite array of cyber-sexual web sites now proliferating on the Internet.⁵

So how then did the complex body of traditions known as Tantra come to be mingled, combined, and fused with Western sexual magic? And how did it come to be identified primarily with sensual gratification and sexual liberation? To answer this question, I think we need to look at the earliest Western scholarship on Tantra from the nineteenth century and then examine the complex process through which Tantra was appropriated by a Western popular audience at the turn of the twentieth century.

As Richard King has argued in *Orientalism and Religion*, Western scholars of the nineteenth century consistently imagined India as a land of transcendental mysticism and other-worldly spirituality, set in contrast to the “this-worldly” and politically-active West. Rather strangely, however, King makes absolutely no reference either to the role of sexuality in mysticism or to the category of Tantra. But in fact, I will argue, Tantra was a crucial element in the Orientalist imagining of India and a key part of the modern imagining of mysticism, particularly in its darkest, most dangerous and aberrant forms.⁶

⁴ See Padoux, “Tantrism”; Urban, “The Extreme Orient.”

⁵ See White, *Kiss of the Yōgini*.

⁶ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, chapter 5. King lucidly examines the “romantic and exotic fantasies of Indian religions as deeply mystical, introspective and otherworldly in nature” (p. 142); yet he strangely never mentions Tantra or anything relating to sexuality. I can only conclude that this is because the presence of Tantra would undermine his central thesis—namely, that Indian mysticism was imagined as something other-worldly, transcendent and identified with Vedanta and other highly philosophical schools. The intense sensuality of Tantra in the Orientalist imagination would seem to contradict this thesis. However, I would suggest that Tantra came to represent, for both Indian and European authors, mysticism in its most degenerate form—a kind of mysticism that had been corrupted with sensual desire and this worldly-power. See Urban, *Tantra* and “The Extreme Orient.”

As Michel Foucault has observed, this period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—roughly the period of the Victorian era in England—was by no means simply the age of sexual repression and prudery that we now commonly imagine it to have been. On the contrary, the late nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented explosion of discourse about sexuality, which was now categorized, classified, and described in endless titillating detail. Above all, there was a special interest in sexuality in its “deviant” or “transgressive” forms, such as homosexuality, masturbation, and other non-reproductive acts.⁷ The new interest in Tantra and other exotic sexual techniques from the “mystical Orient” was part of this larger Western interest in the power of sexuality in its transgressive forms. Many European men and women of the late nineteenth century, it would seem, were working through their own deep ambivalence surrounding sexuality and religion; and they found in Tantra a wonderfully “other” form of spirituality—a kind of empty mirror onto which they could project their own most intense anxieties, fears, hopes, and forbidden desires.⁸ For many Orientalist scholars and Christian missionaries, Tantra was reviled as the most perverse and depraved confusion of sexuality and religion, sensual indulgence, and spiritual ideals. Yet for many other authors of the late- and post-Victorian era, Tantra seemed to represent an exhilarating freedom from the oppressive prudery of nineteenth-century Christian society.

In this chapter, I will examine Tantra’s complex journey to the West in the nineteenth century through one of the most important and today little-known esoteric groups of this era, the Ordo Templi Orientis. Founded by Theodor Reuss in the early twentieth century, the O.T.O. was not only one of the earliest European groups to take a serious interest in Tantra; more importantly, it was also one of the first to meld the Indian traditions of yoga and Tantra with Western methods of sexual magic, such as the techniques taught by Paschal Beverly Randolph. We will see, however, that the O.T.O. would take

⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. See also Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*; Anderson, *When Passion Reigned*.

⁸ As Benavides comments in his study of Giuseppe Tucci, one of the great scholars of Buddhist Tantra, “The vision of the Orient nurtured by these intellectuals was in most cases a screen upon which they could project their own understanding of the Occident: either the triumphant discovery that the West was superior to the East, or the melancholy realization that the East possessed a magic no longer present in West” (“Giuseppe Tucci,” 162).

these sexual techniques in a very different direction than any Indian Tantrika would have imagined. For Reuss and the O.T.O., the sexual rites of Tantra were imagined as the means to achieve not just liberating spiritual experience, but the birth of a whole new social order. Finally, for the O.T.O.'s most infamous member, Aleister Crowley, these sexual techniques were imagined as the means to destroy the old, dying world of the Christian West and usher in a new era of human history. In either case, these Western appropriations of Tantra are not so much the product of any actual Indian tradition as they are reflections of the Orientalist fantasies and sexual obsessions of modern Western society itself.

Sexual Union and Ritual Impurity in Hindu Shakta Tantra

The one who is hesitant in drinking [wine] or is disgusted by semen and menstrual blood is mistaken about what is [in fact] pure and undefiled; thus he fears committing a sin in the act of sexual union. He should be dismissed—for how can he worship the Goddess, and how can he recite Chandi's *mantra*?

Krishnananda Agamavagisha, *Brihat-Tantrasara*
(sixteenth century)

The Goddess is fond of the vulva and penis, fond of the nectar of vulva and penis. Therefore one should fully worship the Goddess with the drinking of the virile fluid and by taking pleasure in the wife of another man, as well as with the nectar of the vulva and penis.

Kaulavalinirnaya (sixteenth century)

So just what is Tantra, anyway? The word itself is derived from the Sanskrit root *tan*, “to weave, stretch or spread,” and has been used throughout Indian history with a wide range of meanings. It appears from the earliest Sanskrit texts, the Vedas, to denote everything from a loom or weaving machine, to a system of philosophy, to an army, row or series, to a drug or remedy.⁹ Most commonly *tantra* is used to refer to a particular text—though one that may not necessarily contain the sorts of titillating things we normally associate with “Tantra” (nor are all “Tantric” texts called *tantras*).

⁹ See Urban, *Tantra*, 23–43; Padoux, “Tantrism.”

According to most popular literature on Tantra in the United States today, Tantra is defined primarily as spiritual sex or the use of sexual techniques to achieve higher consciousness and/or optimal orgasms (“nookie nirvana,” as *Cosmopolitan* magazine recently defined it).¹⁰ According to neo-Tantric guru, Margo Anand, Tantra allows one to achieve “the feeling of lightness and joy that arises during ecstatic lovemaking, a sense of ‘dancing in the sky,’ that comes when we bring the quality of meditative awareness to our orgasmic power.”¹¹ At the same time, Tantra in the West is also often identified not just with sex, but more specifically with *sexual liberation*—above all, liberation from the prudery and repression of Christian society. As the Schrecks put it in *Demons of the Flesh*, the Tantric adept is “the gleeful transgressor of all accepted boundaries,” who joyfully overthrows the “distorted psychosexual conditions that the past centuries of Christian dominance have engendered.”¹²

And yet in most Asian traditions Tantra is generally understood less in term of “sex” than in terms of *power or energy*. That is, it is a series of teachings and techniques aimed at awakening, harnessing, and utilizing the spiritual power believed to flow through the entire cosmos and the human body. Thus, as White defines it, Tantra is

that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.¹³

In the Hindu Tantric traditions, this energy is typically identified as *shakti*—the power that creates, sustains, and destroys the universe—but it is also the power that flows through the social and political world, as well. Tantric ritual seeks to harness and exploit this power, both as a means to spiritual liberation and as a means to this-worldly benefits, such as wealth, fame, and supernatural abilities. As Douglas Brooks summarizes, “The Tantrika conceives of the world as power. The

¹⁰ Collins, “The Secret to Tantric Sex,” 240. “The result is both an *out of body bond* with your partner plus *very physical* ecstatic orgasms...Grab your guy and get ready for a trip toward erotic enlightenment” (ibid.).

¹¹ Anand, *Art of Sexual Magic*, 2.

¹² Schreck and Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh*, 41, 141.

¹³ White, *Tantra in Practice*, 9.

world is nothing but power to be harnessed.”¹⁴ Sexual union (*maithuna*) is indeed used in some traditions as one method to awaken and harness this power; but it is by no means the only, or even usually the most important, technique employed in Tantric ritual. And when it is used, it is typically restricted to closely guarded esoteric rituals and surrounded by severe warnings about the dangers of its abuse. In the words of one of the most famous and influential medieval texts, the *Kularnava Tantra*,

What I tell you must be kept with great secrecy. This must not be given to just anyone. It must only be given to a devoted disciple. It will be death to any others.

If liberation could be attained simply by having intercourse with a [female partner], all living beings in the world would be liberated just by having intercourse with women.¹⁵

Many forms of Tantric practice do involve explicit forms of ritual transgression. Consumption of meat and wine, and in some cases sexual intercourse in violation of class laws, can be employed as a means of awakening and harnessing the awesome power or *shakti* that flows through all things. Yet at the same time, Tantra is really by no means the subversive, anti-social force that many Western readers imagine it to be. On the contrary, it is in most cases a highly *conservative* tradition, which ultimately re-asserts the ritual authority and social status of male brahmins. Social and sexual taboos are typically only violated in highly controlled ritual contexts and are generally re-asserted—indeed, *reinforced*—outside the boundaries of esoteric ritual: “Anti-caste statements should never be read outside their ritual context. Returned to ordinary life, no high caste Tantric would think of breaking social taboos... The ritual egalitarianism of Tantrism in practice acted as a caste-confirming... force.”¹⁶

Not only is there a vast diversity of different texts, sects, rituals, and traditions that fall under the general category of “Tantra,” but there is also a huge diversity of opinion about the role of sexual union in Tantric practice. Various Tantric schools—and various modern scholars of Tantra—differ widely over the most basic questions: for example, is sexual union meant to be understood literally and performed physically, or is

¹⁴ Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom*, xix. See Urban, *Tantra*, Introduction.

¹⁵ Avalon, ed., *Kularnava Tantra*, II.4, II.117.

¹⁶ Gupta et al., *Hindu Tantrism*, 32. On this point, see Urban, “The Power of the Impure”; Sanderson “Purity and Power.”

it to be understood symbolically and used merely as a symbol for the union of divine masculine and feminine energies? Should orgasm occur, or should orgasm be avoided? Should the semen be emitted during union, or should it be withheld and sublimated inwardly? Does the female partner have an active role in the union, or is she a mere tool or “flower” from which the “nectar” is collected and then cast aside? Some schools call for a difficult act of seminal retention and sublimation during the rite; others use an even more complex procedure called the *vajrolī mudra*, which involves not only seminal retention but actually the sucking or withdrawal of the female sexual fluids out of the woman’s body into the male body (what some call the “fountain pen technique”); and others reject the physical act of union altogether in favor of a purely symbolic understanding of divine union.¹⁷

As David Gordon White argues, one of the oldest Tantric schools, the Kaula (from *kula*, lineage or family), centered around the oral consumption of sexual fluids. By consuming the combined semen and vaginal fluids, the initiate was literally “incorporated” into the esoteric lineage, physically infused with its most powerful essence: “the Tantric Virile Hero generated and partook of his own and his consort’s vital fluids in a ‘eucharistic’ ritual, whose ultimate consumer was the Goddess herself, who pleased, would afford the supernatural enjoyments and powers the practitioner sought.”¹⁸

In India generally, bodily fluids, and above all sexual fluids, are considered dangerous and potentially polluting, as the ambivalent leftovers that overflow the boundaries of the physical body.¹⁹ In the Tantric rite, however, the sexual fluids are the ultimate source of power. According to the sixteenth century *Bīrhat Tantrasara* (“the Great Essence of the Tantras”), the combined sexual fluids become the *kula dravya* or “clan substance,” which is the most awesome and dangerous of substances. It is the powerful “remnant” (*ucchiṣṭa*) of the “sexual sacrifice:”

With the sacrificial elements, the semen, unbroken grains of rice, perfume, flowers, he should worship the Goddess in the vagina... With incense, lamps and various food offerings, the Kula adept should honor her in various ways, and then he should [consume] the remnants himself.²⁰

¹⁷ See Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities*, 51–52.

¹⁸ White, *Kiss of the Yogini*, 73–74.

¹⁹ “Indian traditions have always viewed sexual fluids, and most particularly the uterine or menstrual blood, as polluting, powerful, and therefore dangerous substances” (White, *Kiss of the Yogini*, 67). See also Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 114–122.

²⁰ Agamavagisha, *Bīrhat Tantrasara*, 703.

This *kula dravya* or “remnant” of the Tantric feast is surrounded with an aura of power and danger. If consumed outside the secret ritual, it will send one to the most terrible of hells: “apart from the time of worship, one must never touch a naked *shakti*. And apart from the period of worship, the nectar must never be drunk by adepts. Touching it, their lives are lost, and drinking it, they would go to hell. Thus is the Kula worship.”²¹ But once placed in a sacrificial vessel and consecrated by the Goddess, the *kula dravya* is transformed into divine nectar, *amrita*. By consuming this nectar, the Tantrika will enjoy supreme bliss and fulfillment of all worldly and otherworldly desires.

Then with great effort, he must obtain the precious Kula nectar. For with that divine nectar, all [the gods] are pleased. Whatever the wise man desires, he will immediately attain... Having purified the Kula substance, which has the nature of Shiva and Shakti, O Beloved, and having deposited this nectar of life, which is of the nature of the Supreme Brahman, in a sacrificial vessel, [he attains] the eternally blameless state free of all distinctions.²²

Clearly, the Tantric rite of *maithuna* and the consumption of the combined sexual fluids is a profoundly transgressive act—an act that must be surrounded with an intense secrecy, and one that would destroy those who undertake it without proper intention or ritual controls. And surely much of its power derives precisely from its transgressive character. Like the sexual fluids themselves, these rites are surrounded with an aura of impurity and danger; but the Tantrik hero (*vira*) who dares to engage in them can transcend the mundane boundaries that limit ordinary human beings. As Alexis Sanderson observes, the aim of this transgression is precisely to attain a kind of “unfettered super-agency through the assimilation of their lawless power in occult manipulations of impurity.”²³

That being said, however, the sort of “transgression” described in Tantric texts like the *Kaulajñananirnaya* or the *Brihat Tantrasara* is hardly a matter of socio-political transgression or a subversion of the larger status quo. In most cases it is quite the reverse. As Douglas Brooks argues, the highly esoteric transgressions of Tantric ritual typically served not to undermine the class system or *brahman* authority, but on the contrary

²¹ *Brihat Tantrasara*, 704.

²² *Ibid.*, 703.

²³ Sanderson, “Purity and Power,” 200–201. See Urban, “The Power of the Impure.”

to re-assert them. That is to say, they re-affirmed the authority of male *brahmans* as ritual experts who were skillful enough to handle the dangerous power unleashed by ritual impurity: “Tantrism... does not intend to be revolutionary in the sense of establishing a new structure of social egalitarianism... It opens its doors only to a few who... seek to distinguish and empower themselves.”²⁴ As we see in the case of the most famous Tantrikas like Abhinavagupta, Bhaskararaya or Krishnananda Agamavagisha, most Tantric authors insist that such transgressions were to be carefully restricted to closed ritual contexts; outside of esoteric ritual, the class system and *brahman* authority were to be reaffirmed, perhaps more strongly than ever.

Tantra in the Orientalist Imagination

Shaktas usually meet in a forest glade where, by the light of a huge bonfire, they begin the ceremony by getting drunk and eating cow’s flesh. On these nights everything is permissible; Untouchables jostle Kshatriyas, Brahmins dig knives into the remains of the cow, women come from the Zenana and discard their veils... Stretched on the grass with her sari thrown off lies a young girl... who must allow herself to be embraced by all the adepts in turn... The culminating act of this abominable orgy is the slaughter of a young man or woman who, while still alive is torn to pieces by frenzied Shaktas... [I]t is priests and Black Magicians who lead the way... who promise happiness to these poor deranged people who, groaning and screaming, wallow in the bloodstained mire.

Edmond Demaitre, *The Yogis of India* (1937)

From the very cradle of civilization in the temples of Babylon, hidden beneath the seemingly sex-negative creed of Christianity, and in the Western magical revival of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the siren song of the left-hand path calls.

Nikolas and Zeena Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh* (2002)

²⁴ Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities*, 70. See Urban, “The Power of the Impure.”

So if Tantra in its South Asian contexts was originally a highly esoteric tradition that had little to do with sensual abandon or sexual liberation, how then did “Tantra” come to be defined primarily as “spiritual sex” in the modern Western imagination? This shift begins, I think, during the early colonial era, with the first discussion of Indian religions by Christian missionaries and Orientalist scholars in the nineteenth century. The Orientalist interest in the Tantras, I would argue, was a part of the broader concern with sexuality and its aberrations during the Victorian era. As Foucault points out and we have already noted, the nineteenth century was anything but a period of silence and suppression of sex, but rather an era of unprecedented new discourse about sexuality, which was now endlessly described, classified and analyzed as “*the secret*.”²⁵ Above all, there was a new fascination with sexuality in its socially deviant or perverse forms, which were now categorized in intricate detail. As Richard von Krafft-Ebing suggested in his widely influential text, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the sexual instinct is the most powerful, sublime and potentially dangerous force in human nature, the origin of our religion and ethics as well as our most bizarre perversions:

[S]exual feeling is the basis upon which social advancement is developed. If man were deprived of sexual distinction and the nobler enjoyments arising therefrom, all poetry and . . . moral tendency would be eliminated from his life. . . . Sexual feeling is the root of all ethics, and no doubt of aestheticism and religion. The sublimest virtues . . . spring from sexual life, which, however, on account of its sensual power, may easily degenerate into the lowest passion and basest vice. Love unbridled is a volcano that burns down and lays waste to all around it; it is an abyss that devours all—honor, substance and health.²⁶

Thus Krafft-Ebing and other European sexual scientists compiled a vast catalogue of sexual deviations—a sort of “medicoforensic peep-show” of perversions²⁷—ranging from homosexuality and sadism to

²⁵ “The society that emerged in the nineteenth century—the bourgeois capitalist or industrial society . . .—did not confront sex with a fundamental refusal of recognition. On the contrary, it put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it. Not only did it speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; it also set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex. As if it suspected sex of harboring a fundamental secret” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 69).

²⁶ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 24.

²⁷ Kern, *The Culture of Love*, 334–335. As Foucault comments, “[W]hat came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, madmen and women and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex; reveries, obsessions, petty manias . . . Whence

hypersexuality, necrophilia, polyspermia, nymphomania and spermatorrhea. Among the most “dangerous” aberrations were those that mingled religion and sexuality: “The cause of religious insanity is often to be found in sexual aberration. In psychosis a motley mixture of religious and sexual delusions is observable. . . . The cruel, sensual acts of chastisement, violation, emasculation and even crucifixion, perpetrated by religious maniacs, bear out this assertion.”²⁸ Thus it is not surprising that many European authors were particularly fascinated, repulsed, and tantalized by the secret rites of the Tantrikas, with their explicit fusion of spiritual power and sensual pleasure.

The early Orientalist authors, such as Sir William Jones and H.T. Colebrooke, actually had relatively little to say about Tantra. It was really not until the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the arrival of Christian missionaries like Rev. William Ward, that Tantra became objects of intense interest and morbid fascination. Above all, the missionaries singled out the sexual element—particularly transgressive sexuality—as the most horrific aspect of Tantra and the clearest evidence of its complete depravity. As Ward put it, “the *tuntras*” involve “a most shocking mode of worship” centered around the worship of a naked woman and rites “too abominable to enter the ears of man and impossible to be revealed to a Christian public.”²⁹

For later authors like H.H. Wilson and Sir Monier-Williams, Tantra was incorporated into the larger Orientalist narrative of Indo-European history and the decadence of modern India. According to most Orientalist accounts, the history of India was a steady decline from a golden age, comparable to ancient Greece and embodied in the texts of the Vedas, down to a modern era of licentious superstition, embodied in the perverse rites of the Tantras. Throughout nineteenth-century literature, we find Tantra described in the most vivid language as “lust mummery and black magic,” (Brian Hodgson) “nonsensical extravagance and absurd gesticulation,” (H.H. Wilson) and “black art of the crudest and filthiest kind” in which “a veritable devil’s mass is purveyed in various forms.” (D.L. Barnett)³⁰ By the early twentieth century, as we see in

the setting apart of the ‘unnatural’ as a specific dimension in the field of sexuality” (*The History of Sexuality*, 38–39).

²⁸ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 29.

²⁹ Ward, *A View of the History*, v.I, 247. For general discussions of Orientalist scholarship on India, see King, *Orientalism and Religion*; Inden, *Imagining India*.

³⁰ Quoted in Avalon, *Principles of Tantra*, 3–5. On Orientalist views of Tantra, see Urban, “The Extreme Orient,” 123–146.

Edmond Demaitre's text cited in the epigraph above, Tantric ritual was believed to be a kind of grotesque fusion of Dionysian *sporagmos*, drunken orgy and witches' *sabbat*.³¹

This identification of Tantra with sexual licentiousness was only further complicated in the late nineteenth century, as Tantra became increasingly confused with various pornographic and sexological literature proliferating in Victorian England. One of the most widely-read (though least original) authors on Tantra was Edward Sellon, who was best known as an author of cheap pornography, such as *The New Epicurean or the Delights of Sex Facetiously and Philosophically Considered in Graphic Letters Addressed to Young Ladies of Quality*. Having served as an Ensign in the Madras infantry as a young man, Sellon was particularly fascinated with the erotic mysteries of the Orient with all its dark skinned "houris." As he described his exploits among the enchanting women of India,

I now commenced a regular course of fucking with native women. The usual charge for the general run of them is two rupees. For five, you may get the handsomest Mohammedan girls, and any of the high caste women who follow the trade of a courtesan. The "fivers" are a very different set of people from its frail sisterhood in European countries... They understand in perfection all the arts of love, are capable of gratifying any tastes, and in face and figure they are unsurpassed by any women in the world...

I have had English, French, German and Polish women of all grades of society, but never, ever did they bear a comparison with those salacious, succulent houris of the far East.³²

During his time in India, Sellon also learned something of Hindu belief and practice, which he published in his *Annotations upon the Sacred Writings of the Hindus*. Like his description of these dark-skinned, hyper-erotized Indian women, his view of Hinduism only continues the worst Orientalist stereotypes of the dark, mysterious, libidinous East. Above all, his titillating description of Tantric worship—in which "natural restraints are wholly disregarded" and which "terminates with orgies amongst the

³¹ Demaitre, *The Yogis of India*, 222–23. Similar accounts can be found in a variety of other authors. According to August Barth, "The use of animal food and spirituous liquors, indulged to in excess, is the rule of the sect... Sakti is worshipped in the person of a naked woman, and the proceedings terminate with the carnal copulation of the initiated... [A] Sakta of the left hand is almost always a hypocrite and a superstitious debauchee" (*The Religions of India*, 199–200).

³² Sellon, quoted in King, *Sex, Magic and Perversion*, 11.

votaries of a very licentious description”—would become one of the most influential accounts in the late Victorian popular imagination.³³

Finally, this equation of Tantra with its sexual aspects would become hopelessly confused with the publication of various Sanskrit erotic texts by Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890).³⁴ Not only did Burton found a small secretive group called the Kama Shastra Society, but he also privately published the *Kama Sutra* (1883) and the *Ananga Ranga* (1885), the first Hindu treatises on love to be translated into English (texts which could not be officially translated until the mid 1960’s). Although the *Kama Sutra* in fact had little if anything to do with Tantra, from Burton’s time on, it would become largely confused and often completely identified with Tantra in the Western popular imagination.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a few brave scholars made an effort to defend and re-valorize Tantra, arguing that there is far more to this ancient tradition than mere illicit sexuality. The most important figure in this moralizing reform of Tantra was John Woodroffe (a.k.a. Arthur Avalon), the enigmatic High Court Judge and secret Tantrika, who made it his life’s work to defend the Tantras against their many critics.³⁵ In Woodroffe’s rather sanitized, rationalized account, Tantra is a noble philosophical tradition, basically in line with the Vedas and Vedanta and comparable in its symbolism to the liturgy of the Catholic Church.³⁶

Despite Woodroffe’s attempts to present a sanitized and reformed version of Tantra, however, the equation of Tantra with sex would persist throughout the Western imagination, both popular and scholarly. By the mid-twentieth century, Tantra had become more or less equated with its sexual component, most commonly defined as “spiritual sex,” and generally confused with Indian erotica like the *Kama Sutra*. For the most part, this is a misunderstanding and confusion that continues to this day.

³³ Sellon, *Annotations on the Sacred writings of the Hindüs*.

³⁴ See Burton, trans., *Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*.

³⁵ On Woodroffe, see Urban, *Tantra*, 134–64, and Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal*. Taylor argues that “Arthur Avalon” is not simply a pseudonym for Woodroffe, but is rather the joint creation of Woodroffe and a Bengali, Atal Behari Ghose, who helped him translate most of the texts.

³⁶ “Tantra simply presents the Vedantik teachings in a symbolic form for the worshipper, to whom it prescribes the means whereby they may be realized in fact” (Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shakta*, 587).

Paschal Beverly Randolph and the Beginnings of Sex Magic

The Light of the East, despite all fog, has emerged victorious!

Oriflamme (1912)

A new civilization, a new system of morals will arise from the new Christianity of the gnostic Templar-Christians. . . . [T]he Church of the gnostic Neo-Christians seeks to found communities . . . of sinless, i.e. freed from the Nazarene Christian idea of original sin, people.

Theodor Reuss, "The Gnostic Neo-Christians"
(1917)

One of the most important groups in the transmission of Tantra to the West—and also in its radical transformation and perhaps de-formation—was the highly esoteric brotherhood known as the *Ordo Templi Orientis*. Although they are little known or studied in contemporary scholarship, the O.T.O. was to play a critical role in the development of sexual magic and Tantra in the West over the last 100 years, for it is in the O.T.O. that we find the first real attempt to unite the two currents of Western sexual magic and the new, often garbled and misunderstood traditions of Tantra coming from India. The O.T.O. thus represents one of the first, even if rather misdirected and confused, attempts at cross-cultural synthesis between Eastern and Western esoteric traditions.

Sex, magic, and secrecy had, of course, long been associated in the Western religious imagination: from the early Gnostics to the Knights Templar to the Cathars of late medieval Europe, esoteric orders had long been accused of using sexual rituals as part of their secret magical arts.³⁷ However, perhaps the first evidence of a sophisticated and well-documented use of sexual magical techniques cannot be found any earlier than the mid-nineteenth century, with the mysterious figure of Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–75) (the focus of Patrick Deveney's essay in this same volume).³⁸ A mulatto born of a wealthy Virginian father and a slave from Madagascar, Randolph was raised a poor, self-taught free black in New York city. After running away from home at

³⁷ On the charges of sex magic brought against the Cathars and later the Templars, see King, *Sex, Magic and Perversion*, 170–171.

³⁸ For a longer discussion, see Deveney's chapter in this volume.

age sixteen, he traveled the world and eventually emerged as one of the leading figures in the nineteenth-century Spiritualist movements, the most famous scryer of his times, as well as America's foremost exponent of magical eroticism or Affectional Alchemy. In sexual love, "he saw the greatest hope for the regeneration of the world, the key to personal fulfillment as well as social transformation and the basis of a non-repressive civilization."³⁹

In the course of his wanderings through Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, Randolph encountered a wide variety of esoteric traditions—not just European Spiritualist, Masonic, and Rosicrucian orders, but also a range of Sufi lineages. In fact, he claims to have derived much of his knowledge from a group of Fakirs in the areas of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, which may have been a branch of the unorthodox Muslim mystical order of the Nusa'iri—a group long persecuted by orthodox Islam because of their alleged Gnostic sexual rituals.⁴⁰

Whatever his primary inspiration, Randolph began to teach a form of sexual magic that would have a profound impact on much of later Western esotericism. For Randolph, the experience of orgasm is in fact the critical moment in human consciousness and the key to magical power. During orgasm, as new life is infused from the spiritual realm into the material, the soul is suddenly opened up to the spiritual energies of the cosmos: "at the instant of intense mutual orgasm the souls of the partners are opened to the powers of the cosmos and anything then truly willed is accomplished."⁴¹ As such, the experience of sexual climax has the potential to lead the soul either upward or downward, to higher states of spiritual transcendence or to lower, more depraved states of corruption:

The moment when a man discharges his seed—his essential self—into a...womb is the most solemn, energetic and powerful moment he can ever know on earth; if under the influence of mere lust it be done, the discharge is suicidal.... At the moment his seminal glands open, his nostrils expand, and while the seed is going from his soul to her womb he breathes one of two atmospheres, either fetid damnation from the border

³⁹ Franklin Rosemont, Foreward to Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, xv.

⁴⁰ Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, 211ff. "The Nusa'iri of Ansairreh...are a nominally Muslim group living...in isolated areas in the mountains of northwest Syria and Latakia...What has mainly set the Nusa'iris apart and made them the object of persecution and massacre by the orthodox Muslims...is the belief that they practiced pagan and Gnostic sexual rites" (ibid., 211).

⁴¹ Ibid., 218–9.

spaces or Divine Energy from heavens. Whatsoever he shall truly will and internally pray for when Love...is in the ascendant, that moment the prayer's response comes down.⁴²

The power of sex, then, can be deployed for a wide range of both spiritual and material ends. If one can harness the creative energy aroused by sexual contact, he can realize virtually any worldly or other-worldly goal. Not only can one achieve the spiritual aims of divine insight, but he can also attain the mundane goals of physical health, financial success, or regaining the passions of a straying lover. According to Randolph, the major uses sex magic are:

I. For purposes of increasing the brain and body power of an unborn child, II. Influencing one's wife or husband and magnetically controlling them, III. regaining youthful beauty, energy, vivacity, affectional and magnetic power, IV. prolonging the life of either the subject or actor or either at will, V. attainment of Supreme white magic of will, affection or Love, VI. For the furtherance of financial interests, schemes, lotteries, etc. VII. The attainment of the loftiest insight possible to the earthly soul.⁴³

One of the most striking features of Randolph's sexual magic, however, is his insistence that both male and female partners must have an active role in the process, and in fact, that both must achieve orgasm in order for the magical operation to be successful: "For the prayer to be effective the paroxysm of both is necessary... [T]he woman's orgasms should coincide with man's emission, for only in this way will the magic be fulfilled."⁴⁴ The resulting pleasure that both partners feel in this union is nothing less than the overflowing joy of the divine emanating from above like the breath of God himself:

When pleasure results from the meeting of the electric currents of the male with the magnetic flow of the female, in the nerves of each, as in the touch of loving lips, the two currents spread out into waves, which flow all over the nervous network of both until they die out... upon the foot

⁴² Randolph, *The Mysteries of Eulis* (manuscript 1860) reproduced in Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, 339–40. See also Randolph, *Eulis!* and *Magia Sexualis*.

⁴³ Randolph, *The Mysteries of Eulis*, 337. Randolph lists over a hundred uses for sexual magic, which include: Frustrating bad plans of others; Relating to money dealings, losses, gains and to forecast them; The grand secret of domestic happiness; To render a false husband, lover or wife sexively cold to others; To secretly penetrate others' designs (Machiavelli's power), The power of influencing others, solely financially; To derange the love relations of those not one's lover; To become immersed in business spheres, to reliably direct others; The grand secret of life prolongation (ibid., 319–325).

⁴⁴ Randolph, *Magia Sexualis*, 76–8.

of the throne whereon each soul sits in voluptuous expectancy... [T]he joy... is diffused over both beings and each is based in the celestial and divine aura—the breath of God, suffusing both bodies, refreshing both souls!⁴⁵

Randolph's sexual teachings were to have a lasting impact on later occult traditions, introducing sexual magic into the mainstream of American and European esotericism: "[T]hrough Randolph's influence the genie had been released from the bottle; the notion that sex provided the lost key to scattered elements of mythology had taken on a practical side. A multitude of sexual mysticism flourished."⁴⁶

The Secret of Sexual Magic: Tantra and Sex Magic in the O.T.O.

[T]he sexual-religion of the future... is based on the necessary ritual completion of the sex-act. The New Gospel of Salvation of Sexual Religion!

Reuss, "Parsifal and the Secret of the Graal Unveiled" (1914)

The original inspiration for or spiritual father of the O.T.O. is usually identified as Carl Kellner (1851–1905). A wealthy Austrian paper chemist, Kellner had studied widely in various esoteric traditions such as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism and also traveled to Asia to delve into the Eastern mysteries. In the course of his travels, Kellner claims, he studied with three Eastern masters whom he identified as a Sufi named Soliman ben Aifa and two Hindu Tantrikas named Bhima Sena Pratapa and Sri Mahatma Agamy Paramahansa. According to later O.T.O. accounts, Kellner was also in contact with an esoteric order known as the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light. First appearing in Chicago in 1895 (though some date it earlier, to 1885), the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light appears to be either an offshoot or a rival branch of the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, which had adapted many of Randolph's teachings on sexual magic.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Randolph, *Eulis!*, 126. "No real magic power can or will descend into the soul of either except in the mighty moment, the orgasmal instant of BOTH—not one alone! for then only do the mystic doors of the SOUL OPEN TO THE SPACES" (*The Ansairitic Mystery*, in Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, 314).

⁴⁶ Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, 252.

⁴⁷ The connection of Kellner with the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light was asserted in the journal *Oriflamme* in 1912. See also Godwin et al., *The Hermetic Brotherhood of*

The primary architect of the O.T.O., however, was Kellner's associate, Theodor Reuss (1855–1923).⁴⁸ The son of a German father and an English mother, Reuss was a curious and controversial figure who was admired for his extensive knowledge of esoterica but suspected by many of being a charlatan or a fraud. As former friend, August Weinholtz, described him in 1907 in the Masonic periodical *L'Acacia*,

This man's cleverness and extraordinary activities, his sophistries, his knowledge of languages, his ability to play no matter what role, make him a real international menace. In some respects he reminds one of Cagliostro, the most brilliant of all masonic charlatans, who successfully contrived to dupe his contemporaries.⁴⁹

After enjoying some success as a music-hall singer and newspaper correspondent, Reuss also appears to have been involved in some controversial political activities. In the 1880s, using false credentials, he joined the Socialist League, a Marxist group that attracted various dislocated communists and anarchists. Later, he would be accused by many of operating as a spy under the direction of the Prussian secret police, who had allegedly sent him to England to monitor the activities of Marx's daughter, Eleanor Marx-Aveling. Although the charges of espionage were never proven, they did add to Reuss' image as a mysterious figure who was variously regarded as either a genius or a charlatan.⁵⁰

It is not entirely clear what connection there may have been between Reuss' political career and his occult activities. However, he would eventually claim to have an immense body of esoteric knowledge and identified himself as a master in a wide range of occult traditions, particularly the "Irregular" forms of Masonry such as the Ancient and Accepted Primitive Rite of Memphis and Mizraim and the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. And he would ornament himself with a variety of impressive titles, such as Illustrious Brother, Expert Master Mason, Secret Master, Perfect Master, Grand Elect Knight Kadosh, 30°, Grand Inquisitor Commander, 31°, Prince of the Royal Secret,

Luxor, 422, 428. For a discussion of Kellner's life see Dvorak, "Carl Kellner." The best overall reconstruction of O.T.O. history is Pasi, "Ordo Templi Orientis."

⁴⁸ There is some debate as to whether Kellner or Reuss was the founder of the O.T.O. Official O.T.O. sources generally credit Kellner as the one who came up with the idea of the Orientalische Tempel in 1895; critics like König, however, claim that Reuss was the real founder; see König, "The OTO Phenomenon," and "Theodor Reuss as Founder of Esoteric Orders;" Howe and Möller, "Theodor Reuss."

⁴⁹ *L'Acacia* 9 (Paris, 1907): 387–88, quoted in Howe and Möller, "Theodor Reuss."

⁵⁰ Howe and Möller, "Theodor Reuss." See also Howe and Möller, *Merlin Peregrinus*.

the Sovereign Sanctuary of the Gnosis, and various other increasingly elaborate ranks and degrees.

During the 1890s, Reuss claims to have collaborated with Kellner in order to form a new esoteric order dedicated to the inner secrets of magical practice. Initially, the goal was to found a new *Academia Masonica* that would enable all Freemasons to become familiar with all existing degrees and systems of Masonry. This appears to have been the original inspiration for the O.T.O., as a complex fusion of Craft Masonry, Rosicrucianism, and various Eastern imports, above all the techniques of Hindu Tantra. However, as Reuss defined it, the “Ancient Order of Oriental Templars” is nothing less than a secret, powerful brotherhood that has been operating covertly throughout all of history, guiding the forces of culture, politics, and even revolutions:

Let it be known that there exists, unknown to the great crowd, a very ancient order of sages, whose object is the amelioration and spiritual elevation of mankind. . . . This Order has existed already in the most remote, prehistoric times, and it has manifested its activity secretly and openly in the world. . . . it has caused social and political revolutions and proved to be the rock of salvation in times of danger and misfortune.⁵¹

The time had now come for this secret order of sages to reveal itself openly to the world.

From its origins, the O.T.O. claimed to be in possession of the innermost secret of all esoteric systems, the most profound mystery that lies at the foundation of all occult, mystical, and spiritual traditions, even the secret of the Eastern Sages, and the means to rebuild the Temple of Solomon. According to a 1904 edition of Reuss’ journal, *Oriflamme*:

One of the secrets which our Order possesses to its highest degree consists in the fact that it supplies the properly prepared brother with the PRACTICAL means to erect the true Temple of Solomon in Man and to find again the “lost Word”: namely, that our Order supplies to the initiated and chosen brother the practical means to obtain proof of his immortality even during his earthly existence. . . .

This secret is one of the true secrets of Masonry and exclusively the secret of the Occult High Degree of Our Order. It has come down to our Order by word of mouth from the fathers of all true Freemasonry, the “Wise Men of the East”⁵²

⁵¹ “Ancient Order of Oriental Templars,” in König, ed., *Der Grosse Theodor Reuss Reader*, 126.

⁵² Reuss, “Von den Geheimnissen der okkulten Hochgrade unseres Ordens,” 31; reproduced in König, *Der Grosse Theodor Reuss Reader*, 75.

But what is this tremendous secret of the East that opens up the treasures of all occult systems of knowledge? The answer is given eight years later in the 1912 anniversary issue of the *Oriflamme*: the supreme mystery is nothing less than the secret of sexual magic, which, though extremely rare and precious, can be revealed to the most qualified seekers:

Our Order possess the KEY which opens up all Masonic and Hermetic secrets, namely, the teaching of *sexual magic*, and this teaching explains, without exception, all the secrets of Nature, all the symbolism of FREE-MASONRY and all systems of religion.⁵³

Now, although this teaching of sexual magic is the secret of the O.T.O. and is not suitable for publication in a pamphlet which reaches wide circles, nevertheless, the management of the Order has decided to lift a very small tip of the veil which conceals our secret... to enlighten earnest seekers.⁵⁴

Sexual magic may have already been a part of Carl Kellner's esoteric practice, which he claimed to have learned from the masters of the Orient. Kellner was in fact one of the few Western authors at the time who had a fairly detailed knowledge of yoga and certainly one of the few who had anything more than disdain for its more esoteric practices. In a piece attributed to Kellner in the 1912 issue of *Oriflamme*, he adapts the yogic idea of the *vayus* or vital energies believed to exist in specific parts of the physical body, such as the heart, anus, navel, larynx, eyes, etc. He was particularly interested in the *vayus* associated with the reproductive organ (the *napa*), which could be sublimated, re-directed, and transformed into intense spiritual energy through yogic practice. This, according to Kellner, is true "sexual magic" and the source of god-like power:

[S]exual magic is concerned with the Vayus Napa (in the reproductive organ)... This exercise is called "Transmutation of the Reproductive Energy." This exercise of the transmutation of the Reproductive energy is not done for the purpose of sexual excess, but in order to strengthen the eternal God Power on the earthly plane requiring sexually strong, perfect persons.... The reproductive energy is a process of creation. It is a Godly act! In the reproductive organ (male and female) there is concentrated in the smallest space the greatest vital force... [T]he performer of the exercise must concentrate all his thoughts on withdrawing and lifting the reproductive energy from the organ into the solar plexus,

⁵³ Reuss, *Jubilaeums-Ausgabe der Oriflamme*, 21.

⁵⁴ Reuss, "Mysteria Mystica Maxima," *Jubilaeums-Ausgabe der Oriflamme*, 21.

where he “wills” that it be stored for transmutation purposes... [F]inally the great “merging” or reunion occurs and the performer becomes the seer while remaining fully conscious and experiences what he sees. This is white sexual magic!⁵⁵

Many believe that Kellner also engaged in more esoteric forms of magic together with a small circle of disciples called the “Inner Triangle;” these involved various forms of Yoga, meditation, and sexual rites aimed at generating the divine “Elixir”: “His wife was the Great Goddess. Kellner himself acted as Babylonian Priest. In his house was a room without windows where the tantric rites took place to prepare the Elixir, that is: male and female sexual fluids.”⁵⁶

It was really Theodor Reuss, however, who made sexual magic a central part of O.T.O. practice. Indeed, Reuss regarded sexual rituals and the cult of the Lingam (the Sanskrit word for the phallus or male sexual organ) as the root of all religion, “the most ancient cult on earth,” and the core of every spiritual tradition from pre-historic times down to the Christian Church itself. And the quintessential form of phallic worship is Tantra. As Helmut Möller and Ellic Howe observe, Reuss’ knowledge of Tantra seems to have been drawn primarily from secondary European sources and was “nebulous” at best.⁵⁷ Following most European Orientalists of the day, he defines Tantra as basically “sexual religion.” In his words, “Tantra (Sexual-religion) is built on the active principle of generation, as it manifests in the female energy (Shakti) and the manly energy (Shiva). The Linga (Phallus) is the holiest form in which and through which the great lord-God must be worshipped.”⁵⁸ This Tantric sexual religion is for Reuss essentially the same as that of the Eleusinian mysteries and early Christian Gnosticism, both of which he sees as cults of fertility and sensual ecstasy:

The Eleusinian mysteries were pure Phallus cult. The ceremonies were those of the Tantrics. The members of these mysteries partook of such ecstasy that the freedom of the senses came to them as a totally natural by-product...

⁵⁵ Kellner, in *Jubilaeums-Ausgabe der Oriflamme*, 22–23. See Kellner, *Yoga*; Dvorak, “Carl Kellner.”

⁵⁶ König, “Spermo-Gnostics and the O.T.O.”

⁵⁷ Howe and Möller, *Merlin Peregrinus*, 194.

⁵⁸ Reuss, “Parsifal und das Enthüllte Grals-Geheimnis” (1914), in König, *Der Kleine Theodor Reuss Reader*, 71.

The secret teachings of the Gnostics (Primitive Christians) are identical with the Vamachari rites of the Tantrics... Phallicism is the basis of all theology and underlies the mythology of all peoples... The Phallus as a divine symbol received divine veneration for thousands of years in India.⁵⁹

Indeed, Reuss believes that the ancient cult of the Phallus has survived in a masked form throughout the centuries of Christian rule, persisting throughout popular worship and even in the symbolism of the mainstream Church. As he argues in the Introduction to his treatise on sexual worship, *Lingam-Yoni*,

In spite of the efforts of the Christian churches, over 120 million people... are still practitioners of the sex cult (Lingam-yoni), which surely shows the need to spread widely authentic material about phallism. With that a truer and fairer guideline for the modern sex cult movement (which should be condemned for its excrescences, but which reactivates the ancient divine worship in its inner core) can be found... [T]he Catholic Church uses, in a hidden form, the phallus worship, Lingam-Yoni cult... taken from so-called Pagan rituals... It was the leading religious cult during the fullest flowering of the cultures of classical antiquity, and is still a living factor in our time.⁶⁰

The modern world, Reuss believed, was entering a new era in which the repressive attitudes of Christian Europe were being replaced by a liberated view of sexuality. Even the proliferation of pornography was a natural by-product of this new acceptance of sexuality and the body:

[O]ur time is a time of transition. Old ideas, old habits, old opinions and principles of living vanish bit by bit, and new ideas, new habits... even new religion, seem to grow out of our modern Western cultural ferment. It is only natural that this fermentation makes for peculiar bubbles, and occasionally a lot of foul smelling gas. I need only point out the frightening growth of pornographic literature... But actually these are only the side-effects of a growth period of a new Weltanschauung, maybe even an entirely new world.⁶¹

Under Reuss, sexual magic would become a central part of the upper grades of the O.T.O. The early Ordo was organized in ten major

⁵⁹ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁰ Reuss, *Lingam-Yoni*, Introduction. This passage was also published in *Oriflamme* 5, no. 1 (1906): 33–4. The text itself is largely a translation of Hargrave Jennings' *Phallicism*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

degrees, the lower degrees consisting of more traditional Masonic initiations and the tenth, Supreme Rex, existing largely as an administrative degree. It is in the IX degree that the most profound mystery of mysteries was to be revealed, namely, “the highest, most glorious, holiest, Symbol of sexual-magic! Here begins a secret teaching which is exclusively for initiates.” And this secret of sexual magic is in turn identified with the pre-Christian “pagan” traditions, of which Indian Tantra and the union of *lingam* and *yonis* is the clearest example.⁶² The Lingam is, for Reuss, the most sacred symbol of creation, divine power, and the Logos; as Peter König observes, Reuss regarded the semen as the key to magical power and viewed women as ultimately non-essential to magical practice. Indeed, Reuss would later claim that the “central secret of the O.T.O.” was in fact a sexual interpretation of the Holy Mass, which involved “the union of man with God through consumption of semen—as allegedly taught by Jesus Christ.”⁶³

Much of the O.T.O. literature employs complicated symbolism drawn from alchemy and Hermeticism to describe esoteric sexual rites. As Francis King explains, “the code phrase for the penis is the athanor, that for semen is the blood of the red lion, or the Serpent, while the vagina is referred to as the retort... [T]he fluids which lubricate the female organ are the menstruum of the gluten and the mixture of these with the male discharge is the first matter or, when it has been impregnated with the magic power, the Elixir.”⁶⁴ Sexual rites can be used for a wide variety of magical purposes, ranging from the invocation of a god to the finding of hidden treasure. For example, one might use sexual magic to magically empower a talisman; by concentrating on one’s intended goal at the moment of orgasm and then anointing the talisman with the semen, one infuses it with magical power which can then be employed for a wide range of this-worldly and other-worldly ends. Similarly, the power of controlled imagination and sexuality can be used to incarnate a god within one’s consciousness, by concentrating all one’s will on the deity at the moment of orgasm and so “blending their personalities into one.”⁶⁵

⁶² Reuss, “Parsifal und das Enthüllte Grals-Gheimnis.”

⁶³ König, “The Early O.T.O. and its Development.” Reuss found this interpretation of the Mass in a text by Le Clément de Saint-Marcq: *L’Eucharistie* (1906); re-printed in *Der Grosse Theodor Reuss Reader*. See Marco Pasi’s chapter in this volume for more on Le Clément.

⁶⁴ King, *The Magical World*, 79.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Not surprisingly, Reuss and his disciples generated a certain amount of scandal and were accused of all manner of sexual perversion. Chief among the accusations was homosexuality, which does appear to have played some role in O.T.O. sexual magic. Thus, the *Masonic Journal of Vienna* published an article claiming that Reuss had engaged in a shocking “homosexual assault” that involved the “mutual touching of the phalli” during esoteric rituals.⁶⁶ Another journal, the antisemitic *Der Judenkennner*, would later allege that several novices were so horrified by these rites that they reported Reuss to the police, causing him to flee the country: “In the summer of 1906 he went to Munich...in order to initiate some ‘Novizen’ in the secret of the Order of the Templars. These ‘Novizen’ were so disgusted by these ‘revelations’ that they alerted the police to arrest the libertine Reuss, who...fled to his crony John Yarker in England.”⁶⁷

Freedom from Original Sin: The Utopian Social Vision of the O.T.O.

Freedom in & before God, that is the liberation from original sin, through which the reigning christian-nazarene Church has enslaved to their priests humanity from birth.... Love is the crowning of the world. Love is the highest law. Love is God.

Theodor Reuss, “The Gnostic Neo-Christians”
(1917)

Like Randolph, Reuss clearly linked his sexual magical practices to a much larger vision of social transformation. Yet he also went a great deal further than Randolph had imagined by calling for the creation of an entire new morality and civilization based on freedom from original sin and sexual guilt. The power of sexual magic was not to be a matter of secret practice among the initiated few but would eventually spread outward and lead to the radical reform of society at large: “the sexual re-education of the masses would be the responsibility of ‘priest-doctors’... [P]rivate property would be eliminated, forced labour and eugenics were to be introduced, while only physically perfect parents

⁶⁶ König, “Anal Intercourse and the O.T.O.”

⁶⁷ *Der Judenkennner* 7 (12 February 1936), reproduced in König, “Theodor Reuss as Founder of Esoteric Orders,” 188.

would be permitted to have children. The religion of the O.T.O. would become that of the State.”⁶⁸

The new civilization that Reuss imagined was to be based on the worldview of the early Christian Gnostics—or at least what Reuss imagined the Gnostic worldview to be, given the fairly skewed knowledge of Gnosticism in early twentieth-century Europe. This new society would be a “Neo-Gnostic” society of “Templar-Christians” who had rejected the false idea of original sin and realized the inherent divinity of the sexual act. For the sexual act is the power to create life, and it is this power that makes us god-like, capable of creating life like God Himself. Sexual union is thus a sacrament and a “communion,” no less than the sacrament of the Eucharist:

A new civilization, a new system of morals will arise from the new Christianity of the gnostic Templar-Christians... [T]he Church of the gnostic Neo-Christians seeks to found communities, existing on a co-operative basis, of sinless, i.e. freed from the Nazarene-Christian idea of original sin, people. For the formation of such gnostic “Christos” communities only those are suitable who are...convinced of the truth of Manu’s saying: “Only he who has understood the holy doctrine of sanctity of the God-Organs is truly liberated and free from all sins”... The gnostics recognize that humanity’s “resemblance to God” consists in the fact that they are able to grasp and understand the divinity of the earthly act of procreation as a parallel of the divine act of creation... [T]he act of love consummated under the control of the will in God is a sacramental act, a “Mystic Marriage with God,” a communion, a union of self with God.⁶⁹

A key part of Reuss’ vision of a new civilization free of original sin was a new respect for women. Because women can bear children, they are the ultimate embodiment of sexuality and should be revered as the highest symbol of this divine power of creation. This reverence for woman as Mother would in turn form the foundation for a new kind of nation for the future:

The first aim of our Order in the esoteric-practical realization of our teachings is that in the future the “Mother” is to be honored as “High priestess” in her family.

Every pregnant woman is a “Saint” in our eyes... She is the symbol of human procreation from the Godly power of creation...

⁶⁸ König, “The Early OTO and its Development.”

⁶⁹ Reuss, “The Gnostic Neo-Christians” (1917), reproduced in König, *Der Gross Theodor Reuss Reader*.

Our Order proves that it does not merely follow abstract goals, but that it is capable of intervening energetically in the everyday life of our common people whenever it is urgently necessary that they be educated to a correct understanding... of the duties of a nation with regard to its own future, particularly during the present era.⁷⁰

It would, however, be a mistake to regard Reuss as a feminist. His ideal of the true woman was largely in keeping with mainstream nineteenth-century values: woman is to be exalted as a mother and revered for her central role in the domestic sphere. In fact, Reuss was quite critical of the early form of feminism emerging in England, “with its extreme Motherhood-denying ‘woman’s movement (Suffragettes),” and he hoped that the O.T.O. could help restore the true cult of Motherhood.⁷¹

One of the more intriguing episodes in Reuss’ life and utopian aspirations occurred during the last decade of his life in Switzerland. In August of 1917, Reuss organized an international “Anti-National” Congress under O.T.O. auspices at Monte Verità, a liberal commune near Ascona on Lake Maggiore. Interestingly enough, this event is mentioned in the notorious antisemitic tract *Die Geheimnisse der Weisen von Zion* (translated into English as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an immediate bestseller when published in Germany 1919). The author, whose actual name was Müller von Hausen, quotes from a letter that Reuss was alleged to have written:

My secret aim for this congress is to bring together land reformers, vegetarians, Theosophists, pacifists... from Spain, Italy, Holland, Russia, France, etc. and convert their hitherto poisonous anti-German sentiments into something more fair to Germany... The “Anti-Nationalist Cooperative Congress” flag and the draft programme are naturally merely a camouflage... Germany should send two masonic representatives who are men of the world and know the true... history of Freemasonry and its secret political history.⁷²

Ever a subject of controversy and scandal, Reuss has been accused of both social-political subversion and simple greed-driven chicanery. According to one account of the events at Monte Verità, Reuss’ Congress assumed “almost orgiastic qualities. An O.T.O. lodge was founded, there were ‘initiations,’ and Reuss pocketed the money received

⁷⁰ *Oriflamme* (1912): 19–20.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*: 20.

⁷² Beck (pseud.), *Die Geheimnisse der Weisen von Zion*, 165.

from successively higher degrees.”⁷³ Indeed, more than one critic has accused Reuss of simply peddling secret degrees filled with tantalizing esoterica to various European bourgeoisie who liked the idea of becoming “knights” and “masters” in these arcane—and deliciously transgressive—occult orders.

But in this regard, Reuss was perhaps only fulfilling his role as founder of the secret order of “Oriental Templars.” An eclectic blend of Eastern exotica and Western erotica, the O.T.O. was from its inception less an embodiment of any actual Indian tradition than a product of Orientalist fantasy, nineteenth-century sexual obsession, and an ideal of radical liberation through sexual transgression.

The Beast with Two Backs: Aleister Crowley and the Law of Thelema

One of the great insights of South India is the great Temple of the Shiva lingam. I spent a good deal of time in its courts meditating on the mystery of Phallic worship . . . My instinct told me that Blake was right in saying: “The lust of the goat is the glory of God.” But I lacked the courage to admit it. The result of my training had been to obsess me with the hideously foul idea that inflicts such misery on Western minds and curses life with civil war. Europeans cannot face the facts frankly, they cannot escape from their animal appetite, yet suffer the tortures of fear and shame even while gratifying it. As Freud has now shown, this devastating complex is not merely responsible for most of the social and domestic misery of Europe, but exposes the individual to neurosis . . . We resort to suppression, and the germs create an abscess.

Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*

Perhaps no figure would take this goal of radical liberation through sex magic and Tantra further than the O.T.O.’s most infamous member, the Great Beast, Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). As I have argued elsewhere, Crowley does not appear to have had a very deep knowledge of Indian Tantra.⁷⁴ He did, however, inherit much of the Orientalist vision of the exotic, erotic East, which he melded with his own elaborate experi-

⁷³ Howe and Möller, “Theodor Reuss.”

⁷⁴ Urban, “Unleashing the Beast” and “The Beast with Two Backs.” For other studies of Crowley, see Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*; Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*.

ments in sexual magic (or Magick, to use Crowley's spelling),⁷⁵ and he would be credited by his later disciples as one of the first adepts to synthesize Eastern Tantra with Western magic. As his biographer John Symonds remarks, "His greatest merit was to make the bridge between Tantrism and the Western esoteric tradition and thus bring together Western and Eastern magical techniques."⁷⁶ In the process, however, he would take the ideal of social and political transformation to even further extremes. As Alex Owen observes, Crowley's sexual magical rites were "performed in a colonial context against a backdrop of fin-de-siècle 'decadence.'"⁷⁷ As such, I would argue, Crowley's sex magic takes the O.T.O.'s Orientalist dreams and libertarian fantasies to their ultimate ends.

It would be difficult to summarize Crowley's sexual-magical experimentations in a long book, much less a short article; so for the sake of brevity I will simply mention a few of his notable innovations in the practices of the O.T.O. In many ways, Crowley might be said to embody some of the deepest tensions in late Victorian English society as a whole. The son of a preacher in the highly puritanical Plymouth Brethren sect, Crowley would later turn to the most extreme forms of sensual excess, apparently not resting until he had shattered every imaginable social and religious taboo. Like many other British intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—such as Oscar Wilde, D.H. Lawrence, Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter and others—Crowley loathed what he saw as the stifling hypocrisy and repression of the Victorian era: "[T]o us Victoria was sheer suffocation. . . . She was a huge and heavy fog; we could not see, we could not breathe. . . . [T]he spirit of her age had killed everything we cared for. . . . The soul of England was stagnant, stupefied!"⁷⁸

Yet Crowley also went much further than most of his generation had dared by not simply proclaiming the death of the old Victorian era,

⁷⁵ Crowley uses the spelling "Magick" to distinguish his art—the art of changing nature in accordance with one's Will—from most vulgar understandings of the term. See *The Law is for All*, 39, and *Magick in Theory and Practice*.

⁷⁶ Symonds, Introduction to Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, xxv. As Grant comments, "The revival of Tantric elements in the *Book of the Law* may be evidence of a positive move on the part of [Crowley] to forge a link between Western and Oriental systems of magick" (*The Magical Revival*, 126). Popular books on Tantra/Sex Magick are too numerous to cite here: see for example the works of Christopher S. Hyatt: *Tantra without Tears; Secrets of Western Tantra*.

⁷⁷ Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 187.

⁷⁸ *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, 216.

but also by proclaiming himself to be the herald of a whole new era in history. In 1904, in fact, Crowley claimed to have received a revelation from his guardian-angel, Aiwass, who dictated to him *The Book of the Law* (*Liber AL vel Legis*).⁷⁹ His most famous work, *The Book of the Law* announces the dawn of the third Aeon of mankind: the first aeon was that of the Goddess Isis, centered around matriarchy and worship of the Great Mother; the second aeon was that of Osiris, during which the patriarchal religions of suffering and death—i.e., Judaism and Christianity—rose to power. Finally, with the revelation of the *Book of the Law*, a new aeon of the son, Horus, was born: “the old formulae... of the dying God is no longer efficacious... The formulae of the new Aeon recognizes Horus, the Child, crowned and conquering, as God.”⁸⁰

Beginning in 1910, Crowley became involved with Reuss’ O.T.O. and soon became its most infamous member. According to his own rather fanciful account, he was approached by Reuss, who had read a cryptic chapter of Crowley’s *Book of Lies* and accused him of revealing the innermost secret of the O.T.O.: the secret of sexual magic. Though Crowley had done so unintentionally, the story goes, he was named the Sovereign Grand Master General of Ireland, Ioana, and all the Britains. Going even further than Randolph or Reuss, Crowley identified sexual magic as the most powerful of all forms of magic—a secret that even he himself had not fully understood after years of experimentation, and one so powerful that it “cannot be used indiscriminately” or revealed to the unworthy.⁸¹

If this secret which is a scientific secret were perfectly understood, as it is not by me after more than twelve years’ almost constant study and

⁷⁹ Actually, the revelation came first through Crowley’s wife, Rose, during their trip to Cairo, when the voice of the god Horus began to speak through her. She later revealed that the being speaking through her was an emissary of Horus named Aiwass, and Crowley eventually claimed to have received the *Book of the Law* directly from Aiwass without Rose’s mediation.

⁸⁰ Crowley, *The Law is for All*, 47. See Symonds, *Introduction to The Confessions*, xxii.

⁸¹ Crowley, *The Book of Lies*, 5–6. “Shortly after publication, the O.H.O. (Outer Head of the O.T.O.) came to me... He said that since I was acquainted with the supreme secret of the Order, I must be allowed the IX {degree} and obligated in regard to it. I protested that I knew no such secret. He said ‘But you have printed it in the plainest language’. I said that I could not have done so because I did not know it. He went to the book-shelves; taking out a copy of THE BOOK OF LIES, he pointed to a passage in the despised chapter. It instantly flashed upon me. The entire symbolism not only of Free Masonry but of many other traditions blazed upon my spiritual vision. From that moment the O.T.O. assumed its proper importance in my mind. I understood that I held in my hands the key to the future progress of humanity...” (ibid.).

experiment, ... there would be nothing which the human imagination can conceive that could not be realized in practice... If it were desired to have an element of atomic weight six times that of uranium that element could be produced.⁸²

Like Reuss, Crowley does discuss Indian Tantric techniques and various other generic Oriental exotica. Styling himself “Mahatma Guru Sri Paramahansa Shivaji,” Crowley wrote quite a bit on *hatha yoga* (“yoga for yahoos”),⁸³ and he included a discussion of Tantric sexual techniques in his *De Arte Magica*.⁸⁴ Yet, as his own disciple Kenneth Grant acknowledges, Crowley’s references to Tantra reveal a general ignorance of actual Tantric techniques and reflect a more widespread Orientalist stereotype of Tantric eroticism and libertinism.⁸⁵

In addition to quasi-Tantric references, however, Crowley also added his own interpretations and ritual flourishes to the O.T.O.’s magical repertoire—including a full-scale Gnostic Mass filled with highly erotic symbolism.⁸⁶ At the same time, he also revised the O.T.O.’s hierarchy

⁸² Crowley, *The Confessions*, 767.

⁸³ Crowley, *Eight Lectures on Yōga*. He claimed to have achieved the highest yogic state of *samadhi* while meditating in Ceylon in 1901. See “The Temple of Solomon the King,” 166–7.

⁸⁴ “[T]he wise men of India have a belief that a certain particular Prana, or force, resides in the Bindu, or semen... Therefore they stimulate to the maximum its generation by causing a consecrated prostitute to excite the organs, and at the same time vigorously withhold by will... [T]hey claim that they can deflower as many as eighty virgins in a night without losing a single drop of the Bindu. Nor is this ever to be lost, but reabsorbed through the tissues of the body. The organs thus act as a siphon to draw constantly fresh supplies of life from the cosmic reservoir, and flood the body with their fructifying virtue... (see almost any Tantra, in particular *Shiva Sanhita*)” (*De Arte Magica*, XVI).

⁸⁵ See Urban, “Unleashing the Beast.” Grant recounts Crowley’s correspondence with David Curwen, who studied left-hand Tantra in South India. According to Grant’s account, Crowley was rather annoyed that Curwen seemed to possess much greater knowledge about Tantra and sexual magick; as Crowley himself admitted, “Curwen knows 100 times as much as I do about Tantra. But I do not advise it” (Letter to Grant, 1946; cited in Grant, *Remembering Aleister Crowley*. Curwen claimed to have a recipe for preparing the prized “Elixir of Life” that was far superior to that of the O.T.O. (*ibid.*, 49).

⁸⁶ See Urban, “Unleashing the Beast.” An elaborate, highly choreographed ceremony, the Gnostic Mass is a creative re-imagining of the secret rites alleged to have been practiced by the early Gnostics and later corrupted by the Catholic Church. Although there is no physical intercourse involved in the Mass, its symbolism is highly sexual. The primary actors are the Priest, who parts a sacred veil with his “Lance,” and the Priestess, who removes her robes to embody the nakedness of the divine female principle. The Mass also involves the consumption of wine and “cakes of light,” and it is perhaps worth noting the ingredients suggested for the latter. According to the recipe provided in the *Book of the Law*, they are to be made with “meal & honey & thick leavings

of initiatic degrees, expanding them to eleven. The eighth, ninth, and eleventh of these focused on more explicitly transgressive sexual rites of auto-erotic and homosexual intercourse. As Peter König summarizes the upper degrees,

Crowley's VIIIth degree unveiled...that masturbating on a sigil of a demon or meditating upon the image of a phallus would bring power or communication with a divine being...The IXth degree was labeled heterosexual intercourse where the sexual secrets were sucked out of the vagina and when not consumed...put on a sigil to attract this or that demon to fulfill the pertinent wish...In the XIth degree, the mostly homosexual degree, one identifies oneself with an ejaculating penis. The blood (or excrements) from anal intercourse attract the spirits/demons while the sperm keeps them alive.⁸⁷

As we can see, Crowley's practice of sexual magic represents a radical departure from the rather prudish system of Randolph; it is even more extreme than that of Reuss and much more willing to use a wide variety of non-heterosexual forms of sex magic. Indeed, his sexual palate was quite eclectic. In addition to more mundane heterosexual acts, his magic sampled a smorgasbord of techniques, including "mentally meditating on his penis—masturbating—while thinking of gods and angels; consecrating talismans with combinations of semen, vaginal juices and menstrual blood; prolonging and intensifying sex through visualization...beseeching gods for information, money and material possessions during sex."⁸⁸ Many of Crowley's own diaries are quite replete with detailed discussions of his own experiments in auto-erotic, heterosexual, and homosexual intercourse. Between 1914 and 1918, Crowley's journal, *Rex de Arte Regia*, records a long series of 309 acts of sexual magic for a variety of purposes. These included both spiritual aims, such as offering praise to Pan or attaining supernatural powers, and more material aims, such as fascinating mistresses or enhancing his youth and sexual attraction. Of these, the largest number were employed for the purpose of generating money. Increasingly worried

of red wine: then oil of Abramelin and olive oil" and softened with fresh blood. As for this last ingredient, menstrual blood is preferred.

⁸⁷ König, "Spermo-Gnostics and the O.T.O." Two of the most important texts for the IX degree rituals are *Liber Agape* and *De Arte Magica* and the magical diaries based on his sexual operations: Symonds and Grant, eds. *The Magical Record of the Beast 666*. The IX degree rite was also published in censored form as "Two Fragments of Ritual." See also King, *The Secret Rituals of the O.T.O.*

⁸⁸ Michaelson, ed., *Portable Darkness*, 143.

about his own finances, Crowley developed a sexo-economic technique of imagining a shower of gold coins raining down at the moment of climax. At least in his opinion, this worked, since he claimed to receive several unexpected checks and offers showing up out of the blue.⁸⁹

But perhaps the most significant feature of Crowley's sexual magic was his explicit use of transgression as a ritual tool. Indeed, he seems to have taken a certain delight in inverting and tearing down the social taboos of his Victorian childhood, in ways that would have made even the most hard-core Indian Tantrika blush. I could cite a number of entertaining examples here; but for the sake of brevity, I will note just a few of the more notable ones. As we have already seen, Crowley's higher-level rituals centered around acts that were considered extremely transgressive by Victorian standards. Sodomy and masturbation were foremost among the acts considered both physically and morally dangerous in Victorian society, and they would therefore become powerful tools in Crowley's magical practice. The original preface to his *The World's Tragedy* was, in fact, sub-titled "Sodomy," in which he vowed "to fight openly for that which no living Englishman dared defend, even in secret—sodomy!"⁹⁰

However, even Crowley's heterosexual rites would have been considered somewhat against the grain of Victorian sexual values. As we have already seen, many of his practices involved deliberate inversions of "normal" sexual intercourse, such as the consumption of sexual fluids, which were regarded as the powerful "elixir" employed in many of the IX degree operations.⁹¹ In some cases, Crowley seems to have truly exulted in his own depravity, going to great lengths to describe his descent into licentious transgression. As he described his relations

⁸⁹ Skinner, *The Magical Diaries of Aleister Crowley*, 5–6. See Symonds and Grant, eds. *The Magical Record of the Beast 666*.

⁹⁰ Crowley, *The World's Tragedy*, xxvii. One of Crowley's most intense periods of experimentation in sex magic began in 1914, during his "Paris Workings," conducted with the help of his lover, Victor Neuberg. Crowley engaged in a variety of rites intended to achieve the goals of invoking the gods Jupiter and Mercury. In the course of the operations, Crowley became possessed by an evil spirit posing as the god Mercury. This being informed them that the ultimate act of magic would require the rape, ritual murder and dissection of the body of a young girl. Yet even the Beast recoiled from this act. See King, *The Magical World of Aleister Crowley*, 85; Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 186ff.

⁹¹ On the consumption of the "elixir" see especially *De Arte Magica*, chapters XIV–XVI, and Crowley's magical records, many of which discuss preparation of the "elixir," the commingled male and female fluids integral to the O.T.O. IX degree ritual (*The Magical Record of the Beast 666*, 45ff.).

with his partner, Ronnie Minor, in 1918, “I now do all those things which voluptuaries do, with equal or greater enthusiasm and power; but always for an Ulterior End. In this matter I am reproached by that whore of niggers and dogs, with whom I am now living in much worse than adultery.”⁹² Similarly, as he described his relations with a young American, Cecil Frederick Russell, who came to study with him in 1921 and became a partner in his sexual magic,

Now I'll shave and make up my face like the lowest kind of whore and rub on perfume and go after Genesthai [Russell] like a drunken two-bit prick-pit in old New Orleans. He disgusts me sexually, as I him, as I suspect... [T]he dirtier my deed, the dearer my darling will hold me; the grosser the act the greedier my arse to engulf him!⁹³

Crowley would go to even further extremes of transgression during his years at the Abbey of Thelema. In his diaries, he claims to have transcended all material distinctions, shattering the boundary between pure and impure, such that even the most defiling substances—including human excrement—became for him the pure Body of God. Thus the shit of his Scarlet Woman, Leah Hirsig, became the “Thelemic Host” in his Gnostic Mass:

My mouth burned; my throat choked, my belly wretched; my blood fled wither who knows... She stood above in hideous contempt... She ate all the body of God and with Her soul's compulsion made me eat... My teeth grew rotten, my tongue ulcered, raw was my throat, spasm-torn my belly, and all my Doubt of that which to Her teeth was moonlight and to her tongue ambrosia; to her throat nectar, in her belly the One God.⁹⁴

While Crowley's rituals might strike many readers as disgusting, bizarre, insane, or simply absurd, they do in fact possess a very clear and coherent logic. His own stated goal was nothing less than to tear down and destroy the old, dying world of Western Christianity and the prudish Victorian society in which he was raised. If this was a religion and society built upon stern sexual morality and social taboos, then the surest way to destroy that world would be to systematically overturn, invert, and violate those taboos. Only then could he hope to raise up in their place the new law of Thelema, “Do what thou wilt”: As he put it in a letter to his brother-in-law, Gerald Kelly,

⁹² Crowley, 1918 Diary (O.T.O. Archives), cited in Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 265.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁹⁴ *The Magical Record of the Beast 666*, 235.

I say today: to hell with Christianity, Rationalism, Buddhism all the lumber of the centuries. I bring you a positive and primaevial fact, Magic by name: and with this I will build me a new Heaven and a new Earth. I want none of your faint approval or faint dispraise; I want blasphemy, murder, rape, revolution, anything, bad or good but strong.⁹⁵

Yet in the end, Crowley was really a deeply ambivalent and contradictory figure, a man who embodied many of the fundamental cultural contradictions of Western society in the early twentieth century. A kind of “Beast with two Backs,” he was a striking exemplar of the very same late Victorian society that he fought to hard to overthrow.⁹⁶ His own relentless quest for transgression, his pre-occupation with masturbation, sodomy and self-defilement, only shows that he was never really able to transcend the taboos of his Victorian childhood. As the Schrecks observe, even Crowley, “who spent decades reacting to the sexual repression of his upbringing in an extreme Christian sect, never completely deprogrammed himself. Even in his sixties, one gets the impression he was still ‘being a bad boy,’ doing everything he could to outrage his long-dead parents.”⁹⁷ By the end of his life in 1947, Crowley also seemed to have reached much the same state of exhaustion and collapse experienced by Europe at the end of World War II: like the grand ideals of European modernism, his dreams of a glorious new age of Thelema had ended not in a utopian society, but in drug addiction, loneliness, and squalor.

Sex, Transgression and Liberation, East and West: A Brief Comparison

Kulacara must be kept completely secret. In the *Nīlāntātra* it is said that Kula rituals must be performed in an isolated place, and there must be no opportunity for common people to see

Krishnananda Agamavagisha, *Brihat Tantrasara*
(sixteenth century)

⁹⁵ Crowley, quoted in Suster, *The Legacy of the Beast*, 44.

⁹⁶ See Urban, “The Beast with Two Backs.” Martin likewise describes Crowley as “both an effect and a cause of the shift in turn of the century Zeitgeist from Queen Victoria to D.H. Lawrence” (*Orthodox Heresy*, 183).

⁹⁷ Schreck and Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh*, 142.

Even the perversions in the excrescences of most modern fermentation are at their bases of divine origin.

Theodor Reuss, Introduction to *Lingam-Yoni* (1906)

If we compare the various forms of esoteric practice found in traditional Hindu Shakta Tantra and those in modern western movements like Reuss' O.T.O., I think we find both remarkable similarities and profound differences.⁹⁸ Both the Shakta Tantrikas and the O.T.O. engage in deliberately transgressive ritual acts that systematically violate conventional social codes and moral laws; and in both cases, these transgressions center at least in part around ritualized sexual intercourse and the consumption of sexual fluids as a source of super-human magical power. Both, moreover, are generally quite male-oriented and arguably even misogynistic in certain respects, making the male practitioner the primary beneficiary of the rites and treating women largely as tools (perhaps dispensable ones, at that) in secret ritual.

Apart from these interesting similarities, however, there are also fairly obvious and important differences between the Tantric and O.T.O. rites. First and foremost, Reuss begins from the fundamental (mis)identification of Tantra with sex. Following the nineteenth-century Christian missionaries and European Orientalist scholars, Reuss defines Tantra essentially as "sexual worship"—the only difference being that he turns the Orientalist narrative completely on its head, by regarding this Tantric sexual worship not as a depraved confusion of religion and sensuality but as the most needed spiritual remedy for a prudish, hypocritical Christian society. From Reuss' time onward, this basic (mis)equation of Tantra with sex has been a consistent theme in virtually every popular Western text on Tantra, from *Tantra without Tears* to *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Tantric Sex*.

Second and more important, most traditional forms of Hindu Tantra are by no means the subversive, anti-social, or revolutionary force that they are commonly imagined to be by western onlookers. As we have seen in the case of Krishnananda, most Tantric authors were quite conservative and limited their transgressive actions to the confines of highly controlled secret ritual. Outside of the ritual circle, social boundaries and gender relations were re-asserted, indeed, argu-

⁹⁸ For a more detailed comparison, see Urban, "The Power of the Impure."

ably even reinforced. Conversely, Reuss and virtually all later “Western Tantrikas” have embraced Tantra as a radical force of resistance and challenge to the existing social order. Since Reuss’ time down through the sexual revolutions of the 1960s, and continuing to this day, Tantra has been transformed into what neo-Tantric guru Nik Douglas calls an “engine of political change.”⁹⁹ As Nikolas and Zeena Schreck put it in their manual of twenty-first-century sex magic, Tantra is the path of “social defiance,” based on the “refusal to follow his or her society’s religious restrictions;” it is, as such, inherently opposed to any form of totalitarianism:

If the left-hand path is dangerous...one of its primary hazards is the peril of freedom in a world almost instinctively committed to crushing liberty in whatever form it might appear. All autocracies have held sway by severely curbing the full development of sexual power in their subjects. The left hand path...must be viewed as a threat to *any* hierarchy that seeks to bridle the development of man into god.¹⁰⁰

Thus in the course of its remarkable journey to the West, Tantra has been transformed from a highly esoteric and generally conservative tradition into one of the most powerful symbols of sensual pleasure, sexual liberation, and political freedom.

Conclusions: Tantra, Sex Magic and Neo-Orientalism Today

A man who desires sexual intercourse because of lust or for the sake of mere pleasure will surely go to the Raurava Hell, O Goddess.

Krishnananda Agamavagisha, *Brihat-Tantrasara*
(sixteenth century)

Tantra traditions come from ancient practices in India, Nepal and China. Whereas once they were reserved for royalty, now they are for all of us. The practices also help heal past hurts, often stored in sexual centers of the body, so that you can be more...open to love

Kuriansky, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Tantric Sex*
(2001)

⁹⁹ Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*, 315.

¹⁰⁰ Schreck and Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh*, 9–10.

Once Reuss and the O.T.O. had let the “secrets” of sex magic and Tantra out of the bag, a wide array of erotic-magical traditions would begin to flourish through Europe and the United States. In the process, the sexual magic derived from Randolph and the O.T.O. would be increasingly mingled and (con)fused with a somewhat garbled version of Indian Tantra. Reuss himself seems to have been aware of the dangers of revealing these sexual secrets. Already in 1906, in his *Lingam-Yoni*, he predicted that these Eastern teachings on sexual magic would very likely be misunderstood and abused by many:

Some Tartuffe may say that we are “immoral”, “corrupting.” etc., but we are prepared for that... While treating of this subject as we do in this work we will touch upon and describe many things which might inspire libertines of both sexes to perverted thoughts, which is only natural, but not our fault. To the pure, as we know, everything is pure.¹⁰¹

The O.T.O. itself gave birth to a number of offshoots and rival movements, such as the Fraternitas Saturni, the Fraternitas Rosicruciana Antiqua, the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, the Typhonian current and the Ordo Templi Orientis Antiqua, a breakaway branch formed in 1921 which focused on sex magic and Voodoo. Today, as critics like Peter König observe, the once highly esoteric O.T.O. has become quite popularized and commercialized, as we can now discover all the secrets Tantric sex magic so long as we are prepared to pay for the costly series of initiations.¹⁰²

Not only did Tantra and sex magic begin to proliferate throughout these esoteric traditions, but they also began to spread throughout Western popular culture in the twentieth century. Already in 1906, the first Tantrik Order in America was founded by the infamous Dr. Pierre Arnold Bernard, better known in the popular press as the “Omnipotent Oom” and the “Loving Guru.”¹⁰³ By the 1960s, Tantra had become increasingly incorporated into the countercultural movement and widely associated with not just sexual freedom, but also with movements toward political liberation and social revolution. Thus, in 1964, Omar Garrison published his *Yōga of Sex*, promising that through Tantra yoga “man can achieve the sexual potency which enables him to extend the ecstasy crowning sexual union for an hour or more, rather than the

¹⁰¹ Reuss, Introduction to *Lingam-Yoni*.

¹⁰² König, “Ordo Templi Orientis: The McDonaldisation of Occulture.”

¹⁰³ On Bernard see Urban, “The Omnipotent Oom.”

brief seconds he now knows.”¹⁰⁴ Finally, perhaps the most infamous Neo-Tantric master of the 1980s was Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (a.k.a. “Osho”), the self-styled “Guru of the Rich.” As Rajneesh re-defined it, Tantra is the ultimate path of individual freedom and rebellion against the fixed norms of mainstream society: “Tantra is a dangerous philosophy, it is a dangerous religion... [M]an has not yet been courageous enough to try it on a larger scale because the society does not allow it... [T]he society thinks this is absolute sin... Tantra believes in joy because joy is God.”¹⁰⁵

In sum, it would seem that the “Orient” has not simply been a realm of other-worldly mysticism and transcendent spirituality in the Western imagination, as Richard King suggests. On the contrary, there has always been another darker, more disturbing, but also more tantalizing image of in the Orient in the Western gaze: the fantasy of the exotic, erotic, hyper-sensual fantasy Orient, most clearly embodied in the Western fascination with Tantra. The O.T.O. is simply one of the more extreme examples of this fetishization of Tantra, one of the first to combine Tantra with Western methods of sexual magic, and the first of many to re-imagine Tantra as a path of social and political liberation. In this respect, Reuss not only foreshadowed the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s by half a century, he also helped pave the way for the sexual theories of neo-Freudians like Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse—both of whom also closely linked sexual liberation with social and political liberation.¹⁰⁶

Today, as we surf the “Tantra.com” web-site or browse our *Complete Idiot’s Guide to Tantric Sex*, it would seem that Tantra has been thoroughly commodified and mass-marketed as the most exotic, erotic form of the exotic Orient itself. According to Kuriansky’s “idiot” version, this is a simple, direct method to achieve both sexual and spiritual ecstasy. As such, it is naturally “consistent with Western obsessions with worldly pleasures” and our quick-fix mentality:

¹⁰⁴ Garrison, *Tantra*, xxviii, xxvi.

¹⁰⁵ Osho, *The Tantric Transformation*, 293; see Urban, *Tantra*, ch. 6.

¹⁰⁶ See Reich, *Selected Writings: Marcuse, Eros and Civilization*, 197–211. As Altman observes, “The idea of sexual liberation as integral to larger social and political liberation was an underlying theme in radical and romantic theories since the early nineteenth century and became central to both the counterculture and New Left movements of the 1970s” (*Global Sex*, 160).

Although tantric practices were developed in the Eastern part of the world, they are particularly...appealing to the Western world today...Tantric sex promises simple steps and instant results, which are appealing to Westerners who are conditioned to "instant" lifestyles (instant coffee, fast food, instant gratification) and quick fixes.¹⁰⁷

In short, Tantra in its Western forms has been remarkably transformed into a life-affirming technique of self-improvement that fits quite nicely with American capitalism and consumer culture. One is thus tempted to agree with König that what we are witnessing is a kind of "McDonaldisation of occultism," transmitting a form of "McGnosis" based on O.T.O. sex-magic: "It is only a matter of time before we see the 'Caliphate' not only selling T-shirts with the O.T.O.-lamen and...pornography but also frozen 'Amrita' (the sexual-secretion cocktail) over the Internet."¹⁰⁸

In the end, it would seem that we have not advanced all that far beyond the sexual obsessions and transgressive fantasies of our Orientalist forefathers. If anything, our Orientalism has only expanded with the expanding networks of transnational capitalism. Today, we not only project our own suppressed desires onto the eroticized mirror of the Orient, but we also repackage these reflected phantasms for a new generation of spiritual consumers in a much larger global marketplace of exotic religions.

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¹⁰⁷ Kuriansky, *The Complete Idiot's Guide*, 8, 9.

¹⁰⁸ König, "Ordo Templi Orientis."

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THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF SEXUAL MAGIC,
EXEMPLIFIED BY FOUR MAGICAL GROUPS IN THE
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

HANS THOMAS HAKL

For obvious reasons, sexual magic is a subject that evokes controversy and curiosity. Surprisingly, however, there exists—with the laudable exception of two works on the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor and on Paschal Beverly Randolph¹—practically no critical scholarly literature that studies it as a historical phenomenon and, as a result, the information available to a wider public tends to be sensationalist, second-hand, and mostly unreliable. In this chapter we will present a factual presentation of the theories and practices of four of the most important groups and orders devoted to sexual magic in the twentieth century, based upon direct study of the relevant primary sources.² It should be noted though that probably the most famous of these sex magical orders—Theodor Reuss's and Aleister Crowley's *Ordo Templi Orientis* (O.T.O.)—is not included in this overview, because it is the subject of a separate chapter by Hugh Urban elsewhere in this volume.

*The Fraternitas Saturni*³

The Fraternitas Saturni (FS), Germany's most important magical order in the 20th century, was officially founded in Berlin on Easter, 1928.

¹ See the article by John P. Deveney in this volume.

² One of the main obstacles to a critical study of sexual magic is the fact that we are mostly dealing with secret societies and initiatic orders, the documents of which are largely not available to the general public or to scholarly research. The usual reticence about making materials intended for internal use available to outsiders is further enhanced in the case of sexual magic, due to the controversial nature of the teachings and practices. Against this background, it is important to point out that much of the present discussion is based upon documents in a private collection (referred to in the text as PC), to which the author is fortunate to have access.

³ For more detailed information in English on the Fraternitas Saturni see Flowers, *Fire & Ice* and a privately printed pamphlet by the same author, *The Secrets of Fire and Ice*. For more concise information see Hakl, "Fraternitas Saturni." Besides books, internal magazines, and special prints, there exist seventeen mimeographed volumes of collected

In fact, however, the lodge had already started its workings two years earlier, in May, 1926. The founders were the bookseller Eugen Grosche (order name Gregor A. Gregorius, 1888–1964) and four brethren. The FS derived from the *Pansophische Loge* (Pansophical Lodge of Lightseeking Brethren of the Orient, Berlin), led by the bookseller Heinrich Tränker (order name Rechartus, 1880–1956). Since 1921, Tränker had also been Grand Master of the O.T.O. in Germany. In 1926, he had a falling-out with Aleister Crowley, who had demanded that all German lodges under the aegis of Tränker should submit to his world lodge A.:A.: (Astrum Argentinum). This demand was rejected, and a majority of the Pansophical Lodge's brethren left the order and became members of the newly founded FS. Nevertheless, the FS remained in contact with Crowley and even adopted a slightly adapted version of the well-known Crowleyn "Law" of the New Aeon, "Do what Thou wilt." But organizationally and in their teachings, the FS remained completely independent. New members joined the order from Wilhelm Quintscher's (1893–1954) *Orden mentalischer Bauherren* (Order of Mental Architects) after it was dissolved in 1928.

During the National Socialist period the FS was banned, but after the war Eugen Grosche reassembled the former members and became their leader for the rest of his life. His death in 1964 was followed by the usual power struggle over succession, resulting in several schisms. The order managed to survive these troubles and in fact still exists today. It has an initiatic system consisting of thirty-three degrees, similar to the masonic Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite; but, naturally, it does not belong to regular Freemasonry. Its doctrines are very eclectic, with a special emphasis on astrology, and include an enormous mass of occult and magical lore, ranging from runes to the kabbalah, and from Ancient Egypt, via yoga to esoteric cosmology. In its essence, the FS is based upon a gnostic doctrine according to which man is capable of discovering his inherent divinity by means of knowledge and self-realization. As the name indicates, the FS sees itself as placed under

documents and rituals, assembled by Adolf Hemberger (1929–1992) under the title *Documenta et Ritualia Fraternitatis Saturni* (PC). It was through Hemberger, a professor of scientific methodology at Giessen University and an assiduous collector of degrees in various magical orders, that practically all the internal FS-documents became known to outsiders in the 1970's. The first details of internal teachings leaked through in Dr. Klingsor (a pseudonym of Hemberger's), *Experimental-Magie*.

the sign of Saturn, which is considered to be the opposite of the Sun and implies a solitary, hard, and elitist approach to spiritual development. The order is pronouncedly anti-Christian.

Contrary to current prejudice, the FS is not primarily a sex magical order like the O.T.O., and sex magical rituals and writings in fact play only a minor role in its practices and doctrinal corpus as a whole. Still, the phallus is seen as the earthly manifestation of divine power, with semen as its vehicle; and the vagina symbolizes chaos as the creative ground of being. Sexual magic is practised, but—theoretically at least—only “in order to break through the astral world and to enter higher mental levels.”⁴ The order is dominated by a masculine perspective and its attitude towards women is ambiguous: on the one hand, woman is regarded as a “cosmic-demonic principle,”⁵ but on the other, it is only through “spiritual and physical union” with her that “man became capable to act as creative principle” at all.⁶ The FS teaches “Tantric”⁷ practices for transforming the generative powers into spiritual energy and these require periods of chastity lasting up to 180 days in the case of important ritual workings; moreover, in theory at least, initiates into the highest degrees should even observe complete abstinence. These rules clearly show how different the FS is from the O.T.O.

The FS’s path is “hard and solitary” indeed. Generally speaking, the male magus should have intercourse only rarely and in any case he should never give in to sexual indulgence in order not to become the slave of woman. He is allowed to ejaculate into the vagina for magical purposes only, never for personal gratification. One of the main applications of sex magic in the FS consists of using the female partner as a medium to facilitate magical workings in the astral sphere. This requires her to be completely subjugated to the magus sexually, so that no other magus can exert an influence over her. According to the teachings, this can be achieved by rubbing the magus’ semen on the woman’s solar plexus. During her period of menstruation, she should furthermore be obliged to drink his semen regularly.⁸ Sperm is considered to be among the most important means for magical creations, but its fluidic forces

⁴ Anonymous (Gregor A. Gregorius), *Sexualmagie*, 83.

⁵ Gregorius, “Das Weib als kosmisch-dämonisches Prinzip,” 6–14.

⁶ Anonymous, *Sexualmagie*, 24.

⁷ For the problematics of the term “Tantric” in this context, cf. Hugh Urban’s chapter in this volume.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

must be consciously directed by the mental and imaginative power of the magus; otherwise, it is completely useless.

Another application of sex magic in the FS is the creation of astral beings. To achieve this goal, the magus' sperm must be combined with the female bodily fluids during sexual intercourse and collected from the vagina afterwards. Only such a spiritual combination of solar and lunar fluidic forces has the power to create astral beings. The magus and his medium must be protected by a magical circle during the ritual because astral vampires are said to be always present at such occasions. The astral beings believed to be created through sexual magic can be used for all kinds of practical magical work. For this purpose they must be "tied" to a symbol or kabbalistic name, that is written on a parchment saturated with a mixture of the female and male fluids.⁹ Certain drugs, like cannabis or opium, may also be used in their creation—as well as in other sex magical operations—in order to enhance the power of visualization and for fumigation purposes.¹⁰ This procedure for creating new astral beings with clearly defined characters must be strictly distinguished, according to the FS's teachings, from the invocation or evocation of already existing angels, demons, or other spiritual beings.

One ritual used in this context is the so called 5 M Rite, clearly derived from the Tantric practice of consuming the five M's (*mansa*, meat; *matsya*, fish; *mudra*, grain; *madya*, wine; and *maithuna*, intercourse). The magician and his medium consume a ritual meal prepared from the first four M's. They are both in a state of high erotic tension, due to a previous period of chastity and hence have plenty of "odic force" at their disposal. Within a magical circle, the magus now puts his medium into a trance by means of so-called banishing magic and proceeds to draw odic force from her chakras,¹¹ which he then directs through his own body and finally projects onto a parchment. This procedure is repeated seven to nine times. It is followed by ritual intercourse, after which the parchment is soaked with the combined essences dripping

⁹ Ibid., 80, 81, 93, 94.

¹⁰ Ibid., 92. The necessarily careful use of so-called witch-ointments containing henbane, belladonna, thorn apple etc. to be rubbed into the area of the sexual organs and under the armpits, was also regarded as helpful for all kinds of sex magical operations.

¹¹ After the rite the magician is, however, obliged to replenish the odic force of his medium.

from the vagina. Alcohol and three drops of blood from the “Saturnian” (i.e. the middle) finger of the magus are added.¹² Astrological conditions have to be observed very carefully: even the sexual positions taken by the partners depend on them.¹³

Sexual magic is also used for the activation and development of the chakras, because it is said to increase their ethereal forces. For this purpose certain runic and yogic positions are prescribed.¹⁴ Similarly, intercourse is seen as a means of harmonizing the magical odic fluids between man and woman.¹⁵ A specific degree focused on sexual magic in the FS is the 18th degree, called *Gradus Pentalphae*. The rite of initiation involves ritual intercourse in front of the members who already hold the 18th degree. In the course of this ritual, a living black cock is decapitated, and its blood spilled over the couple while they are engaged in intercourse. The magus’s ejaculation must take place outside the vagina through vigorous rubbing of the penis by the female partner, while the other sisters and brethren yell ecstatically. At the end, a clean white cloth is placed over the couple.¹⁶ It is not certain that this rite has ever been put into actual practice, and if so, how often.

In addition to it, there exists a document¹⁷ called *The Symbolism of the Gradus Pentalphae*, the original of which is in the handwriting of Mstr. Daniel (pseudonym of Guido Wolther, who became Master of the Chair in 1966) and preserved in an exercise book. It contains many sigils and very explicit drawings, plus some text. Right at the beginning we find a very clear guideline: “Strict rejection of homosexuals and pederasts as magical sexual monsters.” The text also contains “The Secret of the Sexual Power of the Magus Pentalphae,” which explains a procedure through which the magus can perform the sexual act up to ten times in one session. It also gives advice to female holders of this degree, on how to sexually vampirize non-initiated males; these can be “thrown away like used gloves” once they are no longer able to provide the

¹² Hemberger, *Organisationsformen*, 109–112.

¹³ Gregorius, *Die astrologischen Aspektzeichen* (English translation in King, *Sexuality, Magic, & Perversion*, 116–119).

¹⁴ Anonymous, “Sexualmagie” (reserved for holders of the eighteenth degree).

¹⁵ Gregorius, “Der Sexualverkehr.”

¹⁶ Hemberger, *Organisationsformen*, 138–140. English translation (but with a number of sigils omitted) in Flowers, *Fire and Ice*, 157–163.

¹⁷ See reduced facsimile in König, *In Nomine Demiurgi Nofetati*, 108–127.

initiate with more vital force. Again, whether the instructions in this document were ever put to practice is very doubtful.¹⁸

*Giuliano Kremmerz, the Fraternity of Myriam and the
Ordine Osirideo Egiziano*

Apart from some passages in English editions of books by Julius Evola, nothing about the sexual magical doctrines of the various Italian groups directed by Giuliano Kremmerz (pseudonym of Ciro Formisano, 1861–1930) has ever been published in English. Texts by Kremmerz himself exist only in Italian and French. Actually, however, the sexual magical system practiced in these groups is arguably the most intricate and well-developed among all the magical organisations known in the Western world.

Kremmerz¹⁹ has long been known in Italy and among specialists in France as one of the great figures of the Italian magical scene, next to Julius Evola (1898–1974) and Arturo Reghini (1878–1946). His voluminous *Opera Omnia* consists of nearly 1,500 pages, but does not contain any of the internal instructions used within his magical orders. Hence, until the mid-1980's, very little was known about his sexual magic except for what he had written himself in one of his magazines, *Il Mondo segreto: Avviamento alla Scienza dei Magi* (1896–1899) (*The Secret World: Introduction to the Science of the Magi*),²⁰ in his booklet *I Tarocchi dal punto di vista filosofico* (The Tarot from a Philosophical Perspective),²¹ and finally in his *Angeli e Demoni dell'Amore* (Angels and Demons of Love), where he made the important distinction between love directed by the mind (which he considered impure) and love directed by the heart and dedicated to the angels.

¹⁸ It has even been suggested that Adolf Hemberger, in whose possession the original document remained until his death, was more or less cheated by Mstr. Daniel, who produced this document for him simply because he was paid for it; the latter has, however, denied this vehemently in a personal interview with the author.

¹⁹ For a short introduction in English, see Introvigne, "Kremmerz, Giuliano." For a very good overview of his general magical philosophy, see Di Vona, *Giuliano Kremmerz*.

²⁰ A complete reprint of the magazine, in two large volumes and in a limited numbered edition, has been published in 1982: see Pierini, *Il Mondo Segreto*.

²¹ Reprinted in Kremmerz, *Opera Omnia*, vol. II, 299–364 and in Kremmerz, *I Tarocchi*. He discusses erotic magic in the chapter about the Tarot card "The Lovers."

The teachings discussed in these writings explain how to induce the “lighting of a psychic fire” (*più*), based upon the complementary magnetism of the female (passive) and male (active) polarities. This fire is aroused in a man and a woman by developing a very strong mutual attraction without any possibility of releasing it through a physical relationship. The man and woman then “use” the mutual erotic “fluids” as a means to enter transcendent states. Mere carnal desire must be overcome, as it would paralyse the *active* magical “state of *mag*.” The aim seems to be the attainment of a kind of androgynous state for man and woman.²² The procedure is reminiscent of the so-called *Fedeli d'Amore* of the Middle Ages, although women seem to be more strongly involved in Kremmerz's case.

But rumors existed about a more secret sexual teaching by Kremmerz, that supposedly went far beyond what he had described in these publications. Then, at the end of the 1980's, all of a sudden a group known as *Prometeo/Agape* in Milan, under the leadership of Paolo Fogagnolo (an ex-member of the dreaded revolutionary and pro-communist Red Brigades), published the so-called “Corpus” of Kremmerz in a small and strictly limited number of copies and at a high price.²³ A veritable scandal broke loose, accusations of treason and theft, and even threats of assassination were uttered. People of opposed factions attacked each other when they met in the street, and several Kremmerzian groups were shut down. Regardless of the nature of their involvement (if any) in sexual magic, nearly all the organisations and activities related to Kremmerz were affected heavily by these events and in fact are still suffering from them today.

Before going into the details of Kremmerz's teachings, it is necessary to give some background about Kremmerz himself and the tradition to which he claimed to belong.²⁴ Giuliano Kremmerz, whose real name

²² See Kremmerz, *Opera Omnia*, vol. I, 146, 351–352, 390ff., vol. II, 330–331.

²³ Kremmerz, *Corpus philosophorum totius magiaë*. Heavily expurgated reprints of the Corpus had been around at least since 1981, when the Milan-based Association of Symbolical and Alchemical Studies Kemi published a version of it, in which many of the numbered sections were kept blank, and marked with the word “omissis.”

²⁴ Probably the most accurate biography of Kremmerz is Verniero, *Giuliano Kremmerz*. Unfortunately only its first part, which stops at around 1900, has been published. The rest, which could shed some badly needed light on the secret teachings which interest us here, has never been made public and is kept in the safe of a lawyer, a friend of A. Verniero's son. Further biographical notes are to be found in G.M.G., *Giuliano Kremmerz*. This booklet is based on notes by Marco Daffi (pseudonym of Count Libero Ricciardelli), who had studied with Kremmerz. See also Pierini, *Il Maestro*

was Ciro Formisano, was born in 1861. From his childhood onwards (he lived in Portici near Naples) he is said to have been in contact with the most important members of a pagan and strongly anti-Christian group called *Scuola di Napoli* (the School of Naples). This group supposedly devoted itself to alchemical and magical workings, but unfortunately we have no documentary proof that it actually existed. It was believed to hail back to the Prince Raimondo di Sangro di San Severo, Duke of Torremaggiore (1710–1771),²⁵ one of the most controversial figures in eighteenth-century Italy. Di Sangro was the first Grand Master of Freemasonry in Naples and a known alchemist rumoured to have tried to create a homunculus. Furthermore, he was a lover of great art and had employed the famous Antonio Corradini to create sculptures for a marvelous underground chapel, which also served him as a laboratory.²⁶ The Pope had excommunicated him. Not unfittingly he died by accidentally poisoning himself in the course of one of his alchemical experiments.

Still in Naples, the famous magician and impostor Count Cagliostro (pseudonym of Giuseppe Balsamo, 1743–1795), who was certainly in contact with di Sangro, developed his Egyptian Rites.²⁷ Tradition had it that they contained secret degrees, named *Arcana Arcanorum*, consisting of a kind of internal alchemy aimed at the formation of an indestructible “glorious body”: a subtle bodily vehicle by means of which one could achieve immortality. We do not know for certain where Cagliostro got these ideas, although Massimo Introvigne has suggested²⁸ that while travelling though Germany, Cagliostro may have come into contact with certain groups belonging to the Gold- und Rosenkreuzer and, especially,

Giuliano Kremmerz. The book contains extracts of letters by Kremmerz written to his daughter and brother in law.

²⁵ For a short overview in English, see Introvigne, “Sangro di San Severo, Raimondo di.”

²⁶ See, among others, Vagni, *Raimondo di Sangro*. In Cioffi, *La Cappella Sansevero* one can admire photos of this incredibly sumptuous chapel, which is now a public museum.

²⁷ For a short introduction in English, see Introvigne, “Cagliostro, Alessandro di”; and cf. McCalman, *The Last Alchemist* and Galligani, *Presenza di Cagliostro*. For a specialized discussion of his “magical” endeavors and “Egyptian Rites” see Gentile, *Il mistero di Cagliostro e il sistema egiziano*.

²⁸ Introvigne, *Il Cappello del Mago*, 164–165. Introvigne’s book is based on incredibly extensive research, and although it has sometimes been criticized as somewhat biased, it must be considered indispensable. It also contains a very good survey of Kremmerz and his groups up to recent times.

the Asiatic Brethren.²⁹ These groups, in turn, are said to have been influenced by the messianic movements of Jacob Frank and Sabbatai Sevi, who were supposedly in possession of secret sexual teachings. In the absence of hard evidence, such a line of transmission must remain no more than a hypothesis.

Cagliostro's legacy of the secret "Egyptian" degrees is said to have been passed on to three important members of an "Ordine Egizio," out of which came Kremmerz's *Ordine Osirideo Egiziano*.³⁰ The first was Baron Nicola Giuseppe Spedalieri (1812–1898), who was a pupil of Eliphaz Lévi and maintained a voluminous correspondence with him. The second was the lawyer Giustiniano Lebano (1832–1909), who also was in contact with Eliphaz Lévi and owned a very large library of occult works. Lebano received occultists from the whole of Europe, reputedly including personalities as famous as Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, Helena P. Blavatsky, Dr. Franz Hartmann, and, of course, Giuliano Kremmerz.³¹ Unfortunately, Lebano's papers, manuscripts, and books were lost when his wife committed suicide by burning herself and all the papers in an attempt to expiate what she regarded as her husband's magical wrongdoings. The third person, finally, was Pasquale de Servis (1837–1893), who lived in the house in Portici where the young Ciro Formisano grew up.

After his student years, Formisano briefly worked as a professor of geography and then became a journalist. Next, he seems to have lived for some years in South America, from where he returned a rich man. He immediately started publishing esoteric magazines. In 1907, he moved to Ventimiglia, then to Camogli on the Italian Riviera, and from there to Beausoleil on the Côte d'Azur, where he died in 1930.

²⁹ For the Gold und Rosenkreuzer, see McIntosh, *The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason*, and Geffarth, *Religion und arkane Hierarchie*. For the Asiatic Brethren, see Katz, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe*, ch. III.; McIntosh, o.c., ch. 10; Faivre, "Asiatic Brethren"; and the original documents in Anonymous, *Die Brüder St. Johannis des Evangelisten aus Asien in Europa*.

³⁰ For more details on this transmission see Capiferro / Guzzo, *L'Arcano degli Arcani*, Lo Monaco, *L'Ordine Osirideo Egizio*, and Maddalena, *Sairitis-Hus*. Here I leave aside the history of the purely masonic Arcana Arcanorum in the context of Memphis-Misraim, and the involvement of Martinism. For those aspects, see Labouré, *Secrets de la Franc-Maçonnerie Egyptienne*, 127–128. and Brunelli, *Rituali dei gradi simbolici della massoneria di Memphis e Misraim*, 37f.

³¹ See the historical notes in Lo Monaco, Fincati, *Arcana Arcanorum*, 7. Writings by Lebano are also included in this booklet.

Why he moved to France is unknown, but he may have had troubles with the Italian authorities because of his activity as a healer. Famous in magical circles are the stories about Kremmerz going to Monte Carlo to play roulette and win whenever he so desired.

In 1898, Kremmerz distributed a circular letter announcing the foundation of a “spiritualistic, magical fraternity” called the *Fratellanza Terapeutica Magica di Miriam* (*The Therapeutic Magic Brotherhood of Miriam*), dedicated to the study and practice of hermetic medicine.³² Patients were being cured by means of magnetic strokes and ritual prayers: by these means, the malevolent spirits, which caused all illnesses according to the fraternity’s teachings, could be driven out.³³ The Fraternity of Miriam really seems to have been an order dedicated to healing the sick and according to the stories which have come down to us, must have been quite successful. But behind the order of Miriam another order seems to have been hidden, with practices of a completely different kind: this was the *Ordine Osirideo Egiziano*.

The study of this group is made particularly difficult by the fact that the primary sources now at our disposal are not only scarce, but often of dubious authenticity as well. In fact, in most cases it is practically impossible to ascertain whether the documents one has in hand have been actually written by Kremmerz himself, or by members of his groups, or may even have been forged by adversaries in order to blacken Kremmerz’s reputation.³⁴ Moreover, even if the documents are genuine, it is not at all clear whether, and if so, to what extent, Kremmerz was personally involved in the rituals and exercises to be described here. There are those who reject the sex magical documents circulating under his name as forgeries or as the products of schismatic currents subsequent to Kremmerz and affirm that he personally limited himself to the “piromagia” or amorous magic described in his own

³² For the history of this order see Ja-Hel, *La Pietra Angolare Miriamica*, which is valuable for its reprints of internal correspondence.

³³ See Kremmerz, *Istruzioni Magiche*, in which the editor, collector and great admirer of Kremmerz, Pier Luca Pierini, has reprinted Kremmerz’s Bulletin “La Medicina Ermetica” (1899), with instructions for the members of Miriam. In the book edited by Agape, *La Magia della Myriam*, more internal instructions are given. Besides prayers, one can also find there instructions for rituals as well as the sigils of genies and angels.

³⁴ These documents used to circulate in the form of photocopies, were very hard to come by, and then only at a high price. In the meantime many of them have been reprinted in brochures, or can even be found on the Internet. It should be emphasized, however, that there is no guarantee of authenticity, and in many cases the sources have been either expurgated or manipulated.

publications and briefly summarized above.³⁵ Others maintain exactly the opposite and state that the “good” order of Miriam was only a facade for the “evil” *Ordine Egizio*, which sought to vampirically exploit the unsuspecting members of Miriam by sucking their life force and astral energy. After years of dispute among the proponents of these various perspectives, a certain consensus now seems to have emerged, according to which the three-volume *Corpus philosophorum totius magiae* published by Agape is indeed the work of Kremmerz, even though some other members of his order might have had a hand in it too. With respect to other documents, the dispute continues, particularly about some of those published under the title *Lo Sputo della Luna*³⁶ (The Spit of the Moon) by Vittorio Fincati and his publishing house Letture S...consigliate.³⁷ My description of the rituals and procedures will therefore be based mainly on the *Corpus* as edited by Agape and some other documents published by the same editor in the book *Scopi e pratiche alchemiche dell'Ordine Osirideo Egizio*.

The first volume of the *Corpus*, called “Preparation,” begins with the statutes and articles of the *Ordine Egizio*. Its sole aim, according to the statutes, is the perpetuation of the Arcane and Sacred Sciences. Members are asked to keep away from politics and profane interests and to concentrate on the magical studies and practices taught in the order. In return for doing so, they are promised health, good fortune, wealth, and honor. Those who work incessantly will even “conquer the light.” A short course on the fundamentals of magic follows, with emphasis on the importance of Love.

One of the basic principles of sex magic is described with reference to sexual union. “Whoever copulates thinks, imagines, projects the reality of his thought into the sperm.... The female blood nourishes and feeds this image projected into the sperm, because woman is subject to the male thought due to her desire and voluptuousness.”³⁸ The text also states that a woman can be influenced only “when she is hot.” If

³⁵ See e.g., Horus “Demotismo antiermetico o pandemia dissacrante?”

³⁶ Fincati, *Lo sputo della Luna*, which also describes vampiric practices with human blood. Similar skepticism can be applied to Fincati, *Ci prude il muladhara* (Our muladhara is so itchy).

³⁷ Vittorio Fincati has also published writings of other authors associated with sexual magic, such as the Chevalier Clément de Saint-Marcq (on whom see Pasi’s chapter in the present volume) or the so-called Satanist priestess Maria de Naglowska, on whom see below.

³⁸ Kremmerz, *Corpus*, I, 45.

this condition is fulfilled, a man is capable of changing her completely and may turn her into his servant as well as into an ascetic nun. If, however, “she is not burning with desire, do not try.”³⁹ Violence is not recommended, because “in nature everything is achieved by degrees.”⁴⁰ Preparation by means of long periods of fasting and absolute chastity, in body, mind and emotion, is necessary in order to become master of oneself and build up a superior force.

The second volume, called *La Sofia* (wisdom, i.e. magical knowledge) teaches how to reach the state of *mag* (the active magical state, which is needed to be able to work on the hidden planes) and discusses the possibility of consciously separating one’s “soul” from one’s body and directing it wherever one wishes. Instructions on how to prepare talismans for protection and for accomplishing these magical aims are also given. The third volume, *Del separando magico* (*Of the Magical Separated Soul*), is probably the most important one, because it gives exact instructions pertaining to the practices and rituals by which one can give birth to a “glorious body,” as vehicle for the voluntary separation of one’s “soul.” In the first, more theoretical part, the alchemical mercury is identified as sperm. This is followed by prayers and sigils for the practical work. The path to be followed consists of three degrees, plus a Great Arcanum at the end. The first degree starts with long ritual fasting, total chastity, breathing exercises, and various other preparations. Next, according to a very precise sequence determined by astrological cycles, the man must “assimilate,” that is to say, ingest his own sperm obtained through masturbation. One should not think lightly about all this: the short cycle of these rituals alone consists of no less than 40 “operations” of this type, one every nine days (nine being the number of the moon). Women can practice the ritual too: instead of sperm, they ingest their own sexual secretions, obtained by an autoerotic technique during their menstrual period. Successively there are further so-called *coobazioni* (literally: repeated distillations of a liquid, to enrich its efficacy), that is to say, ingestions of the same substances. This time, however, another substance must be added to them: in most cases, a not yet fertilized dove’s egg.⁴¹ In the second degree, the male and female secretions are mixed, and the mixture is ingested together

³⁹ Kremmerz, *Corpus*, I, 125.

⁴⁰ Kremmerz, *Corpus*, I, 125.

⁴¹ See the article of Ilario Brandano (pseudonym of a longstanding Kremmerzian practitioner), “Das alchemistische Geheimnis in der Schule von Giuliano Kremmerz.”

with the egg. For the third degree, this mixture must be “cooked” by the couple in three “rounds,” by way of various operations of sexual magic in which always both partners are involved. The final phase—the Great Arcanum—consists of five “retreats in the dark,”⁴² each one lasting seven days, during which the *coobazioni* of the male respectively the female secretions are continued separately. All these degrees are strictly subject to precise astrological laws and consist of several cycles; as a result, they require a lot of time to complete.

What is the aim of all these instructions? Certainly not a refinement of sexual pleasures, a subjugation of women, kinky sex games, or sexual liberation. By means of a prolonged regimen of fasting, breathing exercises, prolonged chastity, meditation, and years of general magical preparation, a superior magical force is to be developed: a force so strong that it should be capable of conquering everything, even physical death. Central to the instructions is the “practice of separation.” This is an operation of “internal alchemy” (the body being the laboratory, that contains all the substances and instruments needed for the Great Work), which requires a perfect knowledge of one’s own body and its various hidden planes. During this operation, the solar spiritual part of man is slowly separated from his physiological, astral, and mental components. At the same time, another “body” must be built: the so-called “glorious body” as a new vehicle that will carry the separated part corresponding to the spiritual Self of the magus. Once this Self is able to make use of this new vehicle, it no longer needs the physical body, and hence death is of no importance to it. The Self with its glorious body will survive in another sphere of reality, as long as the internal power of the Self is strong enough to resist the forces of dissolution. Thus the goal of the Arcana Arcanorum is quite clear: it is to become immortal and godlike.

These practices are already provocative enough, but the so-called “Magia Avatarica” (*Magic of the Avatars*) has evoked even more protest and feelings of disgust. What does it consist of? In volume II of the *Corpus*, the question is raised of whether there is any scientific and experimental proof for the belief that the human soul is actually independent from the physical body and therefore potentially immortal.⁴³

⁴² More details in Agape, *Scopi e pratiche alchemiche*, 195–196. This volume also reveals the detailed practices of the three degrees, 165–166.

⁴³ Kremmerz, *Corpus*, II, 51–52.

The answer is in the affirmative and boldly states that this proof cannot be refuted by anyone. It is to be found in what is called *Magia Avatarica*:

This *Magia Avatarica* . . . consists of a mysterious chemistry by which in a living and intelligent body the soul is separated, and inserted definitely or temporarily into another body, from which the [original] soul has been removed beforehand, or in the exchange of the soul of a living body by the soul of a genius, a hero or a deity (numen).⁴⁴

In other words, a master is supposedly capable of driving out the soul from a young and healthy body and replacing it with his own. Whenever a new body is needed, one can repeat the procedure and hence live “eternally.”

The second part of this definition of the avataric method is perhaps even more startling. From the available documents, it seems clear that every aspirant to the Order’s higher degrees has to undergo a blood pact, sealed by one’s semen or menstrual blood, which binds him or her indissolubly to a spirit or deity (numen) that henceforth represents one’s personal “gate” to the “otherworld.” Apparently, in the course of the initiations this numen gradually takes total control over the body of the aspirant, whose “old” soul must simultaneously be driven out. This is why all members of the Order are known by the name of their numen: for example, Kremmerz—or rather Kremm-Erz—is not meant to be a normal pseudonym, but the name of the numen which had taken the place of the soul of the ordinary person formerly called *Ciro Formisano*.

This is supposedly also the secret behind the “marriages” of human beings and elemental beings, such as undines, described in the famous *Comte de Gabalis* by the Abbé de Montfaucon de Villars. “Possession” by a numen is furthermore adduced as explanation of the magical powers attributed to the members of the Order. The practices are said to go back to Assyrian/Babylonian magical rituals for reviving the dead. An author writing under the pseudonym of Alexandre de Dánann has dedicated an entire book to attacking these practices and providing them with a historical as well as esoteric background.⁴⁵

Morally disgusting as this practice may appear to some, it could be argued that Christian mysticism, with its concept of dissolving one’s

⁴⁴ Kremmerz, *Corpus*, II, 52–53.

⁴⁵ De Dánann, *Mémoire du sang*

own Ego and letting Christ take its place, is based on a similar principle. Likewise, a famous mystical instruction, such as that of letting the “old Adam” die so that the “new Adam” can live, suggests that the old Ego has to vanish and a “new spirit” takes over. Of course, the question remains *which* “spirit” that is: while Christians regard Jesus Christ as God, for a believer in Kremmerz’s magical system at least some of the numina may appear as gods as well. Incredible though it might seem at first sight, one can therefore understand why among the various organisations deriving from Kremmerz or his groups, some consider themselves to be genuinely Christian. One such group, calling itself *Ordine Essenico Occidentale* (Essenian Occidental Order) was led by Erim (pseudonym of Count Umberto Amedeo Alberti di Catenaia, 1879–1938), whose pupil Paolo M. Virio (pseudonym of Paolo Marchetti, 1910–1969) is equally well-known for his abundant—although veiled—literary production.⁴⁶ In these Christian Kremmerzian circles, however, sexual magic is allowed only between married couples, of which both partners must be practising Christians and have previously received a very serious Christian education. It is maintained that otherwise only phantasms will be created, which then become inhabited by evil demons. Still, the goal remains the same: the creation of a body of light that is said to grant immortality.

It was Kremmerz himself who took the initiative to found several so-called Academies in various Italian towns (Rome, Florence, Bari). After his death, they soon went their own way, with all the ego-clashes, jealousies, and dogmatic changes known from other similar instances. Groups inspired by Kremmerz’s teachings have survived to the present day, in spite of the turmoil unleashed by the publication of the *Corpus* and other secret materials. The precise instructions, however, are different with almost every organization.⁴⁷ Some of them completely reject sexual magical teachings and concentrate on healing in the tradition of the Order of Miriam. Even some celebrities have joined Kremmerz’ organisations. Thus in the Florence Academy one could find Nino Rota, who composed the music for nearly all of the movies by Federico Fellini, but also for the famous mafia movie *The Godfather* and for Franco

⁴⁶ See Paolo Virio, *Esoterismo cristiano e amore*, Luciana Virio, *Paolo M. Virio. Esempio di vita* and Claudio Lanzi “Paolo e Luciana Virio,” which is the introduction to Paolo e Luciana Virio, *Le lettere e la vita*.

⁴⁷ The instructions used here and taken from the published *Corpus*, seem to come from the C.E.U.R. Group in Rome.

Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*. Vinci Verginelli, who assembled one of the most beautiful collections of illuminated alchemical manuscripts in the world⁴⁸ and was one of the last direct pupils of Kremmerz, headed the Academy of Rome. Unfortunately he burned all his correspondence with Kremmerz before his death in 1987.

The rituals and practices of the *Ordine Osirideo Egizio* are also present in France. For example there is an *Ordre Souverain Interne et Hermétique d'Atoum* (Sovereign Internal and Hermetic Order of Atoum, OSIHA), which has translated many manuscripts into French.⁴⁹ One of its leading members is Count Jean-Pierre Giudicelli de Cressac Bachelerie, who has disclosed much on the secret background of Italian and French orders in his book *Pour la Rose Rouge et la Croix d'Or*. He combines Kremmerz's teachings with Taoist alchemy. At the end of his book,⁵⁰ interestingly enough, the famous scholar of Taoism Cathérine Despeux gives a short overview of Taoist alchemy. This includes a description of a female path to salvation called the "Decapitation of the Red Dragon," by means of which the menstrual cycle must be stopped as a precondition for the final goal. Strangely, other countries have not yet been touched by the teachings of Kremmerz, although the relevant materials have been available for nearly twenty years now.

Julius Evola and the UR Group

The Italian Julius Evola (1898–1974) had many faces. In the English-speaking world he is quite well known as a Traditionalist and author on esoteric subjects and especially as a political writer with fascist and racist leanings. But he was also a philosopher in the tradition of Novalis, Max Stirner, and Nietzsche and a founder of Italian Dadaism whose paintings are still exhibited in major museums of modern art. Still less known is his—admittedly highly individualistic—involvement in the history of Comparative Religion. Through his writings and translations, he was instrumental in making Tantrism and Zen Buddhism known in Italy; he sought to spread his own interpretation of the original teachings of Buddhism; he published two translations of

⁴⁸ See Verginelli, *Bibliotheca Hermetica*.

⁴⁹ The order consists of three classes: black, white and red. The translations have appeared under the imprint of Isolément Silence, Cercles Atoum, in A4 mimeographed manuscripts.

⁵⁰ Giudicelli de Cressac Bachelerie, *Pour la Rose Rouge*, 187–190.

the *Tao Te Ching* into Italian (not from the original Chinese, however); and for longer or shorter periods of time, he was in contact with the likes of Mircea Eliade, Giuseppe Tucci, Sir John Woodroffe, Raffaele Pettazzoni, and Karoly Kerényi.⁵¹

But most relevant in the present context is Evola as a “metaphysician of sex.” To understand his vision of sexuality, or rather of eros and sexual magic, we must start with the Platonic myth of the androgyne as told in Plato’s *Symposium*.⁵² According to this myth, there originally existed three human sexes: males, females, and hermaphrodites. When they attempted to attack the gods, Zeus decided to cut them into two parts. Ever since, each separated half longs to be reunited with its counterpart: those who originally belonged to a male are attracted to other men, those who belonged to a female are attracted to other females, and those who belonged to a hermaphrodite are attracted to the other sex.

In discussing this myth in his book *Metafisica del Sesso* (*The Metaphysics of Sex*),⁵³ Evola makes clear right away that for him sexual desire goes far beyond the level of mere biology. He sees it as a force of attraction that ultimately aims at the metaphysical and primordial unity of man and cosmos. For him, sexuality is therefore inextricably bound up with a profoundly religious drive.⁵⁴ Only this unity can give true meaning to human life and quench man’s deep metaphysical thirst. For Evola, it is simply not permissible to speak of real freedom, real knowledge, and real power before having achieved this unity.

Here is also the point of contact between Evola’s sexual and cosmological theories. Basic to his metaphysical cosmology as well is the idea of a primordial unity which has divided itself into two complementary “parts,” analogous to the Taoist theory of Yin and Yang deriving from the one Tao. Likewise, according to Evola, Aristotle distinguished between the *nous* or active spiritual power, and *physis* or the passive matrix. From that perspective, “male” (activity, spirit) and “female” (passivity, life) are two transcendental and primordial categories, and

⁵¹ On this side of Evola, see Haki, “Evola, Julius.”

⁵² Plato, *Symposium* 189–193d (speech of Aristophanes).

⁵³ Evola, *Metafisica del Sesso*, 42–45.

⁵⁴ It may be pointed out here that this yearning for a transcendental primordial unity characterizes all of Evola’s thinking, from his dadaistic pictures and poems, to his philosophy, his magic, and even his politics and racial theories.

the differentiation into male and female here on earth is but a necessary and inevitable reflection of this.

Since sexuality is therefore immediately linked to a transcendent cosmological order, it provides a direct pathway to this longed-for transcendent realm. And more than that: for Evola, it is actually the only way in which mankind may still ascend to transcendence in the present “Iron Age” or kali-yuga. Only by using sexuality’s primordial energy, he says, is it still possible to return to the original unity of cosmos and man. The path of sexuality is therefore the religious way towards salvation *par excellence*. It is for this reason that Evola fought against the banalization of sexuality through its commercialization in the popular media, pornography, and the like. If nudity and “free sex” is everywhere, woman loses her power of fascination over man and the erotic tension vanishes; but precisely this tension is the only means by which man—and man alone: woman being “earthbound” in Evola’s Traditionalist vision—can be propelled into transcendence. Hence Evola feared that the trend towards “sexual liberation” would end up barring even this last way of access to “heaven”: only a spiritual elite fully conscious of what was at stake was permitted to use sexuality freely. It may be noted here that, prior to being paralyzed in 1945, Evola himself led a “loose” life sexually, including affairs with the foremost early Italian feminist thinker Sibilla Aleramo (pseudonym for Rina Faccio, 1876–1960: a leading member of the Italian Communist Party and a successful author) and probably also with Maria de Naglowska (see below).⁵⁵

Between 1927 and 1929, Evola was the leader of a highly intriguing magical group bearing the name of UR,⁵⁶ which counted among its members not only persons with purely esoteric interests, but also poets such as Arturo Onofri and Girolamo Comi, and the “father of psychoanalysis in Italy,” Emilio Servadio.⁵⁷ It is not fully known, however, which members participated in the actual ritual workings of UR and which ones contributed only to its theoretical background. Nor do

⁵⁵ See Hansen (ps. Hans Thomas Hakl), “Julius Evola und der Sexus.”

⁵⁶ For historical data of the UR Group see Del Ponte, *Evola e il magico* “Gruppo di UR.” In English, see Del Ponte, “Julius Evola and the UR Group.” The word *Ur* is linked to fire; according to Kremmerz the word *pir* is derived from it, and means the transforming alchemical fire (Kremmerz, *Corpus* III, 33).

⁵⁷ Anonymity was strictly enforced in the group, and while the persons here mentioned are now known to have been members, the real identity of some others remains unknown.

we know whether the sexual magic described in the sources was really practised as part of the group's work. Personally, the present author doubts it, although certain specific members most probably had some experience in this domain.

One member is of particular importance for us here: Ercole Quadrelli, whose pseudonym of Abraxa appears as the author of the only two pieces on sexual magic to be published in the collected UR essays,⁵⁸ although he probably just furnished the contents, which were then reformulated and written down by Evola.⁵⁹ Quadrelli had been a member of a Kremmerzian Academy and had brought his knowledge to UR. Both the essays on sexual magic are therefore clearly influenced by Kremmerz's teachings. It was Evola himself who pointed this out in 1958, in the chapter on the Brotherhood of Miriam in his *Metafisica del Sesso*. Evola himself had never been a member of any Kremmerzian organisation.⁶⁰

What, then, is the teaching found in these two essays that must be attributed to Abraxa and only partly to Evola?⁶¹ In the first piece, two operations are described, the first of which cannot be properly called sex magic: the magus brings a young girl into an altered state of consciousness in which she is to explore the so-called astral world and report what she sees. The second operation, however, uses love as an element for "igniting" special fluidic forces.⁶² It is explicitly love and not sexual desire: intended here is "love" in the sense of something very subtle and vast, enveloping the whole of the other person without a strong physiological-sexual polarisation. It is the soul, the essence, which must be desired, not the body. Man and woman sit in front of each other

⁵⁸ These essays came from group members and were published in monthly magazines from 1927–1929 under the name of Ur, and in 1929 under the name of Krur. In the 1950's, Evola revised the contents and brought them out in three volumes under the title Gruppo di Ur, *Introduzione alla magia quale scienza dell'Io*. In 1971, he revised them a second time.

⁵⁹ Del Ponte, *Evola e il magico* "Gruppo di UR," 59.

⁶⁰ It is rumored that he was not willing to wait for years until reaching the top of the order but wanted to enter immediately at a very high level, which was not permitted. But there also exist important dogmatic differences between UR and Kremmerz's philosophy.

⁶¹ The first essay has been translated into English under the title "Magical Operations with 'Two Vessels' – Reduplication," in Evola & the UR Group, *Introduction to Magic*. This book comprises the contributions of the first volume of *Introduzione alla Magia*. The second essay was included in the second volume and is titled "Magia dei congiungimenti"; it has not yet been translated into English.

⁶² Naturally, this recalls Kremmerz's "piromagia."

without moving. Loving and longing for each other without movement or contact, they reach out to each other continuously and steadily, until, little by little, they reach a state of exaltation or vertigo, described as so intensive that it cannot be imagined by “ordinary” people. Abraxa describes it as follows: “You will have a sense of effective *amalgamation*, a feeling of the other in your whole body, not through contact but in a subtle embrace that is felt there in every point and penetrates you *like an intoxication that possesses the blood of your blood.*”⁶³

The goal is not this state of exaltation itself, but the point of magical equilibrium at which the ignited fluid can be “projected” into the goal one wishes to achieve. A woman can abandon herself to the state of exaltation, but the man, as the “magician,” must find a balance between resisting and letting go—somewhat like windsurfing on a huge wave. His exaltation must be “conducted” by a transcendent cold, crystalline principle which the magus has invoked and identified with beforehand, and which must not diminish.

Clear warnings are given about the risks of the operation: if the magus cannot resist, he may “drown” in this wave of fluidic energy. If he is lucky, in such a case he will merely experience a mystical state of psychic voluptuousness of the kind we know from certain religious mystics. But he may also fall victim to a “sexual possession,” of which there is little chance of recovery: in such a case, the magus will be continuously assaulted by sexual desires that cannot possibly be satisfied, leading to very severe psychical disturbances and eventually to sexual crimes or suicide.

The second essay by Abraxa and Evola describes a magical practice in which the couple engages in full sexual union. A precondition is that the operation without physical contact, described in the first essay, has been mastered to perfection: otherwise, the male will not have the spiritual power necessary to resist dissolution. As we know from the traditional cosmology already outlined, woman is identified with the principle of Life. The teaching of UR now says that during the sexual embrace this principle of Life, representing the very essence of woman, can manifest itself and appear in its “naked,” that is to say its original transcendent form. We normally believe that we *possess* life, but the doctrine of UR affirms just the contrary: it is Life which possesses us. As Abraxa explains: “Life simply drifts away from you just as from a

⁶³ Julius Evola and the UR Group, *Introduction to Magic*, 223.

withered tree to pass on to other beings, other ephemeral lights in the same game. Like a deadly torch the living pass Life on from one to the other by consuming themselves in the cycle of animal generation.”⁶⁴ Since the magus does not want to die but strives for immortality, his goal is to accumulate within himself a completely unshakeable spiritual Force (referred to in alchemical language as “our” iron or steel), capable of conquering everything and even, so to speak, of “taking possession” of Life itself: not the life of some individual being, but Life as the overarching principle that stands above and comprises all individual lives.

When this Life now starts to manifest during the embrace—metaphorically speaking, of course—the magus must “surprise” her (i.e. Life) with lightning velocity. The more intense the fluidic vertigo created by the erotic energy, the more likely it is that Life herself will appear; hence it is necessary to heighten and intensify the fluidic vortex to its very extreme. At the same time, however, the magus must firmly resist the temptation of letting go: he must maintain a state of cold observation and react quickly, for he must be faster than Life. The Goddess of Life becomes the Goddess of Death when she turns around, and hence the magus must spiritually withstand the tremendous fear of death that he will feel when he faces naked Life. And he must also resist physiologically, that is to say, he must not reach orgasm. How to achieve all this only experience can teach. If the magus is not up to his task, he may die from heart failure at being confronted with the horribly laughing face of Life/Death. He may also become insane or become the victim of a terrible condition of sexual possession, which can be ended only by suicide.

It is hard to imagine a sexual magic more explicit or ambitious than the one taught by the UR group (the same could be said for their other magical techniques as well). Interestingly, however, no secondary literature as yet exists about this very demanding set of teachings.

Maria de Naglowska and the Confrérie de la Flèche d’Or

Maria de Naglowska (1883–1936), already mentioned above with reference to Evola, was born in St. Petersburg as a daughter of the province

⁶⁴ Gruppo di Ur, *Introduzione alla Magia*, vol. II, 330.

governor of Kazan.⁶⁵ Her father was poisoned by a nihilist when she was still very young, and at the age of twelve her mother died from an illness, leaving her an orphan. She was raised and educated in Smolna, a very exclusive private and aristocratic institute in her home town. She also took classes in pedagogy at the Institute of the Order of Saint Catherine. According to René Thimmy (pseudonym Maurice Magre),⁶⁶ her mediumistic gifts were noted very early. Legend has it that already at a very early age she came in contact with Rasputin and/or the Khlisty sect, known for its sexual rites.⁶⁷

She fell in love with the violinist Moïse Hopenko and wanted to marry him. This resulted in a rift between her and her family, who rejected him because he was Jewish and did not belong to the nobility. The two lovers left Russia and settled first in Berlin, then in Geneva, where they married and had three children. Her husband, an ardent Zionist, wanted to settle in Palestine, but Maria did not want to follow him. So he left her and the children around 1910 and became head of the Ron Shulamit Conservatory in Jaffa. Maria survived by teaching in private schools in Geneva, publishing a book on French grammar and another one on education, and earning an additional income as a translator while she also wrote poems.⁶⁸ Somehow she followed study courses in several faculties at the University of Geneva and may even have obtained a diploma of some kind.⁶⁹ She also worked as a journalist, but due to her radical political ideas ended up in prison. After being released, she left Geneva for Berne and Basel but was finally expelled from Switzerland and found refuge in Rome around 1920 where she worked as journalist for the newspaper *L'Italia* until 1926. There she cultivated her esoteric interests and met Julius Evola, with

⁶⁵ There are several versions about her life, but the best informed and most realistic source of information seems to be her pupil Marc Pluquet, on whose booklet *La Sophiale* I am relying here. Having lived in his young years among anarchists and occultists in Paris, when Pluquet met Nagłowska he immediately fell under her spell, and later always referred to her as his spiritual mother. After her death, Pluquet became a collaborator of the famous architect Le Corbusier. He was also instrumental in republishing some of Nagłowska's works in the 1970's. A concise biography of Nagłowska—but likewise mostly based on Pluquet—can be found in Introvigne, *Indagine sul satanismo*, 247–249.

⁶⁶ Thimmy, *La Magie à Paris*, 79.

⁶⁷ Cf. Grass, *Die russischen Sekten*, Vol. 1, “Die Gottesleute oder Chlūsten,” 434–484.

⁶⁸ See the list of her publications on the first three pages of De Nagłowska, *Le Rite Sacré de l'Amour Magique*.

⁶⁹ Introvigne, *Indagine sul satanismo*, 246.

whom she probably had a love affair. Next she spent some time with her son Alexandre in Alexandria, where she also worked as a journalist and became a member of the Theosophical Society. But eventually she went back to Rome, and from there moved on to Paris where she arrived in 1929.

Unable to get a work permit and living in poverty in a small hotel room in Montparnasse, De Naglowska became well known as a teacher of Satanism (which will be discussed later on) and sexual magic in the artistic and occultist circles of that area, whence her nickname “La Sophiale de Montparnasse.” Among her best known followers were the hermetic poet Claude d’Ygé (or Igée, pseudonyms of Claude Lablatinière) and the occult philosopher Jean Carteret. In cafés—first La Rotonde, then La Coupole, the “café des occultistes”, but also in Le Dôme—she daily gathered a circle of admirers around her, talking about her ideas and answering questions in the many languages she knew. In the American Hotel, 15 rue Bréa, she daily received disciples or important guests. And every Wednesday she gave a public lecture in the Studio Raspail, 36 rue Vavin, where some thirty to forty persons gathered to listen to her. After that lecture, a much smaller group of followers would retire to another room for sexual ritual work (on which more below). Surprisingly perhaps, she also visited the Roman Catholic Church Notre-Dame des Champs for a period of contemplation every afternoon. In 1932, Maria de Naglowska founded the *Confrérie de la Flèche d’Or* (Fraternity of the Golden Arrow),⁷⁰ but she was also involved in the *Groupe des Polaires*, which had an arithmetic oracle at its basis.⁷¹

From October 15, 1930 until December 15, 1933, De Naglowska published a journal, *La Flèche*: eighteen issues in all, the first of which contained an article written by Julius Evola.⁷² Indeed, according to René Thimmy,⁷³ if she had any money at all—she did not ask fees from her

⁷⁰ Alexandrian, *Storia della Filosofia Occulta*, 538.

⁷¹ See her article “Les Polaires” in *La Flèche* 13 (15 June 1932), p. 3.

⁷² It appeared in the first number (p. 3, 4) and treated the theme of “Occidentalism.” Interestingly, Naglowska added a few lines after this article, indicating that the authors printed further on in her magazine were not disciples of her, thus implying that Evola was one. She also published a short piece (“Le message de l’étoile polaire”) in Evola’s and the Group of Ur’s magazine UR I, no. 11–12 (November–December, 1927), 328, translated into English in Julius Evola and the UR Group, *Introduction to Magic*, 334. Moreover she translated Evola’s dadaistic poem “La parole obscure du paysage intérieur” into French (the Italian original has disappeared).

⁷³ Thimmy, *La Magie à Paris*, 75 (interview with Naglowska). Thimmy/Magre was

disciples⁷⁴—she invested it in her journal and the books she published. His description of Maria de Naglowska, whom for unknown reasons he disguises under the name Vera de Petrouchka, is worth repeating here, not least because it is so different from popular concepts of a “Satanist”:

Somehow an atmosphere of purity, of chastity emanated from this small and quiet woman, who sat there modestly, speaking little and gesticulating even less and whose way of life seemed to be more or less ascetic. Her ordinary meals consisted of milk coffees and croissants or rolls. She practically never drank alcohol and her sole vice were some cigarettes.⁷⁵

Her only noteworthy physiognomical characteristic were her blue eyes “blue and cold like a glacier or rather like the blades of daggers...lightened by a fire from within.” Timmy adds that, although he may not believe in her doctrines, he has full confidence in her sincerity and unselfishness. An expert on the occult movements of his time, Pierre Geyraud (pseudonym of Abbé Guyader) uses very much the same words in his book *Les petites églises de Paris*: “I look at this woman sitting on her bed. A surprising chastity emanates from her personality. One feels that she is above sensuality, above the strange carnal rites she advocates in public... And she is also above any greed for money.”⁷⁶ In 1936—probably in the wake of a serious accident of one of her followers during the rite of hanging, which she practised in the higher degrees, and which will be described below—she left Paris very suddenly, not even designating a successor in her Confrérie. Pluquet informs us that she went to Zürich to live with her daughter Marie. There she died in her bed on April 17, 1936.

To understand her sexual teachings and practices, something must first be said about De Naglowska’s special brand of “Satanism.” In her mind, God is Life and Life is God. But Life can generate the world only by means of a dialectical process in which Life is constantly con-

also involved with the *Groupe des Polaires* and wrote a very credulous introduction to their basic text book Bhotiva, *Asia Mysteriosa*.

⁷⁴ Laurent, *Les sociétés secrètes érotiques*, 23.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Geyraud, *Les petites églises de Paris*, 142–153. Timmy’s account was published in 1934 and Geyraud’s only in 1937, and one gets the impression that Geyraud “used” various passages from Timmy. His description of De Naglowska’s life is more or less identical, and so are many other details. This naturally does not exclude that he actually met De Naglowska, who was easily approached by journalists, complete strangers or...catholic priests.

fronted with the negation of Life. This negation is Reason, and Reason is associated by De Naglowska with Satan, who likewise constantly fights God. But since God actually needs negation—Satan—as his dialectical counterpart in order to create the world, initiates who want to be part of the dialectic process have to serve Satan before they can serve God. According to De Naglowska, it was also out of the same dialectic between God and Satan that the Son, manifested in Christ, was born.⁷⁷

De Naglowska compared the path taken by the initiates in her order with the ascent of a symbolic mountain,⁷⁸ which must be climbed under the guidance of Satan. Once they have reached the summit, they will be hanged, with their body falling down from the mountain, but they have to blindly trust Satan's promise that they will survive the ordeal. Then, according to De Naglowska, in the exact moment of their fall, their religious service ceases to be satanic and becomes divine; and thus, after having served Satan they start serving God and understand that both these services are but one.

While ascending the mountain, the initiates will undergo several temptations. De Naglowska points out that these come from God, not Satan. In the course of these temptations, they are also confronted with the female sex, whose task is to help them to achieve victory over themselves and their fears. Woman can do this through a certain attitude towards man and through special sexual rites, which are described by De Naglowska in her books.

Maria de Naglowska is best known for her publication of Paschal Beverly Randolph's book *Magia Sexualis*. Consequently, and since only very few people know about her other books, she is often regarded as merely a disciple of Randolph. But she definitely was not. First of all, they lived and worked in different centuries, and it is completely unknown how and through which intermediary (although s/he was probably French) De Naglowska became acquainted with Randolph's teaching. She herself writes only that she acquired a Randolph manuscript in Paris in April, 1931, and that *Magia Sexualis* is based on a collection of his difficult-to-read handwritten notes.⁷⁹ Evola seems to believe, however, that De Naglowska manipulated the material and inserted ideas

⁷⁷ De Naglowska, *Lumière du Sexe*, 19–39.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 37–38.

⁷⁹ Naglowska, "Magia Sexualis" et "La Flèche," *La Flèche* 7 (15 November 1931), 3.

of her own.⁸⁰ Saran Alexandrian, who has done extensive research on her, considers it probable that she “has entirely reworked” Randolph’s teaching, “adding a personal accent,” but—as he underlines—without deforming Randolph’s magical lore. Moreover, according to him, “her translation is certainly superior to the original, which she gave life to and put into order.”⁸¹ And De Nagłowska herself declared that, “The light I am illuminated by is not the one Randolph was illuminated by”: she reproaches him for his “Hindu idolatry” and his mistaken cosmology.⁸² Last but not least, Maria de Nagłowska’s sexual rites were, as we have seen, part of what she regarded as a Satanist religion, and this is not the case with Randolph.

Her first book after *Magia Sexualis* was a novel and shows much better what she was really after. It is called *Le rite sacré de l’amour magique* (*The Sacred Rite of Magical Love*). Its subtitle is “Aveu” (Confession), and it probably contains some autobiographical elements. The novel tells the story of a young lady, Xenophonta, who lives in a castle in the Caucasus Mountains and has been promised to Satan, referred to as a “Master of the Past.” One day, she is raped by a violent Cossack named Micha who, however, is finally saved by her purity. Here already we encounter one of De Nagłowska’s central esoteric ideas: a genuinely pure woman who has dedicated herself to a higher Force (Satan) and does not want anything for herself can save even the most violent man and turn him into a sage. And she can do this by satisfying his carnal desires. In fact, not Micha but Xenophonta was guilty of the rape: she had tempted him by her secretive behaviour, and the only way for her to change Micha was by opening up to him completely. De Nagłowska also retells the story of Adam eating from the apple—a sexual metaphor—that brought death to mankind: “And in order not to obey anymore to the voice of the cave of woman [i.e., her sexual attractiveness] he [Adam] put a seal onto it: the first garment [i.e. the fig leaf]. He spoke to Eve: ‘You will hide yourself from me, because you are the temptation.’”⁸³ The novel has an appendix about De Nagłowska’s doctrine of the

⁸⁰ Evola “Prefazione,” 8, 9. Evola was the Italian translator of *Magia Sexualis*.

⁸¹ Alexandrian, “Maria de Nagłowska et le satanisme féminin,” 190, 191.

⁸² De Nagłowska, “Satanisme masculin, satanisme féminin,” *La Flèche* no. 16, 20–21.

⁸³ De Nagłowska, *Le rite sacré de l’amour magique*, 32. A more detailed discussion of this novel specially in regard to the mysterious cosmic AUM clock described therein can be found in Fincati “Postfazione” in his Italian translation of this novel. Fincati has also written an informative preface to his Italian translation of De Nagłowska, *Iniziazione satanica all’amore magico*, 4–22.

three ages of mankind: the age of the father (represented by Judaism), the age of the son (exemplified by Christ), and the coming age of the Mother: the age of salvation through female sexuality, of which she believed to be the herald.

In her second and third book on sexuality, *La lumière du sexe* (*The Light of Sex*) and *Le Mystère de la pendaison* (*The Mystery of Hanging*), she explains the aim of her religion: it consists in redeeming the Spirit of Evil not by fighting him, but by purifying and reconciling him through rites and sexuality. That is the task to which the “Priestesses of Love” dedicate themselves. They must be “virgins” in the special sense of not knowing normal sexual pleasure:

... pleasure belongs to the Sun and is the characteristic of the Sun, whereas the mysterious mountain of woman [De Naglowska probably refers to the Mons Veneris] is essentially lunar and, like the moon, must remain cold and mute. In the act of love the female vibrations must procure her inner happiness and not a local pleasure, because pleasure belongs to man and not to woman. Human generations start to decline when men deviate from this truth, teaching women what they should never know: local pleasure. Women rapidly grow old when they partake of this forbidden fruit, and the blood of their children impoverishes.⁸⁴

Therefore the priestess of love must feel a true vocation of giving herself to every man with the same physical ardour. She need not love him or even like him, but must see and joyfully adore in him the Perfect Man of future eras. Through her purity and spirituality, woman must educate man, releasing him from all his perversities and making him stronger, healthier, and morally just. If she succeeds in this, she renders a service to the whole of mankind.

It appears that Maria de Naglowska actually put this in practice during the rites of her *Confrérie*, in at least one of which her own body served as the altar. Several of these rites are known and have even been described by outsiders. They were all designed to impress the onlookers by their splendor, ceremonial setting (including music), and candor. Timmy writes, however, that when he was present at such an occasion, the atmosphere among the audience was anything but serious. People there were drinking champagne, and their minds were busy with “profane—just too profane” thoughts.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ De Naglowska, *Le Mystère de la pendaison*, 84.

⁸⁵ Timmy, *La Magie à Paris*, 87.

One example was the Rite of the Compasses. A man or woman stood upright, and a naked priestess lay down at his or her feet at a right angle so that they looked like an open pair of compasses. The members of the group of onlookers took each other's hands in order to form a magical chain. By means of group concentration, the members of this chain then had to generate as much energy as possible. Next, the priestess "drew" that energy towards herself, reinforcing it with the energy generated between her and her standing partner. By focusing it, a fireball of energy was supposed to appear in her hands.⁸⁶ In this rite, the energy was generated only by the configuration and concentration of the participants, apparently without the help of sexual intercourse.

The most famous rite, however, was the Rite of Hanging,⁸⁷ by which a second-degree member, a so called *Chasseur Affranchi* (Liberated Hunter), became a *Guerrier Invincible* (Invincible Warrior).⁸⁸ To prepare for this rite, a man first had to conquer the fear associated with it, and for this he had three, seven, or at the utmost twelve years time. If he still did not want to undergo the initiation at that point, he had to leave the order, and a special rite had to be performed.⁸⁹ In a symbolical act, "his lamp" in the Temple was ceremoniously extinguished, and the priestess whose task it had been to assist him during the period of preparation was henceforth considered a "widow." As punishment for her failure to "purify" him and give him strength and confidence, she was to be taken to the so-called Pavilion of Widows, which she would be allowed to leave only in the darkest hours of night, without moonlight. All this remained theoretical, as no such pavilion existed, and it seems that the *Confrérie* did not even have a temple of its own. Still, these descriptions show the spirit of the underlying philosophy.

The Rite of Hanging itself was open only to the holders of the highest degrees, since the energy generated thereby was considered extremely dangerous for the non-initiated. It consisted of a ritual hanging, with the legs of the hanged man (apparently the initiation was open only to males) actually dangling in the air. Just before the ceremony would lead to a fatal end, the rope was cut and the man was put down on

⁸⁶ See *ibid.*, 85–86, for a description of the rite.

⁸⁷ De Nagłowska, *Le Mystère de la pendaison*, 103–121.

⁸⁸ The first degree was called *Balayeur de la Cour* (Sweeper of the Court), because the holders of this degree were busy sweeping away their deficiencies.

⁸⁹ It is very improbable that any such ceremony ever took place, especially in view of the fact that Maria de Nagłowska had lived in Paris for only six years.

a bed. “His” priestess would lie down next to him, and after he had recovered, ritual intercourse would take place. After this initiation the man had become an “Invincible Warrior,” because he could no longer be tempted by a woman: during his hanging, he had experienced such an extreme lust⁹⁰ and such incredible bliss that everything else would have become shallow. According to the doctrine, Satan himself caused this bliss by entering from above into the body of the candidate at the moment he lost his foothold and fell down. Clearly, we are dealing with an extreme form of a death-and-rebirth initiation: one had to die in this profane world to be reborn in another one. The candidate was to be literally confronted with the total and eternal void, which would inevitably change his perspective forever.

Maria de Naglowska regarded her so-called *Messe d’Or* (Golden Mass) as the most important rite of all. During it, seven male officials were to make love to three priestesses, in a beautiful ceremonial setting and in public. The requirement, however, for all of them was to be totally purified of vanity and personal appetites. This rite was never actually performed and only a preliminary rite preparing for the Golden Mass is on record.

Another point in De Naglowska’s doctrine that well illustrates her intentions is raised in her article “Les mystères cardinaux et la Messe d’Or,” where she writes that the highest sacrament of the union between man and woman is not marriage but divorce. She means a divorce out of love, not out of hatred or disappointment. Its aim is occult perfection. Such a divorce will only be possible when man in the coming era will be redeemed from his “primordial instinct” by a successful marriage. “Stronger than before, because more upright and better centered in himself,” man will voluntarily renounce the pleasure he has known, and leave his home as a mystical hero to pursue higher goals.

We do not know whether Maria de Naglowska created all her doctrines and rites entirely by herself, or was influenced by other sources. One of them could have been (Sar) Joséph(in) Péladan (1859–1918), whose erotic magic may have influenced her.⁹¹ B. Anel-Kham (pseudonym of Henri Meslin, died 1948 and member of the *Groupe des Polaires*)

⁹⁰ It appears that in our own time, hundreds of deaths by accident occur all over the world each year, as a result of various forms of sexually-orientated strangulation techniques.

⁹¹ Cf. the discussion of Péladan’s ideas on eroticism in Bertholet, *La pensée et les secrets du Sâr Joséphin Péladan*, vol. II, “La science de l’Amour,” 11–101.

sees in De Naglowska's Confrérie a revival of the *Cénacle d'Astarté*, a French occult group founded around 1920 by what he calls "adepts of the Divine Woman, third hypostasis of the manifested Absolute".⁹² Most probably she was also in direct contact with Petr Kohout (pen name: Pierre de Lasenic), who lived in Paris during this time: in a series of occult writings called *Dragon Vert (Green Dragon)*, which seems to have been related to *La Flèche*, she announced the publication of his book *Les Rituels des Sociétés de Magie Sexuelle (The Rituals of the Societies of Sexual Magic)*.⁹³ This Kohout is said to have been the most skilled practical magician of the renowned Czech esoteric group *Universalia*, and to have been related to an otherwise unknown French magical order called S.E.S. (*Société Égyptienne Secrète*).⁹⁴ And finally there is the rumour, already mentioned, that De Naglowska was initiated by Rasputin or by the Russian sect of the Khlysties, or even by Hasidic circles.⁹⁵

As a postscript to the above, it may be worthwhile to quote a passage from Mircea Eliade's diary, May 27, 1948, in which he relates something that happened to him after lecturing at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne)* in Paris:

A lady approaches with a package in her hand: it contains the works of Marie de Naglowska on sexuality, *La Lumière du sexe*, *Le Mystère de la pendaison*, and a collection of the magazine *La Flèche*. The lady begs me insistently to take great care with them, to hide them in my closet under lock and key, because they are "very dangerous initiatory texts," etc. Leafing through them at home, I am depressed by their absolute vacuity.⁹⁶

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have set ourselves the goal of presenting a factual account of four quite different types of practice in the domain of sexual magic. It should be stressed again, however, that while this overview is based on original source texts, this does not mean that all the rituals described have actually been put into practice. A more systematic

⁹² Anel-Kham, *Théorie et Pratique de la Magie Sexuelle*, 40.

⁹³ *La Flèche* no. 6 (15 March 1931), p. 8. Unfortunately it could not be found out if this book ever appeared in French. A Czech text called *Magie Sexuelnie* by Kohout has been reprinted in Prague, 1992.

⁹⁴ See the interview with Vladislav Zadrobilek, head of *Universalia* in the nineties of the last century, in *Gnostika* no. 30 (July 2005), p. 27.

⁹⁵ Evola, *Metaphysics of Sex*, 261.

⁹⁶ Eliade, *Journal I*, 83.

classification of the phenomenon might be a next task but falls beyond the scope of this chapter. The same goes for various questions of interpretation and contextualization, such as the relation between sexual magic and other types of magic in modern esotericism and occultism, or the relation between sexual magic and Satanism—not to mention the interest of the subject from perspectives such as the general history of sexuality, the psychology of transgression, and so on. Indeed, the subject of sexual magic may evoke questions of many kinds, but any attempt to address them will have to start with the textual sources themselves, which are as yet almost unknown except among restricted circles of specialists and practitioners, and a first impression of which it has been our goal to present.

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THE ROAR OF AWAKENING:
THE EROS OF ESALEN AND THE WESTERN
TRANSMISSION OF TANTRA

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Tyger Tyger, burning bright
In the forest of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

.....

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

William Blake, "The Tyger"

The multiple weavings of eroticism and esotericism within the history of the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California—the mother of the American human potential movement founded in 1962 by Michael Murphy (1930) and Richard Price (1930–1985)—is a vast half-century tapestry whose multiple patterns, colors, and textures I have woven elsewhere in some detail.¹ The present essay is not a summary or replication of that historiographic project. Rather it is a further theorization of and reflection on the results of it. It is a “standing back” to see one, and only one, of the final weaves or gestalts, in this case an erotic one.

Admittedly, the colorful complexities are bright, but also more than a little daunting. There are, after all, many ways into the erotic here, far too many for as brief an essay as this. Anecdotal humor is perhaps the quickest way into the subject, like the scene I witnessed in the Big House in the spring of 2003, when the psychical researcher Marilyn Schlitz and founder Michael Murphy got into an animated discussion about the strange phenomenon of “bodily elongation” during a research

¹ Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*. Very small portions of the present essay appeared originally in this text and are used here with permission. The section on John Heider also appears, in a different and much expanded form, in “From Paradise to Paradox: The Psychospiritual Journey of John Heider.”

symposium. Murphy asked Schlitz if she had any material on bodily elongation in her archives. “No,” she quipped back, “that would be in the porn section.” Bodily elongation aside for a moment, there are certainly other, less anecdotal, more theoretical ways into the eros of Esalen. We could dwell, for example, on the eros of the founders, the eros of Big Sur literary culture, the eros of the baths, or the eros of Esalen’s contemplative massage tradition.

Richard Price grew up in a Jewish family posing as Episcopalians outside of Chicago in the 40s in the painful emotional shadows of a beloved twin brother who had died at the age of three (from a burst appendix), with a too distant father who retreated into his work, partly perhaps to avoid the pain of the loss of his infant, and with a controlling, sexually repressive mother Price came to more or less hate. Price would find a new life in California, that is, as far from Chicago as he could get, in Buddhism and Taoism, that is, as far from his mother’s social-climbing Christianity as he could get, and in a form of gestalt psychology in which he could find some measure of peace and healing.

He would need the latter, especially after his own mystical awakening erupted within a psychotic state in 1956 that resulted in months of hospitalization and what amounted to psychiatric torture with shock therapy, drugs, and more drugs. It was during one of these psychotic breakthroughs that Price’s sexuality awoke alongside and within his spiritual life and a whole series of psychical experiences, including past-life memories in which he remembered himself as what he thought was a monk, a bodily superpower involving a kind of invisible “energy field” around his body, and a spontaneous healing of an old sports back injury. On the sexual side, Price spoke of “a kind of early shut-up in my genitals” that lasted until these openings. He thus noted that he did not masturbate until he was twenty-two. But the sexual shut-up had been opened now, like his spirit, like his Buddhism, like his life.² The mystical, the erotic, and the psychical all appeared *together* in Price’s breakdown that was also a breakthrough.

Unlike Price, Michael Murphy grew up in what was by all accounts a happy family life. He came to his mystical life in college via the reading of Sri Aurobindo, the Indian metaphysician who encouraged a form of traditional *sannyasa* or celibate “renunciation” as an alchemical tech-

² I am relying here on Erikson, “A Psychobiography of Richard Price: Co-founder of Esalen Institute.”

nique toward a kind of evolutionary advance and spiritual mutation. Murphy lived in Aurobindo's ashram for a year and a half in the mid 50's and took a vow of celibacy, which he did not break until the first few months of Esalen's founding, on the night of October 25, 1962, to be precise. The sex almost killed him. Literally. The day after his breaking of the vow, the couple's car was struck, head-on, by a drunk driver (who, oddly enough, was looking for Murphy) as they drove down Highway 1 on the cliffs of Big Sur. They were on their way to Esalen, where Murphy was to introduce Gerald Heard, a homoerotic celibate author who helped inspire the founding of the institute. Murphy could not help but see connections between the night of sex and the car accident. For him, the whole event partook of the synchronistic, of some deeper weaving of pattern and meaning that would take him years to understand and come to terms with.

We need not begin with the founders, though. After all, the erotic well preceded both men at Big Sur through the place's literary history. There was, for example, the powerful literary presence of Henry Miller, who wrote banned novels many considered pure pornography (more elongating bodies) and who described a kind of automatic writing practice and a series of synchronistic signs he claimed to see in the landscape and magical events of Big Sur. For Miller anyway, these events were not simply unusual or uncanny. They were also noetic. They carried altered forms of knowledge. They produced literature. There was also the foundational intellectual presence of Wilhelm Reich, whose "orgone" everyone in Big Sur was reading about (and probably practicing) at this time. And then there were the Beat poets, like Jack Kerouac, who wrote about both Big Sur and Buddhism and a whole lot of sex and alcohol, which finally really did kill him. Hence the eros of both Big Sur and Esalen would have a distinct literary inflection. It was not just sex. It was sex as literature. It was sexuality as textuality.

Then, of course, there are the famous baths of Esalen. These are located on the southern tip of the property. The voyeuristically inclined can easily see the baths from the cliff porch of the lodge, although the bodies in the waters and on the rooftop massage area are mere dots at this distance and the telescopes perched on the walkway half-way down will not swing south toward the baths (I've tried). They are apparently for looking at ocean horizons, waves, and whales, not watery human beings. The telescopes and binoculars of the occasional fishing boat are another matter. Murphy likes to tell stories about individuals in the baths who used binoculars to peer out on to fishing boats on the

horizon only to see the fishermen peering back at them with their own magnifying scopes. Much more dramatic, in the 1970s military planes and helicopters would fly very, very low, presumably to see the nude bodies stretched out below. There are many perspectives from which to see and to be seen.

Significantly, one enters the baths as one enters a sacred grotto.³ A small ritual fountain bubbles before some Japanese tile art as one walks down the steps. To one's immediate left sits the bathroom and towel area. A bit further in and down one turns right for one of the two changing rooms and a rather spectacular shower room, a spacious watery den open toward the changing room and separated from the ocean by an immense sliding glass wall and a fifty-foot drop to the rocks below. As one enters this changing room and looks toward the shower room, one is often met with the shapes and curves of bathing men and women, their soapy wet forms silhouetted against the ocean horizon and sky.

There are two basic bathing areas: a turn right down the stairs takes one into the northern "quiet" side for those who wish to talk. A turn left takes one into the southern "silent" side for those who prefer contemplation and solitude over curious or chatty company. Significantly, there is no such designation for gender (although the earlier Esalen baths were in fact gender segregated, these "genders"—"Women's Side" and "Men's Side"—in practice referred only to "quiet" or "massage area" and "conversational," respectively). Both founders originally opposed this lack of gender segregation, but the residents and visitors ignored their opposition into sheer irrelevance. The quiet side sports three traditional bathtubs that can be quickly filled with hot or cold water (or both in consecutive order for the really brave) and four baths of various sizes, two under the roof but open to the ocean and two perched outdoors. The silent side contains two much larger square cement baths that are separated from the ocean by a moving glass wall and a private room for massage sessions. A second and much larger massage area and a handicap-accessible bath occupies the roof of the structure, where wild grasses grow.

³ On a related note, according to Richard Tarnas, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who lived on the grounds toward the very end of his life, once defended the baths with the rhyming phrase, "Nudity is not ludity."

There is no doubt that one of the most important bodily practices at Esalen is the social practice of mixed nude bathing in the hot tubs on the very edge of the property. One simply cannot visit the grounds without coming away with the distinct impression that those baths bubble at the very center of whatever meanings Esalen might have for its many visitors. Sociologically speaking, this makes very good sense, for the practice of mixed nude bathing re-enacts in a particularly dramatic and effective way the radical democracy and erotic mysticism of the place within a graceful transgressive movement from separated, clothed, hyper-socialized individuals to a single hot tub of naked men and women sharing conversation as they listen to the crashing ocean just beneath them and ponder the seemingly infinite night sky above them. There is little here to remind one of social distinction and individual separation and much to deny them. Indeed, both one's company and the universe itself seem to mock such temporary illusions as so many cheap ridiculous clothes.⁴

Also significant here is the practice of contemplative massage, which is localized at the same baths but also performed elsewhere on the grounds, particularly around the swimming pool up near the lodge in the front lawn. The language of training is vaguely erotic. The practitioner does not have a "patient" or "client," for example. She or he (more commonly she) has a "partner." Historically (and still today on occasion), moreover, the practitioner might choose to massage in the nude. Traditional Esalen massage, however, works its magic precisely through a very careful balance between the obvious and acknowledged sensuality of close and caring physical touch and a keen professional sense of respect for the partner and his or her own comfort level.

Generally, for example, a session begins with a conversation between the practitioner and the partner so that the massage giver can both get a sense of the partner's needs, wishes, and concerns and receive the latter's implicit permission to touch. One is asked to show up at the baths a bit of ahead of time. Most will take a shower or sit in the baths for a few minutes to relax and prepare mentally. This is, after all, not simply

⁴ The finest reflections on the Esalen baths that I have encountered are Keith Thompson's "The Hot Springs" (*The Esalen Catalog* [January–June 1991]: 4–9), a beautifully written study of the baths via (fictional?) conversations Thompson had in the baths one night with a geologist, a professor of ancient history, a theologian, a physician, and a Big Sur local. For the details of massage techniques, I am relying here on "Esalen Massage" (Looking Glass Home Video, 1997).

a physical experience. It is also, potentially at least, a contemplative experience involving the whole person. After a brief conversation, the massage begins. The partner is nude, except for a towel carefully placed between the buttocks during the first half or on the genitals during the second (the session is roughly divided into two sections, that is, lying on the stomach and lying on the back). Using cold-pressed natural oils that are warmed up by rubbing the hands together, the massage giver begins, perhaps with the toes or on the scalp and works from segment to segment of the body, always being careful to integrate the segment with the rest of the body at the end through long slow massage strokes that physically reunite the body again.

As he or she moves from limb to limb, section to section, the massage giver uses a whole variety of techniques, gently rotating or rocking a joint, stretching a muscle, kneading a sole with a thumb or finger, massaging a spinal line (never the spine itself) with the back of a forearm, massaging an ear or a scalp section, as he or she looks for tension points and begins to establish trust. The combination of a total body massage, the sensuality of an oily touch and rub, the presence of another human being giving such nurturance and care, and the hypnotic roll of the waves surrounding the entire experience all have their effect. The massage giver pauses, integrates the experience within a contemplative moment, and quietly departs the room or space. The partner, assuming he or she is awake, is free to rest there for a few minutes or depart immediately.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to capture this all in words, but some have tried. Perhaps none have been quite as eloquent as the Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, who recounted in some detail his own visions and thoughts while enjoying a hot bath and receiving a group massage by candlelight at Esalen in the late 60s. Cox's reflections are significant, both because of his obvious theological training, but also because they can act as an effective foreshadowing of my thesis on the Tantric transmission.

As Cox was massaged, he found himself watching the candles and his own theological imagination. More specifically, the candles all merged in his vision and he caught a glimpse of Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point, "a supra-personal future in which individuals become joyous corpuscles in a more inclusive organism." Then he felt himself slipping back into his own childhood sensuality and watched as the erotic experience of the baths and massage morphed into a certain metaphysical intuition:

Time, I have no idea how much, passed. Now all the candles were one flame and all the fingers were on one great hand. The combination of water, chanting, body dissociation, and massage was moving me beyond a pleasantly sensuous swoon into something closer to what I could only imagine was either a fanciful reverie or a mystical trance. I could feel the hydrogen and oxygen molecules of the water seeping into the amino acids and carbohydrates and bone cells and nerve endings of my body. The hands touching me became mine, and my own hands slid off my wrists to fuse with the dampness in and around me. Again the vision faded. Now I felt something I had read about many times before but never understood: the underlying unity of Brahman and Atman, the oneness of self, other, and All. . . . We are all in some ways one with the water, the sky, the air, each other, and in the sulfur baths the reality of a collective self seems a little less bizarre than it does in the everyday world.⁵

I know of few recorded experiences that capture as many of the religious resonances of Esalen as this one. The psychological, vaguely psychoanalytic sophistication of the narrative (languages of regression and dissociation), a theology of evolution, a kind of *animan siddhi* or psychic gaze into the microscopic movements of the enlightened body (hydrogen and oxygen molecules, bone cells and nerve endings), the Indian identity of *brahman* and *atman*, and a kind of ecological vision of cosmic unity—these are all classical Esalen tropes.

But there is more, as Cox then goes on and, as if to affirm my own present thesis about Esalen, reflects back on his experience by comparing it to examples of something similar that he knew from the history of religions, in particular the Hindu stories of Krishna making love to the milkmaids and the Tantric rituals of Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism. Significantly, he could only think of a single Western example that spoke to his Esalen experience, a line from the Song of Songs.

But the eros of the founders, of the literature, of the baths, and of Esalen massage are only the beginning. There was also a fifteenth-century Dutch painting, Hieronymus Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights," whose bizarre erotic scenes were much beloved and commented on by the Big Sur figures of Henry Miller, Michael Murphy, and Gerald Heard. Miller saw the Dutch masterpiece as a utopian image

⁵ In Alexander, *American Personal Religious Accounts, 1600–1980: Toward an Inner History of America's Faith*, 428–429. I am indebted to Eugene Taylor for pointing this passage out to me. See his *Shadow Culture: Psychology and Spirituality in America*, chapter 11, "Esalen and the Counterculture Movement of the 1960s."

of Big Sur (hence his book, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*). Murphy has hung it in his homes for forty years as an apt portrayal of Esalen's altered history of blissful heavens and moral hells. Heard suggested it could be read as an esoteric medieval code for *kundalini*-like intuitions and sublimated spiritualized sex.

Then there was the hyper-eroticism of some of the psychedelic sacraments, a kind of super-sexuality elicited by the substances that was reported by many and famously exaggerated by Timothy Leary in an outrageous *Playboy* interview mischievously titled "She Comes in Colors."⁶ Much like Paschal Beverly Randolph in the nineteenth century (see the essay of Deveney above), many of the early Esalen actors saw in these extraordinary substances an important key, if not *the* key, to the history of religions: psychotropic agents had again become, in Randolph's nineteenth-century words now, the secret of "the Alchemists, Hermetists, Illuminati, and mystic brethren of all ages."⁷ Here too we might place the archetypal linking of sex, death, and spirit in the LSD and holotropic breathwork writings of Stanislav and Christina Grof. Stanislav wrote volumes on the eroticism of mystical states, particularly as these states were said to organize themselves around Grof's hypothesized "Basic Perinatal Matrices" (BPM) or archetypal stages of birth and their energies, some of which were distinctly sexual. Christina, moreover, came to her vocation, literally, through her womb and a series of mystical currents and altered states of consciousness experienced during childbirth that she would later read as expressions of an awakening *kundalini*, that is, as "Tantric."

All of this, of course, can also be read as so many moments in the surrounding "sexual revolution" of the 60s (a term first coined by Wilhelm Reich), in which Esalen's famous baths and general culture of sensuality played a small but real supporting role. Significant here too was the Summer of Love of 1967 in San Francisco, which spilled out and down into Big Sur and Esalen, more or less overrunning the property with stoned hippies.

⁶ This interview was later anthologized in Timothy Leary, *The Politics of Ecstasy*, chapter 7.

⁷ Quoted and discussed above in Deveney, "Paschal Beverly Randolph and Sexual Magic."

On “Mysticism” and “Western Esotericism”

All of this is relevant to our topic. But how might we best contextualize such a modern eros within the history of western esotericism? Clearly, we are on similar but also very different ground here than we were with those historical contexts explored in our earlier chapter essays. To take just a few examples, if Thomas Lake Harris’s remarkable sexual mysticism owed as little to Asia as he knew about Buddhism (see the Versluis essay above), and if Aleister Crowley’s consistent references to Tantra were not backed up by a significant historical knowledge of the subject (see the essay of Urban above), the same can not be said about many of the thinkers and actors of Esalen’s history. Clearly, such figures were transforming these traditions, but they were doing so with much more textual, ethnographic, even initiatory knowledge than their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predecessors. They did not just fantasize about India. They traveled and lived there. They did not just read Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist scriptures. They read widely in western scholarship on these traditions (particularly Woodroffe, Conze, and Eliade) and studied and meditated with Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist teachers both in the States and in Asia. And very much like Paschal Beverly Randolph and very much unlike the bookish antiquarians of Deveney’s essay, they insisted on grounding their reading and knowledge in transformative practice and empirically experienced altered states of consciousness and energy, much of which came from literally thousands of hours of disciplined meditation and practice. To put it a bit differently, many of these individuals were not the dilettantes that they are often assumed to be, and their translations of the Asian traditions, however unusual or unprecedented, should be taken as seriously by the historian as those transformations of, say, Buddhism that occurred with the Tibetan assimilations of the eighth century or of the Chinese translations at the beginning of the common era. If the Doctrine of the Elders (Theravada) can become the Great Vehicle (Mahayana) and even the Thunderbolt Vehicle (Vajrayana), why can’t, say, Bengali Shakta Tantra become English California Tantra? Why honor the former transformations and dismiss the latter?

In terms of our present subject, it must be acknowledged up front that the category of western esotericism is a recent scholarly category and so does not occur as such in this twentieth-century history of Esalen. Many of the figures and traditions captured by the expression, of course, were important to Esalen, but nowhere in that history was

the concept of western esotericism advanced or offered as such. The closest we get here is the related western category of “mysticism,” which is in fact omnipresent in Esalen’s history. Indeed, the category of mysticism dates back to the very first brochure, where it appears as “drug-induced mysticism,” the topic of the fourth featured seminar, which took place on November 3–4, 1962. Significantly, the term came with some rather severe challenges to the more traditional and more orthodox concept of “religion”:

There seems to be no question in anyone’s mind who has experienced it, that the so-called “psychedelic” drugs, such as LSD and mescaline, produce a kind of mystical experience. The question that worries many people is, “Is the drug-induced mysticism religion?” It is altogether possible that drug-induced mystical experiences will force us to study and revise all of our previous definitions of religion. Those who are interested in expanding the boundaries of their own religious faith should be interested in a discussion of these questions.⁸

The category of mysticism, of course, had a long prehistory before this Esalen seminar. Although the category had clear and important precedents that reached back as far as eighteenth-century England (where, in its very first English appearance, it already signaled a kind of sublimated feminine eroticism—mysticism, in other words, has signaled a type of sexual alchemy from the very beginning),⁹ seventeenth-century France,¹⁰ and—at least as an adjective—the ancient Mediterranean world,¹¹ the noun as it has been commonly used at Esalen made its first definitive appearance in June of 1902, when the Harvard psychologist and American philosopher William James published his Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹²

In perfect line with the experiential and individualist convictions of Esalen, this same text was written partly out of James’ own mystical experience while hiking in the Adirondacks shortly before the Gifford Lectures, his spiritual experiments with nitrous oxide (which produced one of the most oft-quoted passages of the entire book), his close friendship with the British psychical researcher F.W.H. Myers, and his

⁸ First quadrifold brochure, Fall 1962.

⁹ Schmidt, “The Making of Modern Mysticism,” 273–302.

¹⁰ De Certeau, “Mysticism.”

¹¹ Bouyer, “Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word,” 42–55.

¹² I am indebted to Don Cupitt for this striking thesis. See his *Mysticism and Modernity*.

own psychological researches with the Boston psychic Mrs. Piper.¹³ James approached all of these experiences with great philosophical seriousness and what he himself called a “radical empiricism,” that is, an empiricism that refused to ignore anomalous psychological events simply because they could not be fit into the reigning scientism of the day. In other words, Mrs. Pipers’ telepathic abilities and James’ psychoactive experience of consciousness as multiple were as much a part of the empirical world for James as any daily emotion or sensory perception, and any adequate psychological model had to struggle with *all* of these empirical psychological events, not just the ones that wouldn’t upset the apple-carts of strict materialism and determinism.

Put more baldly, then, “mysticism,” rather than being an ancient category easily found in all religions in all times, derives its Esalen salience from a mystically inclined Harvard professor and psychological researcher speaking in Scotland whose published lectures have since been read by countless other scholars of religion and practitioners (including those at Esalen) and subsequently developed into a coherent, often quite popular idea we now call “mysticism.” Little wonder, then, that James had a major impact on Esalen’s earliest inspirations, primarily through the reading and writing of Michael Murphy, who considers both James’s radical empiricism and his openness to the mystical and the psychical to be among the cornerstones of the Institute’s intellectual foundations.¹⁴

What is perhaps most interesting, though, and what is certainly worth explaining, is how Esalen has helped to redefine, with a whole host of other countercultural and New Age groups, what it means to be a “mystical” movement in the modern world. No one has seen this fundamental shift of the mystical more clearly than Wouter Hanegraaff. In his study of the New Age movement, Hanegraaff has argued that the modern New Age can best be seen as a form of “Western esotericism in the mirror of secular thought.”¹⁵ Although Esalen has always been uncomfortable with the designation “New Age” (hence the expression has been consciously and systematically kept out of its

¹³ Murphy and Ballou, eds., *William James on Psychological Research*.

¹⁴ These last three paragraphs first appeared in a different context in my “Comparative Mystics: Scholars as Gnostic Diplomats,” in Perl, ed., *Talking Peace with Gods, Symposium on the Reconciliation of Worldviews, Part 1, Common Knowledge*.

¹⁵ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*.

catalogs), Hanegraaff's observation holds true for much, if not most, of Esalen's history.

With such a model, we can see that modern mystical movements like Esalen are not at all the same as their premodern precursors, however much they might draw on these for some of their central ideas and practices. These modern movements, after all, have passed through the secular revolutions of science and democracy, and so they order themselves in fundamentally different ways. They understand something of Freud's unconscious, and so they easily and quickly psychologize their spiritualities, that is, they recognize that their religious experiences are fundamentally related to unconscious dynamic forces and the emotional-sexual patterns of their lives. They embrace the basic political principles of secularism, and so they understand religion to be a matter of private choice and never something to be imposed by state, church, or religious authority "from outside" or "from above." They have embraced modern science, whether or not they fully understand it, and so they turn to evolution and quantum physics for some of their most important mystical metaphors and ideas. They live in a capitalist economy, and so they market their spiritual productions as easily and as effectively as others sell computers or professional services. And, perhaps most importantly, they assume the individualist values of modern democracy, and so they reject many of the standard institutional features of esotericism, particularly the elaborate hierarchies and attending secret initiations that have usually defined and controlled these movements as top-down institutions in the past.

In effect, although the form or content of Esalen's mystical thought may indeed be remarkably similar to previous forms, almost all of the rules about how this form of thought can be expressed socially and experienced psychologically have changed, and changed radically.¹⁶ Put simply, if Esalen expresses a kind of Jamesian mysticism, we must immediately add that this is very much a *modern* and *American* democratic mysticism as well, one that seeks, as William Everson imagined, to locate divinization in the here and now and in the individual, not in some

¹⁶ And this sets esoteric movements like Esalen or the New Age in opposition to the Traditionalism of thinkers like René Guenon, Julius Evola, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Fritjof Schuon, Seyyed Hussein Nasr, and Huston Smith, each of whom rejects (to very different degrees) modernity and/or modern science. See especially Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*. Interestingly, despite his rejection of Esalen's evolutionary mysticism, Smith has played a consistent role in Esalen's history.

distant sacred past or through yet another hierarchal system of mediation, authority, and deferral. “Now,” Everson wrote, “it is apparent that whereas hierarchical cultures tend to structure-out the vertical element against the unremitting deferral of apotheosis, democracies constantly seek to precipitate apotheosis in the here and now.”¹⁷

There is a final point to make here. Even though the language of “mystical experience” and “mysticism” were indigenous terms at early Esalen, a case could easily be made that Esalen’s intellectual history is better rendered as a form of “western esotericism in the mirror of Asian thought.” Kocku von Stuckrad has recently distinguished the categories of mysticism and esotericism with the suggestion that the former generally involves some sort of union with a deity or with nature, whereas the latter is distinguished by its consistent claim to some form of “absolute knowledge” or “total hermeneutic.”¹⁸ Put a bit differently, esotericism for von Stuckrad is fundamentally a *noetic* phenomenon—it grants knowledge, even absolute knowledge, about the structure of the cosmos or soul.¹⁹

Rendered thus, the inspirations and symposia of early Esalen were primarily forms of esoteric, not mystical, thought, for they showed little (really no) interest in a particular deity or religious tradition and gave every suggestion that what they were after was a new form of integral knowledge, a new global gnosis uniting both East and West and mysticism (the subjective soul) and science (the objective cosmos). It is no accident, then, that the very first brochures featured on their covers both an infinitesimal calculation equation from Bertrand Russell and a contemplative Asian lotus. The message was clear: the altered states of contemplation and mystical experience carry real knowledge, and this real knowledge can be related to more exoteric forms of knowledge, including and especially modern science. In von Stuckrad’s terms, this was no wish for union with a deity. This was a claim to, or at least a hope for, a total hermeneutic.

¹⁷ Everson, *Archetype West: The Pacific Coast as a Literary Region*, 10.

¹⁸ Von Stuckrad, “Esotericism and Mysticism: What Is the Difference?”

¹⁹ It must be pointed out here that the Jamesian category of mysticism also carries this sense. James, after all, stressed the noetic quality of mystical experience. No doubt, we are dealing with a matter of degrees and overlapping categories here. Western esotericism as defined by von Stuckrad gives *primacy* to the noetic, whereas for James it is only one of four characteristics.

The Western Transmission of "Tantra"

And no hope for a total hermeneutic, not at least at Esalen, can exclude the body and sexuality. Which takes us back to Harvey Cox's theological "free associations" involving Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary vision and the sexual practices of Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism while being massaged down by the Esalen baths. Such metaphysical associations were hardly accidental. Indeed, I would suggest that they were quite prescient, particularly in their linking of the mystical, the erotic, and Tantric India at Esalen. I want to turn now to that specific moment of Cox's massage and expand it into a much broader and developed thesis about the mutual awakening of sexual and spiritual desire at Esalen. That is, I want to focus on the imagining and experience of "Tantra" within the eros of Esalen. As a way into this particular lineage, I will begin (and end) with a single parable and its intriguing transformations through Indian and American culture.

The parable in question is a story that the Bengali saint Ramakrishna used to tell. It first entered American culture through the lectures of his missionary disciple, Swami Vivekananda, who told it again at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. A little over a half-century later, it was developed further through the editing and ghost-writing of Joseph Campbell (a major Esalen figure), who chose to open Heinrich Zimmer's *Philosophies of India* (1951) with a chapter entitled "The Roar of Awakening" based on the same parable. Exiled from Germany for his Jewish wife, that is, for his love of a woman, Zimmer had fled to New York, where he taught Campbell at Columbia just before he suddenly died of pneumonia in 1943.

I want to focus on this parable, particularly as it is refashioned by Zimmer and Campbell, for three reasons. First, because it resurfaces in American culture in 1951, just before the two future founders of Esalen will undergo their own "roars of awakening" within a reading experience and psychotic illumination, respectively, in 1956. Second, because Campbell himself will later play an important role in Esalen's culture and its specific re-imagining and translation of "Tantra." And third, and primarily, because I think the parable's Bengali to American history captures something important about the ways that the categories of eros, experience, and the self were understood and expressed at Esalen's founding and later history.

The parable goes like this in one of its Bengali versions:

A tigress once stalked a flock of goats. But she was pregnant, and so when she jumped, the cub was born and the tigress died. As the cub was raised by the goats, he began to eat grass with them and “bhyaah, bhyaah” like a goat. Soon this cub grew very large. One day, another tiger pounced into the flock of goats. He was speechless before what he saw, namely, a tiger eating grass, bleating, and being raised as a goat. Then the elder tiger grabbed him, took him to a pool of water, and said, “Why do you eat grass, and why do you bleat? Look how I’m eating meat. You eat it too. Look at this—see how your face reflected in the water is like mine!” Seeing all of this, the young tiger also relished the meat.²⁰

It is of some significance that this Indian parable was originally used in both the Bengali text and especially in Vivekananda’s English lectures as a polemical tale to reject the Christian theology of sin (and, by implication, the Christian model of salvation) and focus instead on the immortal nature of the eternal and pristine Self or *atman*. Hence Vivekananda’s famous lines at Chicago in 1893 are quoted again in the Bengali text to gloss his Master’s story: “Ye are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth—Sinners! It is a sin to call a man so. Come up, Oh lions and shake off the delusion that you are sheep!”²¹

The original Bengali tiger has become a lion and the goats are sheep now, perhaps to make more pointed the polemic against biblical Christianity (lions, sheep, and lambs all being central to Christian symbolism), but the basic point remains very much the same: the deepest core of human nature is identical to divinity and cannot be accurately described as morally corrupt, as “sinful.” In short, there is no Christian created “soul” in need of salvation from its sins; there is only the Hindu *atman* or Self beyond all conditionings, moral or otherwise, that needs to be realized as already immortal, blissful, and divine.

Interestingly, the act that finally reveals this pristine Self beyond all culture and clime in the parable is the act of *eating meat*, that is, something highly polluting and potentially transgressive to an upper-caste orthodox Hindu. There are also certain unstated but implied Tantric, even quasi-cannibalistic, echoes here, as the reader might suppose that

²⁰ Gupta, *Srisriramakṛsnakathamṛta*, in 5 vols, volume 5, p. 174; translation mine.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.173.

the tiger is eating goat meat, that is, a member “of his own flock” (which, of course, is not really his own flock). This is an implicit or potential Tantric act, because both eating meat (including, in extreme cases, the cannibalistic act of eating or tasting human corpse flesh) and sacrificing goats are central to the transgressive and sacrificial rituals of Bengali Shakta Tantra. This is not just any old roar of awakening, then. This is a Tantric roar of awakening. But no one says so: not Ramakrishna, not Vivekananda, neither Zimmer nor Campbell. Not just yet anyway.

The later Zimmer/Campbell version of 1951 returns the parable back to its original tiger/goat form but adopts something of Vivekananda’s message as well. Now the surprised elder tiger, whom the text calls “the grim teacher,” grabs the cub by the scruff and hauls him off to his cave where he forces him to eat a bloody slab of fresh meat from a previous kill (again, we are not told what kind of meat it is). At first, the cub is disgusted with the thought, but as the raw flesh goes down, his tail begins to lash the ground, “and suddenly from his throat there bursts the terrifying, triumphant roar of a tiger.” The tiger cub is thus awakened to the “secret lore of his own nature.”²²

In this new context, the humorous fable becomes a powerful story of what must happen to the West, now disillusioned with its own symbols and myths, that is, with Christianity. For Zimmer, the interpretation of India’s philosophical and religious forms can and indeed should become an integral part of the West’s “Roar of Awakening,” for in them we can see our own existential situation, our own disillusionment with transitory superimpositions and the dogmas and rituals of deluded human beings as an obedient flock or herd. In them we can sense something of our own individual unconscious nature, our own “profoundly hidden, essential yet forgotten, transcendental Self.”²³

Jung’s depth psychology and India’s Advaita Vedanta tradition more or less merge in such lines of thought, but it is Jung’s mature rejection of any uncritical imitation of the East and its culturally specific forms of psychological structure and identity that finally wins the day here. Like the tiger cub, the West can learn from India’s jungle lore and awaken to the Self, but it can only truly awaken to its *own* Self, for, as Zimmer insists, “We cannot borrow God. We must effect His new incarnation from within ourselves. Divinity must descend, somehow,

²² Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

into the matter of our own existence and participate in this peculiar life-process.”²⁴

Both Zimmer’s insistence on Western civilization’s own incarnational integrity and the Indian tiger tale’s general turn away from the judging God of western monotheism to the blissful Self would play themselves out at Esalen in the early 60s, primarily through the roar of the human potential movement, which fundamentally rejected the Christian theology of original sin, the pessimistic vision of Freudian psychoanalysis, and the surface science of Skinnerian behaviorism for the more ecstatic possibilities of drug-induced mysticism, psychical powers (the Tantric Sanskrit category of the *siddhi* was often invoked here), and what Abraham Maslow was calling, in his own quasi-orgasmic language, “the peak experience.” It was a truly heady time, a time for eating meat, as if for the first time. In short, it was a time for roaring.

Avalon, Zimmer, Jung, and Campbell: The Tantric Textual Transmission

Following the pioneering work of Hugh Urban on the colonial and postcolonial construction of the category of Tantra, it is my thesis that basic to this roar of awakening was the scholarly discovery, transcultural construction, creative imagination, and actual practice of something called “Tantra,” defined here as a comparative construct mutually created by Western and Asian scholars over the last two centuries that nevertheless accurately names, locates, and analyzes a kind of “super-tradition” that runs throughout the history of Asian religions, including and especially those Asian religions’ recent migrations to American culture.

This Tantric super-tradition is especially obvious in such local manifestations as Hindu Shakta Tantra, some forms of Indian Jainism, certainly Tibetan Vajrayana, much of Chinese Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism, as well as various forms of esoteric Japanese Buddhism, including and especially many aspects of Zen. Doctrinally speaking, this same super-tradition privileges nondual or superbinary systems of thought that advance through elaborate languages of consciousness and energy (often represented as “male” and “female,” respectively); turns to the body, and particularly the sexual body, as the privileged locus of revelation and religious experience; employs various rhetorics

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

of secrecy and ritual logics of transgression; embraces the pursuit of magical powers and occult practices; and sees the human being as a microcosm of the larger universe or macrocosm. “Tantra,” in other words, is our present scholarly term for naming, organizing, and comparing what amounts to one history of Asian esotericism.

It is my own conviction that when a movement like Esalen turned to Asian religions in the 1960s and 70s, what it inevitably ended up embracing was not the orthodox, conservative, and ascetic elements of these historical traditions, but their heterodox, transgressive, and erotic forms. That is to say, when Esalen turned to Asia, what it embraced was not Asia, but Asian Tantra.

Certainly we can make too much of such a thesis. The term or category of Tantra, for example, has not been especially salient in the public culture, catalog offerings, or general therapeutic spirit of Esalen (but neither has it been absent). And Dick Price was certainly right to warn his students against confusing any single understanding of Esalen as the final truth of the place. He thus spoke often of Esalen as the Rorschach Institute or as the Ink-Blot Institute—that is, “Esalen,” to the extent that it lived up to its central insistence that “No one captures the flag,” had an uncanny ability to become just about anything to anyone. We have to be very careful, then, about finding something “Tantric” about Esalen, or almost anything else for that matter. No one captures the flag.

But even Dick found himself powerfully, and somewhat mysteriously, drawn to Bhagwan Rajneesh, the Hindu Tantric guru of the 70s par excellence. Moreover, his commitment to the this-worldliness of Taoism (Price actually used the *Tao Te Ching* to administer the day-to-day runnings of Esalen) can be read, certainly in contemporary scholarly definitions, as Tantric in orientation as well.

And this is just the beginning. Indeed, it is astonishing how often explicitly Tantric themes, figures, and ideas appear at central points or nodes in Esalen’s history. From Ida Rolf’s early training under a controversial New York Tantric yogi (Pierre Bernard), through Murphy’s foundational relationship to the “right-handed” or sublimated Tantric philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and his life-long fascination with the yogic *siddhis* or “superpowers,” to the Kali-like womb visions of Stanislav Grof’s LSD regression work (mind-altering substances are central to Tantric subcultures in Asia) and Esalen President Gordon Wheeler’s early devotional relationship to the Tantric guru Swami Muktananda,

something of significance is going on here. It is not all projection and ink-blots.

Hence Steve Donovan once shared with me that as President of Esalen in the late 1980s and early 90s he discovered that there were “brakes” and “accelerators” that could be applied on the Esalen culture when needed, and that the two most effective accelerators of spirit were workshops on psychedelic or Tantric subjects. The connections between Esalen and Zen Buddhism, moreover, have long been both literal and intimate ones. Tassajara, one of America’s most distinguished Zen monasteries, sits just over the mountain from Esalen. Steve Harper and Dick Price created and maintained a literal trail between the two institutions for years, and Michael Murphy has enjoyed a life-long mentorship and close friendship with Richard Baker Roshi, who helped found Tassajara and whose wealth of teaching experience with the esoterica of meditation includes a clear recognition that, “Zen is right-handed Tantra.” It seems, then, that there is something more than my own personal projections at work in such Esalen moments, something that deserves the carefully defined name of *Tantra*.

There is also a rather clear textual and scholarly prehistory here. Historically speaking, this particular Esalen lineage can be traced at least as far back as C.G. Jung’s enthusiastic reading of Zimmer’s *Kunstform und Yoga im indischen Kultbild* (1926), which was in turn inspired by Zimmer’s enthused reading of Tantric texts and early scholarship, particularly that of Sir John Woodroffe, who (with his Bengali ghost-translator, Atul Behari Ghosh) published under the fused mythological pen-name of “Arthur Avalon.”²⁵ Later, as I have already noted, Zimmer became one of Joseph Campbell’s earliest and most important mentors in New York in the early 1940s. After Zimmer’s sudden death in 1943, Campbell edited his teacher’s lectures and ghost-wrote Zimmer’s *Philosophies of India*, a popular and widely read text that culminates in the striking argument that Tantra is the summation and pinnacle of all of Indian religious thought.

It was this claim or reading (echoed, to be sure, in many other scholars and readers, from Mircea Eliade’s classic *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, to Aldous Huxley’s Tantric utopian novel, *Island*), I would suggest, that in

²⁵ For this remarkable story of transcultural cooperation (and dissimulation), see Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe*.

turn flowed into Esalen's history and the broad counterculture, turning both into profoundly "Tantric" phenomena, at least with respect to their adoption and embrace of Asian religious ideas and practices. Henceforth, whenever a Western actor turned East for inspiration or an image, it was more often than not a Tantric idea or image that he or she finally chose.²⁶ Hence the *cakras* and the *kundalini* of Tantric Hinduism, the copulating Buddhas of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, and the *yin-yang* icon of Taoism would come to dominate the art of the countercultural landscape.²⁷

It was the Avalon-Zimmer-Jung lineage again that Campbell brought to Esalen in the late 60's, where it took root and flourished, precisely along the lines Zimmer had set out as his own life and work. "It was, I felt, not the right solution," Zimmer wrote, "simply to swallow Eastern wisdom hook and sinker, as did the Theosophists, Neo-Buddhists, etc. The task was to transmute it so as to make it fit into the context of our own experiences and traditions: a process of mutual transmutation, assimilation."²⁸ All of his books and articles, Zimmer insisted, were "parts and documents of this process of assimilation and transmutation,"²⁹ that is, of this Tantric transmission into the West. The same, I would argue, is true about much of the literature that has swirled around Esalen.

Consider, for example, Joseph Campbell's earliest appearances at Esalen and his Zimmerian understanding of cultural translation, transformation, and transmission. Although Campbell's first seminar, on "Mask, Myth and Dream" (October 14–16, 1966) did not signal any explicit Tantric themes, his second major appearance, a year later, involved a whole flurry of explicit Tantric references. On October 12–15, 1967, for example, Campbell gave three separate seminars, two in San Francisco and one in Big Sur (at this point, Esalen ran a San Francisco center along with its Big Sur institute). The first in San Francisco, entitled "Freud, Jung & Kundalini Yoga," synthesized

²⁶ There were, of course, exceptions. One thinks in particular of the ascetic devotionalism of ISKCON or the consistent popularity of Theravada meditation techniques and traditions. My thesis is offered as a general pattern to note and reflect on, then, not as a universal rule to impose everywhere.

²⁷ For more on this thesis, see my "Remembering Ourselves"; and "Western Popular Culture."

²⁸ See "Appendix: Some Biographical Remarks about Henry R. Zimmer," in Zimmer, *Artistic Form and Yoga in the Sacred Images of India*, 257.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

western depth psychology and Hindu Tantra to explore “the relevance of Kundalini Yoga for modern psychological theory and the modern quest for meaning.” The second was on the same theme, “The Lessons of Kundalini Yoga for Western Psychology.” Indeed, even when he drove down to Big Sur after this last appearance to give a seminar on “The Mystical Experience & The Hero’s Journey,” it was “Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Tantric, and modern psychological interpretations” that he was advertising, not some abstract “mysticism” or faceless “hero.” Certainly, Campbell had no interest, at all, in mimicking or copying what the Asian traditions had historically accomplished. Rather, he was interested, as always, in exploring how these “initiatory symbols” could take on relevance for what he called “the adventure of modern life.”³⁰ This was pure Esalen. It was also classical Zimmer.

As scholars have noted repeatedly, the Tantra one gets in California (or Kali-fornia for the smiling) is not the Tantra one gets in Calcutta. At Esalen, moreover, this Westernization runs even deeper, since the Tantra that was transmitted to Esalen was transmitted partly through the English writings of Sri Aurobindo, who had already profoundly Westernized the system through his creative incorporation of evolutionary science, translated here into the world-affirming notion that the Divine incarnates in the universe in a progressive historical and fully embodied fashion—in essence, and in Murphy’s terms now, an “evolutionary Tantra.” In other words, even when Asian or Tantric ideas and disciplines are occasionally practiced at Esalen, they are embraced only after they have been refracted through the psychological, scientific, economic, and political lenses of European and American culture. Again, Hanegraaff’s notion of secularization, which we might here reframe as “Asian esotericism become western esotericism in the mirror of secular thought.”

At times, perhaps many times, this refraction through modernity has resulted in forms of American Tantra that bear very little resemblance to their premodern Asian origins and lack, almost completely, the deep textual grounding of a Heinrich Zimmer or the psychological critique of a C.G. Jung. Scholars of Tantra such as Hugh Urban and David Gordon White have been critical of many of these contemporary forms, especially the weekend romance seminar format.³¹ Similarly,

³⁰ Esalen catalog, October 13, 1967.

³¹ See Urban, *Tantra*; and White, *Kiss of the Yogini*. White is more critical than Urban

Esalen administrators and leaders are often equally dismissive of anything smacking of this type of superficial or “Pleasure Tantra,” as it is sometimes called.³² In effect, the New Age has led to a historically groundless conflation of “Tantra” with the “sex workshop,” even as it has remained astonishingly ignorant of developments in Tantric Studies and how scholars now use the term to rigorously locate and describe a broad pan-Asian super tradition.

Urban and White are quite correct to point out the historically false conflation of “Tantra” with “sacred sex.” Tantra is much more than this. But it is also this. As someone, then, who wants to ground a history of Esalen in what are essentially mystico-erotic sensibilities, I approach the Esalen Tantric materials, very much with Urban, as imaginal fusions of Indian and American cultures. There is no place in a historian’s toolbox for gross illusions like cultural purity, religious essences, or unchanging tradition: everything is a mingling and merging, a transformation and a constant creation. Urban powerfully captures something of this truth with respect to American forms of Tantra when he writes:

Tantra, it would seem, lies at a pivotal intersection between Indian and American imaginations, at the nexus of a complex play of representations and misrepresentations between East and West taking place over the last two hundred years. Not only was it a crucial part of the Western “imagining of India,” particularly during the colonial era; but it has been no less crucial a part of the “re-imagining of America,” particularly during the eras of sexual liberation, feminism, gay rights and sexual politics at the turn of the new millennium.³³

I would only add a relevant geographic note here, namely, that, if Calcutta was the epicenter of this East-West fusion in the nineteenth-century, California, and in particular San Francisco and Big Sur, became

here. Urban, for example, is insistent that scholars should pay more critical attention to modern forms of Tantra, which he explicitly links to the history of Western esotericism via modern sexual magic. For his fullest statement on this latter thesis, see his *Magia Sexualis*.

³² The term “Pleasure Tantra” is derived from Victor Bliss and Nathan James, who use it to criticize the romance workshops of Marin County, just north of San Francisco: “I resent the way the easy self-help sex books and Marin-style Pleasure Tantra never address the issue of sexual addiction. There is something terribly deceitful about that, a kind of glossy betrayal” (*The ManTantra Letters*, 200). In a similar spirit, the authors also refer to “New Age woo woo” (262) and “Bay Area bullshit” (77).

³³ Urban, “The Omnipotent Oom.”

the epicenters of this Tantric re-imagining in the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s—from Bengal to Big Sur, as it were.

An Exemplum of the Thesis: The “Esalen Novel” of John Heider

When all is said and done, then, “Tantra” is a word, that is, a cultural reality, not a natural phenomenon (like hot water) or a physiological fact (like testosterone or a penis). It thus should not surprise us that its most dramatic appearances at Esalen are all in texts. There are far too many examples to note, much less to analyze here. There is, however, one particularly dramatic and instructive corpus of such appearances that deserves more attention and analysis than I could give it in my earlier study of Esalen’s history, the unpublished writings of John Heider.

John Heider lived at Esalen from 1967 until 1971 as a key encounter group leader and community personality. These were especially formative times for both the institute and for Heider. Happily, Heider kept a journal for most of this period and later composed numerous essays and even two novels as a means of working through or processing his experiences at Esalen and after. All of these texts remain unpublished. I have briefly analyzed the Tantric structure of Heider’s Esalen journal and a few of his essays in the earlier historiographic project. I was not able, however, to treat his novels. One of these, *Living in Paradox*, is particularly expressive of that same Tantric structure and so deserves much more attention here.

Living in Paradox: A Utopian Soap Opera (1976), is one long meditation on the charismatic magic and the moral failings of the Esalen countercultural experiment in which Heider participated in the late 1960s and early 70s. The novel focuses on a small fictional town in northeastern Kansas called Paradox, “Founded 1856. Population 2317. Elevation 1136 ft.”³⁴ Originally, the place was supposed to be called Paradise, but the cranky postmaster who applied for the post office box accidentally—but not unintentionally—put down “Paradox” instead.³⁵ And so it became. In this bit of mischievous misspelling, in this intentional mistake, lies the entire metaphysical sweep of the novel, which

³⁴ Heider, *Living in Paradox*, chapter 3, page 22 (henceforth LP, followed by chapter and page, for example, LP 3.22); used with permission of the author.

³⁵ LP 4.2.

moves from the Christian search for some final answer or complete salvation in an eternal and never-changing heaven, to a deeply Taoist sense of process and paradox, of reality as a never-ending cycle of conflicting opposites that are nevertheless deeply, erotically, related. From Paradise to Paradox, then: this is the structuring secret of both Heider's "fictional" text and his own real-life psychospiritual journey in and through Esalen.

The narrative of the novel involves a middle-aged Boston couple named Barry and Jean Baker. Barry is a successful lawyer, and Jean is one of Boston's many socialites. Suffering from a shared mid-life crisis of sorts, in March of 1967 they hop on a motorcycle and travel out to California (much like John and Anne Heider did that same summer) in order to attend an Esalen seminar led by Bill Schutz called "More Joy" (an actual seminar series which Heider, in real life, helped coordinate). Immensely turned on by the experience whose psychophysical breakthroughs remind Barry of the first time he and Jean made love in college (more on that later), they decide they have enough money and guts to try their hand at starting their own alternative community.

After their San Francisco bisexual friend, Gustavo, shows them around the Bay Area, hoping they will buy there, they finally decide to purchase an abandoned college property in Paradox, Kansas, instead. Gustavo is appalled, offering the usual platitudes about Kansas and suggesting that the state is precisely the black-and-white boredom the characters of "The Wizard of Oz" escaped *from* on their way to the delicious Technicolor brilliance of a California Oz. "*No one* goes to Kansas," Gustavo insists with his exaggerated horror. "You know they won't let me come too!" But Jean Baker knows better than to take so seriously the pretensions of the West (or the East) Coast. She thus compassionately answers Gustavo with a bit of midwestern paradox, that is, she answers in the middle: "Oh dear! Of course, they will let you in, Gustavo. There must be *some* homosexuals in Kansas. And even in the movie, the Tin Woodsman, the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow, Toto... Why, all of them, even the Wizard, were really from Kansas. The Land of Oz wasn't real, Gustavo. Dorothy was in an altered state of consciousness: she was hallucinating!"³⁶ Gustavo is eventually convinced and quickly warms up to the place recognizing, in the end, that Oz and Kansas are indeed the same place and that, as another character

³⁶ LP 3.12–13.

realizes later on in the novel through a bit of identified Tantric wisdom, “What is here is elsewhere. What is not here is nowhere.”³⁷

And indeed, Paradox turns out to have just about everything. The new college is thus able to draw a delightfully diverse crew from the furthest ends of the Bakers’ social spectrum: their daughter Claire, for example, insists on coming with them and asserting there her own spiritual and sexual freedoms, before them. Gustavo moves in and brings along Luz, his faithful housekeeper who also happens to be a psychically gifted *bruja* or witch. Later, he will bring along members of his gay community and settle into one of the college’s nicer homes, now dubbed “the Gentleman’s Club.” Brash young hippies, with names like Rasher, Tilt, Vision, and Ganja, show up after meeting the Bakers in the redwoods of California and reading about them in an alternative magazine. Similarly, a gifted Zen teacher named Max Schaeffer appears to play the meditation and awareness-is-everything card (he eventually learns that meditation is not everything),³⁸ as does Jubilo, an African-American veteran and masseur whose contemplative massages of white women draws the ire of a bit of hate-mail but the ultimate support of the college community: “We will take our risks, knowingly,” they conclude. A bit later, an African-American woman by the name of Ophelia shows up to attract Jubilo’s erotic attention and so effectively dispel the racial tensions.

Not that this was absolutely necessary. This, after all, was Bleeding Kansas, “the first battle ground of the Civil War” and an adamant defender of American individualism and the freedom of the slaves.³⁹ The citizens of Paradox, educated in this long and proud history of Kansas liberalism and a pragmatic live-and-let-be, quickly warm up to the new strange community among them. And why not? The new college is very good for business, and—not to be underestimated in any small town—it becomes a bottomless well of exciting gossip, almost all of it, oddly enough, basically true.

The college’s and community’s pre-histories, adventures, teachings, debates, joys and tragedies proceed through thirty-six chapters and over three years, with Barry Baker, having become “an adept at tantric sexual meditation,”⁴⁰ eventually traveling to Nepal to live a life of celibate

³⁷ LP 28.16.

³⁸ LP 7.22.

³⁹ LP 3.14.

⁴⁰ LP 23.11.

contemplation, Jean becoming Gustavo's lover while Barry is gone (with his full knowledge and ambiguous support), and Rasher, Vision, Ganja, Max and the rest wrestling through the limitless paradoxes, problems, and promises of spiritual, sexual, and political freedom. It is not easy being free.

Nor is it simple. The entire novel spins out these various complexities, almost all of them produced by a series of dynamic opposites that freedom must generate. There is, for example, that tension between individual freedom and community stability, between the need to nurture experimentation and the need to make money, or, more practically, between the traditional wisdom of home childbirth and an appreciation of the local hospital when these traditional methods fail.⁴¹

They also come to learn that neither pure conservatism nor pure liberalism will do, that each needs the other, that the pendulum will always swing back, and that traditionalism and stability are necessary for any effective revolution.⁴² Jean sees this almost immediately: "I just want a safe adventure," she tells her beloved Gustavo, "a little stable chaos, a revolution on a firm foundation! Maybe, I just want to live in paradox."⁴³ Interestingly, Heider appears to see this paradox as an apt expression of Kansas's geographic location in the exact middle of the country: Kansas *is* America's "neither East nor West," its both-and. Thus when the college comrades sign their Paradox Covenant, they do so on July 4, 1967, and seal the document with a Taoist yin-yang symbol.⁴⁴ So too one of the citizens of Paradox explains to Jean how "[t]he primary paradox in Kansas is being fiercely independent and at the same time respectful of others, cooperative, even in a way conformist."⁴⁵

It is in this midwestern American context that the novel embraces, translates, and eventually transforms into what it calls simply "tantra."⁴⁶ This thirty-six chapter process begins, though, not with an American

⁴¹ LP 32.22.

⁴² LP 29.11.

⁴³ LP 3.11.

⁴⁴ LP 8.26.

⁴⁵ LP 32.5.

⁴⁶ This cultural transmission is possible because of the metaphysics of Tantra itself, which finally denies the ultimacy of cultural and political boundaries through an affirmation of the universal (and always sexual) body: "What is here is elsewhere. What is not here is nowhere" (LP 13.23).

history lesson, nor a piece of geography, but with an act of physical love on a carpeted floor beneath a Chickering grand piano at Smith College, Jean's alma mater. It was there, beneath the piano, that a youthful Barry Baker and Jean Anshaw experienced what the Indian Upanishads had known as *ananda*, the "bliss" that undergirds the universe, and what Will Schutz was now claiming as his own human potential notion of "joy," that natural state of all human beings that can be actualized with the right techniques and attitudes.⁴⁷ The first few pages of *Living in Paradox* implicitly connects both this ancient bliss and this modern joy to the Baker's sexual ecstasy under the piano: "Bliss. Yes, the earth *had* moved, bells *had* rung, and neither could ever forget that absolute proof of the existence of God and the triumph of love that lingered for days and weeks."⁴⁸

One has the sense—I have the sense anyway—that the rest of the novel is an elaborate working out of this original erotic gnosis on page 6, that the novel, first and foremost, functions as a narrative setting for the proclamation and celebration of this real-life sexo-spiritual diamond. I am reminded here of Wilhelm Reich, who discovered something of immense metaphysical significance in the arms of an Italian girl with whom he had intercourse in 1916 while he was a soldier and spent the rest of his life trying to name it, eventually as a cosmic "orgone" (perhaps this is why Heider loves Reich so).

One also has the sense—I have the sense anyway—that, although Heider knew a great deal about comparative mystical literature, when he looked around for available and truly adequate symbols to express this original erotic gnosis, he could not find any in the Western religions. Like the American counterculture, he thus turned to Asian languages and iconographies, and more specifically to the Tao and the Tantra. Here he found what he was looking for. Here, he recognized something of himself. John Heider thus speaks through Jean Baker, who "[w]henever she heard mentioned the subject of sexual meditation," that is, the subject of tantra, she found her "ears pricking up," as if, she confessed, "something very deep in me" is being touched. "It feels almost like a memory from another incarnation."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ LP 1.3 and 1.4.

⁴⁸ LP 1.6.

⁴⁹ LP 13.23.

Heider more or less says the same in the novel, through the character of Max speaking to Richard, Gustavo's lover: "we have no widely-known Western traditions of spiritual sexuality. Oh, there's Oneida and Karezza and magnetic sex. But Christianity—that's our primary influence—doesn't have much to offer on the body. Nothing good below the diaphragm. Christians distrust pleasure, especially sexual pleasure."⁵⁰

"So what is Tantra in twenty five words or less?" Richard reasonably asks. Max answers back immediately, in twenty nine: "Tantric meditation opens the whole human body to the energies of sexual intercourse, refining and amplifying them, and creating a more perfect union between oneself, one's beloved, and God." More technically—and more practically—tantra is about having sex without coming, that is, it is a kind of contemplative *coitus reservatus*.⁵¹ Here is how it worked for the College community, through which tantra was spreading, "like a prairie fire."⁵² "Suppose," the lovely hippie muse, Horizon, explains to Jubilo, "Suppose we were naked. And you sat on a zafu [meditation pillow] with your legs crossed, like meditation, in the lotus position. And I sat down on you, in your lap, face to face, my legs around you, taking you up inside me. And we just sat that way, breathing in unison, for thirty minutes or even an hour."⁵³ Jubilo no doubt expresses the feelings of many a male reader when he confesses that he "couldn't take it." Still, that is what tantra is all about, at least for this novel. It is about riding sexual desire until it morphs into spiritual experience. It is about the paradoxical union of Spirit and Sex.

Although hardly reflective of all of Tantra in South Asia, much of which involves the literal production of sexual fluids (that is, coming) as sacrificial offerings to the Goddess,⁵⁴ such a practice bears a striking resemblance to the "male continence" techniques of John Humphrey Noyes, which the novel freely admits and connects literally to the Kansas Governor Charles Robinson, as well as to the *maithuna* or sexual inter-

⁵⁰ LP 26.13.

⁵¹ LP 11.16.

⁵² LP 15.10.

⁵³ LP 13.8.

⁵⁴ See especially White, *Kiss of the Yogini*. Heider's novel seems to intuit this "other history" through the character of Jordan, who claims that the "ultimate sacrifice" or loss of self involves him putting his penis in Vision and ejaculating. In this spirit, he thus asks Vision to go down into the coal mine shaft (which he likens to her vagina) with him, drop acid, and sit in sexual meditation, so that they can "die and be reborn together" (LP 26.28). This is much closer to the early history of Tantra in South Asia. It is also basically identical (minus the coal shaft) to the Upanishadic understanding of sexuality-as-sacrifice.

course rituals of Huxley's fictional island of Pala, which the novel seems to be aware of but does not mention as such.⁵⁵ Tantra as *coitus reservatus*, in other words, closely resembles earlier Western experiments. As such, it is something of both an East-West fusion and a reflection of the state of knowledge of Tantric practices in the 60s and 70s, which more or less equated the tradition with, well, not coming.

But even Tantra is not sufficient unto itself. It too must be balanced by its opposites, that is, by Christianity, the West, and what the novel calls simply the Law. Barry Baker, at least, insists on what he calls the paradox of the Way and the Law, which at one point he sees incarnated, of all places, in the "burning bush" of Ophelia's vagina.⁵⁶ The Way or Tao may need the Law, but in the end both are subsumed within the Tantra. One of the California hippies, Ganja,⁵⁷ also becomes a spokesperson here by his double claim that "[a]ll creation is dualistic, consisting of a dance of opposites," and that we are not whole and become sick primarily and most deeply because of sexuality and gender: "Deeper than race or religion or nation, deeper than neurosis or psychosis, or even species is sex," he insists. If we wish to become truly whole, then, Ganja claims that we must escape the trap of *yin* or *yang*, that is, we must escape the trap of sexual differentiation or gender itself.⁵⁸

This, it turns out, is one of the final and most radical claims of the novel. It is one of the deepest meanings of truly "living in paradox." The novel itself suggests that Huxley knew about this attempt to go beyond gender, that the earliest Christian priests had Agapetae, or female ritual lovers, and that both the early Christian Gnostics and the later Catholic moralists permitted a form of *coitus reservatus*, the latter "claiming that it was known to Adam in the Garden and therefore a part of Paradise."⁵⁹

Here we come to my alliterative thesis again "from Paradise to Paradox," that is, here we finally arrive at a return to Paradise, not through the ascetic and certain means of salvation and the Gospel of Paul, but through the Goddess of the Gnostics and their sexual meditations,⁶⁰ here joined to the contemplative techniques of Asian Tantra. The Gospel

⁵⁵ LP 15.3–5 and 9.8.

⁵⁶ LP 23.25.

⁵⁷ While more popularly associated in the West with Rastafarianism, ganja is, originally, an Indian term for marijuana.

⁵⁸ LP 34.4–5.

⁵⁹ LP 13.18.

⁶⁰ Paul, Barry Baker points out, believed that sex and Spirit don't mix; "Paul never tried tantra" said Barry. "Paul never tried anything," grumped Gustavo" (LP 23.18).

meets the Goddess. Or in Barry Baker's words now: "We are discovering a new way, an American Tao, a Western Sadhana, a New Path Up The Mountain."⁶¹ By such a Path, Paradise has become Paradox, and a little town in Kansas has become the center of the universe. And why not? "What is here is elsewhere. What is not here is nowhere."

Heider's *Living in Paradox* is one of the fullest and most insightful analyses of Esalen of which I am aware. Writing the novel was a way of doing history for Heider, who realized that a traditional and published historical account would upset many and offend more than few. He could say what he wanted to say and remember what he wanted to remember in the format of fiction, however. That was different. And so this is what he did. He wrote a work of fiction that was largely factual. He revealed the truth by concealing the truth. But the Tantric transmission remained encoded into the heart of the text. How could it not? It was central to that sexual-textual history.

Re-Orienting the Tantra

This same Esalen Tantra hardly went away as the decades ticked by. In some ways, it increased; in other ways, it changed. Partly, this was a reflection of the academic culture. By the mid-1990s, Tantric Studies was enjoying a kind of broad cultural awakening, with a large group of highly trained scholars—many of them emerging from a deeply existential and sometimes psychedelic engagement with the counter-culture—churning out hundreds of technical studies and translations. Moreover, both the interpretive potential and the liberalizing social trajectories of the feminist, gay, and lesbian movements were also having their effects, as books on the Tantric traditions began to appear that turned to gender theory and the question of sexual orientation to re-interpret traditional Asian texts. The results were often provocative. Drawing on these same broad intellectual shifts, other more popular texts grounded in extensive personal experience and practice were also being written. Two that were connected to Esalen are worth mentioning here as a prelude to closing.

Victor Bliss (a pen-name of an Esalen regular) and Nathan James wrote *The ManTantra Letters*, an explicitly homoerotic text that explores

⁶¹ LP 25.6.

many of the western Tantric themes that we have been tracing all along. This is hardly the kind of superficial popularization that one often reads about in the scholarly literature. To take just a few of its literally hundreds of themes: Freud, Reich, and Jung are treated as proto-Tantric thinkers;⁶² Plato, particularly in the erotic dialogues of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, is understood as a gnostic tantric;⁶³ Rumi is read as a poetic master of manlove;⁶⁴ San Francisco (complete with an unflinching gaze into the horrors of the AIDS epidemic) becomes “the most tantric town;”⁶⁵ LSD is experienced as an initiation into Buddhist emptiness;⁶⁶ gay sexuality is linked to Freud and Tantric eroticism through their mutual breaking of exclusive genital sexuality and their understanding of the fundamental mobility or fluidity of desire;⁶⁷ the *cakras* and tantric body are described as “entirely fantasmatic,” that is, they are a “pure product of the imagination,” “a fantasy body that nevertheless has real effects”;⁶⁸ and the standard heterosexuality of Tantric and Taoist symbolism is explicitly rejected as “the sexual activity of straight couples elevated to the level of a mystery religion,” that is, as politics mistakenly projected as universal metaphysics.⁶⁹ Moreover, and most impressively, a sophisticated mystico-erotic theory (linked to Freud’s notion of sublimation) is constructed to explain how Tantric ritual can uncouple desire from its usual objects and so allow it to fly past its target into altered states of consciousness and energy, including

⁶² Bliss and James, *The ManTantra Letters*, 30, 274–277.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 207–208, 317. Bliss links the Greek *gnosis* to the Sanskrit *jñana* (*ibid.*, 246, 283), which in fact share the same Indo-European root.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 276–277.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 277. This is James’s position. Bliss responds that the tantric body is neither arbitrary nor merely a product of the subjective imagination; rather, it is an expression of a different kind of objectivity, “really a trans-subjective, or trans-consciousness objectivity, which reflects the actual universal structure of each and every consciousness” (*ibid.*, 282).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 163–181. Bliss is again less critical here than James, seeing “the heterosexual bias” of Tantra as an inevitable expression of procreation and the physiology of the vagina, which is entered, and the phallus, which enters, and linking all of this to the *yin-yang* symbolism of Taoism. Such symbolism is “primordial,” Bliss insists, “and no gays shouting protests from the rooftops are ever going to change it one iota” (165). Perhaps this is why Bliss’s guru, Bhagwan Rajneesh, condemned homosexuality (*ibid.*, 75–76). In any case, Bliss observes that, “we have to keep in mind that we are an experiment” (*ibid.*, 166).

the *yin* or valley orgasm of bliss and the *yang* of ecstasy (note again the merging of the Tantra and the Tao).⁷⁰

Not unlike Heider's movement "from Paradise to Paradox," Bliss also tracks a definite personal transformation from Christianity to Asian Tantra around what he calls "the whole sexual contradiction in Christianity," which he intuits as the tradition's simultaneous encoding of anti-sex teachings and a rich homoerotic imagery shadowed by the specter of pederastic abuse: "It happened when I was in my early teens trying to pray my way out of my sexuality. I was doing tolerably well, though when I was in church, I kept finding myself eyeing that naked man up on the cross, not quite comfortable about the way it made me feel in my loins." He then relates how an Episcopalian priest tried to seduce him at a summer church camp: "I repelled him (his come-on was pretty creepy), but then—I promptly threw up." From this he concluded that the church's "position on sex is untenable, as ludicrous as that priest," and that such contradictions would one day "blow up right in the face of the church." He also recognized, however, that all religions tend to generate in precisely this way, and that Christianity, particularly in its gospel genius of unconditional love, could be so much more than "the fundamentalism flaying us today," the Catholicism that brought us the Inquisition, and the Puritanism of the early colonists. Bliss, in other words, does not romanticize the East, nor does he dismiss Christianity. He recognizes the excessive moral controls of all the traditions, and he turns to Tantra not because it is perfect, but because "of all the religious disciplines, it seems most sex friendly."⁷¹

Especially pertinent here is the book's fundamental distinction between what it calls "yoga" and "tantra," a distinction Bliss learned from years of studying at the feet of the Hindu Tantric guru Bhagwan Rajneesh (only after he had studied Sanskrit and the Upanishads in Benares for two full years). Here is how he put it in correspondence with me in response to the present essay and its Tantric transmission thesis:

⁷⁰ For the mystico-erotic theorizing, see *ibid.*, 103, 105, 211, 242, 276–277, 296, 328. For the Taoist *yin* and *yang* language, see *ibid.*, 190–191, 251.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 5–7. This letter is dated February 25, 1992, that is, about ten years before the Boston clerical scandals made all of these issues patently, tragically obvious, if never really resolved. James also shares Bliss's homoerotic reading of Christianity. Hence later in the text he will read a painting at the Louvre of Thomas sticking his fingers in Christ's wounds as a symbolic form of anal penetration (*ibid.*, 49).

The conception that Bhagwan introduced to me and that I have maintained ever since is that yoga and tantra represent fundamentally different psychological dispositions towards transcendence. Yoga is the disposition to achieve some ideal state of being, and tantra is the counter disposition to arrive at wholeness or fullness. Restraint and posture is the yogic discipline; surrender is the tantric discipline. This has been very clarifying to me psychologically and historically. Freud was critical here. He saw that devotion to the ego ideal (the superego) generated pathology, and his prescription to own the disowned shifted the ethos to tantrism, a striving for wholeness which has been the basis of therapy since Freud, via Jung and Gestalt, and pervades virtually all of the Esalen new therapies and the California “optimysticism.”⁷²

In the book itself, Bliss makes the exact same distinction, adding that yogis tend to be “ordered, disciplined, and moralistic,” whereas Tantrics tend to be “very quirky, individualistic, and often anarchistic, as they break through their own inauthenticity and raise hell with the order of established society.”⁷³ If the Western yogis of the 1970s, then, were shown again and again to be hypocrites, preaching celibacy in public but keeping all sorts of sexual skeletons in their closets, the Tantrics “are richly adorned with their skeletons,” that is, they hang their skeletons in the living room for all to see.⁷⁴ Put differently and much more abstractly, generally speaking, whereas either/or thinking is “very yogic” and is linked to the moral judgments and exile of Original Sin (with all the attending repression, denial, and hypocrisy this entails), both/and thinking is “very tantric” and is related to being itself, the play of opposites, and the unity of extremes, “where spirit and flesh truly meet.”⁷⁵ We are back, in other words, to a familiar movement “from Paradise to Paradox.”

After his years with Rajneesh, whom he affectionately refers to as “truly the bad boy of 20th century Gurus” and “a Master of Left

⁷² Private correspondence, 22 October 2006. In this movement from the Upanishads to tantric sexual practice and in this linking of Tantra to Western psychoanalysis and Esalen, Bliss’s spiritual life beautifully and powerfully recapitulates the paradigmatic movement “from Vedanta to Tantra” I have studied in Ramakrishna’s life in *Kali’s Child* and that I have identified as the fundamental metaphysical pattern of the later American countercultural translations of Asian religions in *Esalen*, “Remembering Ourselves,” and now the present essay.

⁷³ Bliss and James, *The ManTantra Letters*, 29.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 34, 45, 156. It is the Christian promise of the union of spirit and flesh that initially set Bliss on his path to Tantra (298). The reference to being is also significant, as Bliss had written his Ph.D. dissertation on Martin Heidegger (*ibid.*, 27).

Handed tantra,⁷⁶ Bliss spent the 1990s studying what he calls a non-sexual form of Buddhist Tantra (Vajrayana). *The ManTantra Letters* are, in effect, an attempt to synthesize these “left-handed” and “right-handed” methods into a new wholeness, a new yoga/tantra polarity whereby “sexuality becomes an expression of the spirit, and spirit becomes an expression of sexuality.”⁷⁷

Also relevant here is the work of Marina T. Romero and Ramon V. Albareda, two contemporary Spanish teachers who, with the collaboration of the transpersonal theorist Jorge Ferrer, have taught a form of sexual-spiritual practice at Esalen that manifests some quite extraordinary similarities to (and important differences from) traditional forms of Tantra. Called Holistic Sexuality (or Holistic Integration), the technique is based on over three decades of work with individuals and couples from around the world and is offered in the integral and evolutionary language of the human potential movement. The authors, for example, speak often of “sexuality, spirituality, and human evolution” (the subtitle of one of their essays),⁷⁸ of “integral evolution,” and of the need of practice-based approaches, even as they are also very careful to distance themselves from any traditional religion. Theirs, in my own terms now, is a sexual-spiritual practice of the religion of no religion.

The system works by positing two basic field of human nature: “the energy of transcendent consciousness” and “the dark energy.” The latter expression refers to “an energetic state in which all potentialities are still undifferentiated and, therefore, cannot be seen by the ‘light’ of consciousness.”⁷⁹ This same dark energy is also considered to be the source of all spiritual creativity and innovation; it is the secret of new spiritualities, the *prima materia* of the religion of no religion. Such energy certainly cannot be reduced to simple “sexuality,” but sexuality remains one of its first and most important “soils” for organization and development.

Suggesting that much of the history of religions consists of the privileging of transcendent modes of consciousness that are actually states of dissociation from the body and nature, Romero and Albareda call for a new integration of transcendent consciousness and dark energy within the analogical language of a single “magnetic field.”

⁷⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 8, 327.

⁷⁸ Romero and Albareda, “Born on Earth.”

⁷⁹ Ferrer, “Integral Transformative Practice,” 29.

Only within such a new spiritual-sexual integration can the debilitating spiritual and cultural effects of sexual repression, condemnation, and consequent shame be reversed and new modes of consciousness and energy be developed (“from Paradise to Paradox” again). The actual work of the Spaniards at Esalen has thus involved teaching individuals and couples how to reconnect with their own dark energy field and “magnetize” this into creative communion with their different states of consciousness as these manifest in everyday life, human relationship, and spiritual experience.

Such a practice may initially look like traditional Asian forms of Tantra, but the differences are deep and important ones. To begin with, there is no sexual intercourse in Holistic Sexuality. As Ferrer explained it to me, sexual intercourse is “the road most traveled” for sexual energy, “and so it tends to move in more conditioned circuits within the organism.” Abstaining from intercourse while arousing these energies in contemplative and deeply relational ways thus allows other paths and circuits, roads less traveled, to be explored. We have here, that is, another form of the decoupling of desire from genitality.

Foremost among these roads less traveled is the one toward a fuller and fuller integration of consciousness and energy. Hence sexual energies are never employed to propel consciousness into expanded or transcendent states of disembodiment. Rather, Holistic Sexuality “seeks to catalyze a genuine integration of consciousness and energy at all levels of the person (somatic, vital emotional, mental, etc.)” This latter process of integration involves the mutual transformation of consciousness and energy, so that consciousness becomes eroticized and the instinctual drives are “awakened” into fuller forms of awareness. In this same spirit, the method rejects all the usual patriarchal structures of authority of the traditional Asian systems (so prominent in the various guru scandals of the 1970s and 80s), as well as that standard sexual imagery whereby consciousness is understood as male and energy or matter is understood as female (we have already seen Heider and Nathan James rejecting the same symbolic equations). Finally, Holistic Sexuality is much more oriented toward humanistic and environmental values than specifically religious ones. Accordingly, the practice seeks no transhuman states of divinity and insists that our true home is right here, on planet earth.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ These last two paragraphs are based on a personal communication with Jorge Ferrer on 18 October 2006.

The Tiger and the Lamb

When Joseph Campbell edited Zimmer's *Philosophies of India*, he chose to begin and end the book with Ramakrishna. It is not entirely clear why he chose to do this. Perhaps he did so because a few years earlier he had been working with Swami Nikhilananda on the latter's classic translation of the Bengali *Kathamrta* into English, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1942). Or perhaps it was because Campbell first met Zimmer at a Jungian dinner party hosted and prepared by Nikhilananda.⁸¹ I suspect, however, that the reasons go much deeper than either temporal coincidence or cuisine and ultimately involve Campbell's and Zimmer's metaphysics, which, as I have already noted, were both essentially Tantric in structure and rhetorical accent.

We have already seen that the very first chapter of *Philosophies of India* was inspired by Ramakrishna's parable of the young tiger raised by goats and his subsequent roar of awakening at the insistent teaching and forceful paws of an older tiger. In the fifth and final chapter of the book on Tantra (which Campbell makes clear he himself wrote almost entirely, if from Zimmer's notes), the author returns again to Ramakrishna, as if to finally suggest the Tantric moral of the first story and, with it, the Tantric secret subtext of all of Indian philosophy. For although Western scholars may have first been introduced to the ascetic and dualistic modes of Hindu and Buddhist tradition (Advaita Vedanta and Theravada Buddhism), "in recent years the power and profundity of the Tantric system have begun to be appreciated, and therewith has been facilitated a new understanding of Indian life and art."⁸² For Campbell-speaking-as-Zimmer, at least, it is the dialectic tension between the old dualistic asceticism and the later Tantrism and their eventual synthesis in "the courageous esotericism of the Tantras and in the Tantric Mahayana [Buddhism]"⁸³ that has brought to pass "the miracle of Indian civilization."⁸⁴

Campbell takes "Kali, the dark and beautiful Goddess-Dancer of the Cremation Ground"⁸⁵ as the archetypal deity of this miracle

⁸¹ Doniger, "The King and the Corpse."

⁸² Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 597.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 601.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 599.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 580.

and Ramakrishna, her most famous devotee, as its clearest and most modern exponent. But there is a real problem here, and Campbell knows it. Hence he points out that although Ramakrishna certainly preached a Tantric worldview that divinizes the material world as an energetic manifestation of transcendent consciousness, he in fact largely rejected both the world-affirming implications of this philosophy and the radical sexual techniques of its sacramental expression.⁸⁶ And in this, Campbell suggests, Ramakrishna accurately represents much of modern Hinduism, for “[n]either the saintly nor the gentlemanly Hindu of today . . . favors the boldness of this heroic view. Instead, the attitude formerly assigned to the *pasu* [the ‘animal’ or ‘beast’] is recommended for all, that namely of worshiping the life force (*sakti*) not as the Bride but as the Mother, and thus submitting, like a child, to a sort of sacramental castration.”⁸⁷ Campbell, again as Zimmer, glosses this child-like approach to divinity as the “safe-and-sane sadhana [spiritual practice] of the pious lamb.”⁸⁸

This latter phrase is very telling. Although the Tantric distinction between the spiritual states and capacities of the three classes of human beings—*pasu*, *vira* and *divya* or Beast, Hero and Deity—is a traditional one, I am aware of no Indian text in which the *pasu* is framed as a lamb, nor in which an approach to the Shakti as Mother is considered “beast-like,” nor for that matter one in which the *divya* is glossed as “the Man-God” (another clear but subtle and quite heretical Christianization). These changes, though, echo Vivekananda’s nineteenth-century transformation of the goat of the opening parable into the lamb of his Chicago speech in order to criticize Christianity’s obsession with sin and his call for the divinization of each and every Self.

But Campbell is clearly up to something different than Vivekananda was. The flock of goats at the beginning of the book and the lamb as “the dark-witted animal of the herd”⁸⁹ here at the end serve as a kind of framing device that he seems to be using to suggest the esoteric message of the entire six-hundred-page book, namely, that the secret of Indian philosophy, its grandest dialectical achievement, lies in Buddhist

⁸⁶ This, by the way, was one of the major theses of my own *Kali’s Child*, where I also explain the seeming paradox of how the saint could divinize the world and reject (hetero)sexual contact at the same time: his “orientation” (*bhava*) was homoerotic.

⁸⁷ Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 589.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 591.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 588.

and Hindu Tantra, a *Tantra*, however, that modern Hinduism rejects. And this changes the meaning of the opening tiger tale yet again, for now we no longer have either a Vedantic parable about awakening to one's inner immortal Self (as we seem to have in the original Bengali story), nor a Hindu polemic against Christian notions of sin and salvation (as we quite clearly have in Vivekananda's transformation of the story in 1893), but rather a Tantric tale about a tiger refusing the vegetarian and "pure" ways of orthodox Hinduism for the heterodox meat-eating truths of Asian Tantra, be it Hindu, Buddhist, or otherwise.

There are many ways to read Esalen's own tiger tale, its own roar of awakening. Certainly, via Huxley's and Heard's American brand of Advaita Vedanta and their adoption of some form of the perennial philosophy, there is a real emphasis here on the Self as the immortal, eternal base of all such experience, and with it, a certain ascetic tendency (this was particularly apparent in Gerald Heard). But there is also something vaguely but remarkably "Tantric" about all of this.⁹⁰ When Campbell writes, then, on the very last page of *Philosophies of India* in 1951 that, "[t]he idea of the godhood of the individual is thus democratized in the Tantra, because understood psychologically instead of sociopolitically,"⁹¹ what I suspect he is really writing about is his own Western adoption of Tantra, a Western transmission that was later furthered at Esalen, partly by Campbell himself, Heinrich Zimmer's most famous disciple.

Simply put, I read Campbell as I read many other Esalen figures, that is, as a transmitter of Tantra-related ideas into American culture, transmuted and translated through a general psychoanalytic lens. With Campbell, this is hardly simply a creative interpretive projection, since, as I have already noted, very early in his career, Campbell both helped to translate a Bengali Shakta Tantric text into American English (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*). As we have seen as well, he also more or less wrote the Tantric summary and summation of Heinrich Zimmer's influential *Philosophies of India*. I would argue that these were two formative acts for Campbell, and that something of these two texts carry forward through Campbell's entire corpus, certainly not as a definitive or final conclusion, but as a constant guiding inspira-

⁹⁰ See Matthew Kapstein, "Schopenhauer's Shakti." Kapstein makes the case, as I have here, that *Philosophies of India* is driven by a clear Tantric subtext.

⁹¹ Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 602.

tion. From the hero figure itself (the *vira* or hero is a central theme in most Tantric systems), the hero's supernormal powers (the Tantric *siddhis*), and his mystical marriage with the Great (Mother) Goddess, to Campbell's provocative deconstructions of religious orthodoxies of all kinds, his consistent employment of *kundalini yoga*, his unitive or nondual metaphysic, and his understanding of mythology as an expression of the human body, actual Tantric or Tantra-like themes can be traced throughout his corpus.

Appropriately, then, when Campbell sat down at Esalen with Phil Cousineau in 1982 to reflect back on his life and work, those published reflections end precisely as Zimmer's *Philosophies of India* once began, that is, with the now familiar Tantric parable from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Once again, Campbell tells the story of a vegetarian tiger cub raised in a flock of goats who has to be shocked into his own tiger-identity by another tiger, who forces him to transgress his own conditioned feelings of disgust and social propriety in order to eat meat (it is probably no accident that Campbell had a special fondness for rare roast beef). Campbell summarizes the moral of the parable as the secret of his entire lifework.

There's a moral here, of course. It is that we're all really tigers living here as goats. The function of sociology and most of our religious education is to teach us to be goats. But the function of the proper interpretation of mythological symbols and meditation discipline is to introduce you to your tiger face. Then comes the problem. You've found your tiger face but you're still living here with these goats. How are you going to do that? ... When al-Hallaj or Jesus let the orthodox community know that they were tigers, they were crucified. And so the Sufis learned the lesson at that time with the death of al-Hallaj, around A.D. 900. And it is: You wear the outer garment of the law; you behave like everyone else. And you wear the inner garment of the mystic way. Now that's the great secret of life. So with that I commit you all to be tigers in the world. But don't let anybody know it!⁹²

This was Joe Campbell's western esotericism. We are not who we think we are. We are not who our societies and religions tell us we are. Social science doesn't have the answer, but mythology does. We are not vegetarian goats. We are meat-eating tigers. We are not simply human. We are also divine. But it is best not to tell anyone this astonishing

⁹² Campbell, *The Hero's Journey*, 232.

secret, despite the odd fact that Campbell himself just did, in a widely circulated book no less (admittedly published posthumously).

It should hardly surprise us that so many of the Esalen actors turned to some direct or distant form of Tantric esotericism and eroticism if not for their answers, then at least for their inspirations. Nor should it surprise us that conservative forces, within both American and Indian culture, would later seek to suppress or deny these same countercultural energies. The goat herd calls back the tiger cub.

Such anyway is how I hear Esalen's roar of awakening and interpret many of its erotic echoes reverberating down through the decades. If one listens closely enough, one can still hear the roar and smell the flesh.

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INDEX OF PERSONS

- Aasdalen, Unn Irene, 175
 Abhinavagupta, 410
 Abraham ben David, Rabbi, 138
 Abraham Ḥayyim of Zlotchov, Rabbi, 135
 Abraham Yehoshu‘a Heschel of Apta, Rabbi, 121–123, 134–135, 152
 Abrams, Daniel, 66, 73, 86, 91, 114
 Abulafia, Abraham, 66–67, 73, 86–90, 92, 100, 124–130, 144, 147
 Abulafia, Todros, 73
 Achilles Tatius, 38
 Adams, C.F., 255
 Agamavagisha, Krishnananda, 408, 435, 437
 Agli, Antonio degli, 178
 Aḥa bar Jacob, Rabbi, 71
 Aharon ha-Kohen of Apta, Rabbi, 133, 138–139, 144, 146, 152
 Aharon of Zhitomir, Rabbi, 120, 152
 Albareda, Ramon V., 512
 Albert the Great, 156–157, 219–220
 Alcinous, 187
 Aleramo, Sibilla, 462
 Alexander, Jon, 485
 Alexandrian, Sarane, 370, 467, 470
 al-Hakam, 55
 al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī, 55
 al-Hallaj, 517
 Allen, Michael J.B., 175, 184, 187, 192
 Allen, Sally G., 266
 Allison, Dale C., 69
 al-Mujāwir, Ibn, 57–58
 Altman, Dennis, 439
 Altmann, Alexander, 69, 86, 89, 138
 ‘Amr ibn ‘Alī ibn Muqbil, 57
 ‘Amr ibn Yarbū‘, 54
 Anand, Margo, 406
 André, Marie-Sophie, 375–376
 Anel-Kham, B., *see* Meslin, Henri
 Anglo, Sidney, 243
 Antes, Peter, ix
 Aouattah, Ali, 60
 Apollonius of Tyana, 356
 Appenfeller, Johann Georg, 292
 Aqiva, Rabbi, 71
 Aquinas, Thomas, 244–245, 248, 256
 Aragona, Tullia d’, 175
 Arenbergh, Emile van, 372
 Aristotle, 39, 128, 186, 192, 216, 234, 244, 256, 271, 461
 Arnold, Gottfried, 290–292, 295
 Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, Rabbi, 120–122, 140, 143
 Astell, Ann, 154
 Attridge, H., 26, 29–30
 Aubrey, John, 240
 Augustine, Aurelius, 43–44, 245, 249–250, 252, 268
 Aurobindo Ghose, Sri, 480–481, 496, 499
 Avalon, Arthur, 407, 412, 414, 416, 487, 495, 497–498
 Avicenna, 73
 Ayton, William Alexander, 356
 Azriel of Gerona, Rabbi, 73, 115–116

 Baader, Franz X. von, 285, 296–297
 Ba‘al Shem Tov, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, *see* Besht, The
 Babcock, Barbara, 252
 Bacon, Francis, 240, 251, 315–316
 Badr al-dīn al-Shiblī, 53
 Bahya ben Asher, 84–85
 Baigent, Michael, 385
 Bajjah, Ibn, 128
 Baker Roshi, Richard, 497
 Bakhtin, M., 241
 Bal, Mieke, 249
 Ballou, Robert O., 489
 Balsamo, Giuseppe, *see* Cagliostro
 Barba, Pompeo della, 175
 Barhadbešabbā, 18
 Barkun, Michael, xi
 Barnay, Sylvie, 155
 Barnett, D.L., 412
 Barrett, Francis, 355
 Barth, August, 413
 Barukh of Kosov, Rabbi, 143
 Basil Valentine, 210
 Bateson, Gregory, 482
 Battain, Tiziana, 58
 Bauhin, Caspar, 257
 Baxter, Richard, 260
 Beauvils, Christophe, 375–376
 Beccadelli, Antonio, 190

- Beek, Gottfried zur, 427
 Behari Ghose, Atal, 414
 Bell, Susan G., 254
 Bellin da Modena, Niccolò, 257
 Belzen, Jacob, 479
 Bembo, Pietro, 175, 196
 Benavides, Gustavo, 404
 Benci, Tommaso, 178
 Benedict, Barbara M., 251–252
 Benivieni, Girolamo, 186
 Benjamin of Zalisch, Rabbi, 116, 121
 Benjamin of Zalosch, Rabbi, 137
 Benko, S., 11, 16
 Berezin, Gabriela, 111, 124, 131
 Bernard of Clairvaux, 157, 165–166, 171
 Bernard of Trier, Pseudo-, 222–224
 Bernard, Arnold, 438
 Bernard, Pierre Arnold, 438, 496
 Bernardino, St., 256
 Berry, Duc de, 258
 Bertholet, Eduard, 473
 Besht, The, 118, 131–133, 135, 137–140, 142–143, 145, 147, 152
 Betussi, Giuseppe, 175
 Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *see* Osho
 Bhaskararaya, 410
 Biale, David, 66, 96, 253
 Bianchi, Ugo, 24
 Birven, Henri, 370
 Blake, William, 479
 Blavatsky, Helena P., xv, 453
 Bliss, Victor, 500, 508–512
 Blochman, Elizabeth, 235
 Bloch, Ruth, 235
 Bloom, Harold, 96
 Blum, Paul Richard, 184
 Boccaccio, 195
 Bockmühl, Markus, 69
 Boehme, Jacob, 281–283, 285, 292–293, 335, 338–339, 340, 360
 Boerhaave, Hermann, 216
 Bonus, Petrus, 220
 Borges, Jorge Luis, 65
 Bosch, Hieronymus, 485
 Boudet, Jean-Patrice, 155
 Boullan, Abbé, 364
 Bourdieu, Pierre, 271
 Bouyer, Louis, 488
 Boyle, Robert, 220–221
 Brandano, Ilario, 456
 Brashler, J., 5
 Braude, Ann, 310, 386
 Brauner, Sigrid, 232
 Brezze, William, 369, 396–397
 Bregman, Marc, 71
 Breton, Nicholas, 240
 Britten, Emma Hardinge, 311, 357
 Brodsky, Michel, 374
 Brody, Seth, 115
 Broedel, Hans Peter, 242, 247–249, 273
 Broek, Roelof van den, iv, xii, 1–2, 11, 16, 18, 391, 520
 Brooks, Douglas, 406–410
 Brossel, Nicolas, 375
 Broudéhoux, J.-P., 36
 Brown, Dan, xi, 385
 Brown, Peter, 236
 Brunelli, F., 453
 Bruni, Leonardo, 185
 Bruno, Giordano, xvi, xix, 175, 177, 182, 187, 195, 197–203, 197–205, 251
 Buber, Martin, 142, 152
 Bucher, Stefan, 95
 Buckley, J.J., 27, 34
 Bugge, John, 249
 Bulwer Lytton, Edward, 355, 356, 453
 Burke, Patricke, 95
 Burton, Richard Francis, 414
 Burton, Robert, 270
 Bush, George, 337
 Buttlar, Eva von, 292
 Caesarius of Heisterbach, 245
 Cagliostro, 357, 359, 365, 395, 419, 452–453
 Cahagnet, Louis-Alphonse, 357
 Cairns, Huntington, 181
 Caldwell, Sarah, 408
 Calvin, John, 268
 Camelin, Sylvaine, 58
 Campbell, Joseph, 492, 494, 497–499, 514–518
 Camporeale, Salvatore, 245
 Capiferro, Giuseppe Maddalena, 453
 Carpenter, Edward, 323, 429
 Carr, Amelia, 153
 Carroll, Bret, 328
 Carteret, Jean, 467
 Castiglione, Baldassare, 175, 196–197
 Catenaia, Umberto Amedeo Alberti di, 459
 Cato, 272
 Cauwenberghe, Marie van, 372
 Cavalcanti, Giovanni, 178, 183–184, 187–189, 192–193, 196
 Cazzaniga, Gianmario, 384

- Certeau, Michel de, 488
 Chanel, Christian, 366, 395
 Cheetham, Tom, 49
 Chelhod, Joseph, 51–52, 54
 Chevaillier, Alzire, 341
 Cicero, 186
 Cioffi, Rosanna, 452
 Clairembault, Dominique, 295, 375
 Claisse, Renée, 59
 Clark, John R., 183
 Clark, Stuart, 234–235, 238–241
 Clarke, Susanna, 355
 Clarkson, Lawrence, 352
 Classen, Albrecht, 255
 Clement of Alexandria, xi, 8, 10, 24,
 26, 28–30, 33–37, 42, 44–45
 Clerbois, Sébastien, 372, 375–376
 Clymer, Reuben Swinburne, 366
 Cobb, William, 323
 Cohn, Norman, 272
 Colebrooke, H.T., 412
 Collins, Lynn, 406
 Comi, Girolamo, 462
 Conze, Edward, 487
 Coomans de Brachène, Oscar, 372
 Coomaraswamy, Ananda, 490
 Coppe, Abiezer, 351–352
 Corbin, Henry, 49–50
 Corbusier, Le (Charles-Édouard
 Jeanneret-Gris), 466
 Cornaro, Elena, 254
 Corradini, Antonio, 452
 Correll, Barbara, 259–260, 271–272
 Corsi, J., 178
 Cosimo de' Medici, 185
 Coudert, Allison P., iv, xiv, 53, 231, 249,
 267, 520
 Couliano, Ioan P., 365
 Cousineau, Phil, 517
 Cox, Harvey, 484–485, 492
 Crapanzano, Vincent, 59–62
 Crisp, Tobias, 351, 352
 Crowley, Aleister, xix, 370, 386,
 392–397, 405, 428–435, 428–435,
 444–446, 487
 Cupitt, Don, 488
 Curwen, David, 431
 Cush, Denise, 498
 Cyril of Alexandria, 44

 Daffi, Marco, *see* Ricciardelli, Libero
 Dall'Orto, Giovanni, 184, 186, 188,
 193, 196
 Dánann, Alexandre de, 458

 Dante Alighieri, 195
 Daston, Lorraine, 234, 257
 Daumas, F., 5
 David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, 78, 95
 David ben Zimra, Rabbi, 130
 Davis, Andrew Jackson, 325, 327, 336,
 343, 358–359, 361
 Davis, Natalie Z., 252, 256, 268
 Debus, Allen G., 225
 DeConick, April, iv, xii, xvii, xix, 3, 10,
 17, 19, 23, 34, 520
 Dedekind, Friedrich, 271–272
 Deghaye, Pierre, 290
 Dekker, Thomas, 271
 Demaitre, Edmond, 410, 413
 DeMaria, Richard, 336
 Deming, W., 36
 Derrida, Jacques, 96
 Despeux, Cathérine, 460
 Deveney, John Patrick, iv, xii, xix,
 333, 355–357, 362, 370, 386, 395,
 415–418, 445, 486–487, 520
 Devereux, Georges, 261
 Devereux, James A., 178
 Dexter, George, 315, 317
 Diacceto, Francesco, 175
 Dicaearchus of Messene, 186
 Didymus the Blind, 44
 Diogenes Laertius, 185
 Dionysius Areopagita, Pseudo- 154, 156,
 179
 Dirkse, P.A., 5, 10
 Dodds, E.R., 179
 Dolan, Frances, 254–255
 Doniger, Wendy, xviii, 514
 Donovan, Steve, 497
 Dorbon, Louis, 375
 Douglas, Nik, 437
 Douglass, Frederick, 328
 Douglass, Jane D., 255
 Doutreleau, L., 27, 35, 40–41
 Dove, Mary, 161–164, 167–168, 170
 Dowd, Freeman B., 365
 Dresner, Samuel, 142
 Duclo, Gaston, 220
 Dupotet de Sennevoy, Jean, 357
 Dürer, Albrecht, 241–242
 Dvorak, Josef, 419, 422

 Eamon, William, 250
 Eastman, Hubbard, 334, 351
 Ebreo, Leone, 175, 196
 Eby, Frederick, 269, 272
 Eckartshausen, Karl von, 293–294, 305

- Edie, James M., 94
 Edmonds, John, 315, 317–318
 Edwards, Jonathan, 271
 Eijk, A.H.C. van, 34
 Eirenaeus Philalethes, 220–222
 Eleazar of Worms, 73, 86, 144, 152
 Eliade, Mircea, 218, 221, 257, 461, 474, 487, 497
 Elimelekh ben Hayyim of Kuznitz, Rabbi, 121
 Elijor, Rachel, 72
 Elizabeth, Queen, 199, 201, 204, 239
 Ellis, Havelock, 429
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 350
 Empedocles, 37
 Encausse, Gérard, *see* Papus
 Epiphanius of Salamis, 11–18, 22, 41–42, 44, 390–391
 Equicola, Mario, 175
 Erasmus, Desiderius, 259–260
 Erikson, Barclay J., 480
 Etkes, Immanuel, 118
 Eugene IV, Pope, 185
 Eusebius of Caesarea, 36
 Everard, Dr., 365
 Everson, William, 490–491
 Evola, Julius, 450, 460–467, 469–470, 474, 490
 Ezekiel Panet, Rabbi, 143
 Ezra ben Shlomo of Gerona, Rabbi, 114–116

 Fabricius, Johannes, 261
 Faccio, Rina, *see* Aleramo, Sibilla
 Fahd, Toufic, 51
 Faivre, Antoine, iv, xi, xvii, 281, 294, 296, 336, 453, 520
 Fanger, Claire, iv, xi, xvii, 62, 153, 155, 159, 521
 Farber-Ginat, Asi, 86, 98
 Fellini, Federico, 459
 Fendt, L., 11
 Fenton, Paul, 124
 Ferguson, Margaret W., 254
 Ferrer, Jorge, 512–513
 Festugière, A.-J., 4
 Festugière, Jean, 194
 Ficino, Marsilio, iv, xvii, xix–xx, 175, 177–197, 199, 204, 206–207, 251
 Fiévet, Jules, 376–377
 Fincati, Vittorio, 453, 455, 470
 Finn, Huck, 311
 Flandrin, Jean-Louis, 249
 Fletcher, Jefferson Butler, 196

 Flowers, Stephen Edred, 445, 449
 Fogagnolo, Paolo, 451
 Fogarty, Robert, 336
 Formisano, Ciro, *see* Kremmerz, Giuliano
 Fornell, Earl Wesley, 326
 Fortune, Dion, 343
 Foster, Lawrence, 336
 Foucault, Michel, 273, 274, 404, 411
 Fowden, Garth, 1
 Fox Keller, Evelyn, 257, 266
 Fox Sisters, 357
 Francis I, 257
 Frank, Jacob, 453
 Freud, Sigmund, xx, 148, 183, 428, 490, 498, 509, 511
 Friedmann, Rabbi Abraham, 119
 Frisken, Amanda, 321

 Gabay, Alfred, 330
 Galen, 38–39, 266
 Galliani, Daniela, 452
 Galston, Miriam, 89
 Garb, Jonathan, 114, 147
 Garrison, Omar, 438–439
 Garrison, William Lloyd, 334
 Gatti, Hilary, 250–251
 Geber, 211
 Gebergen, Van, 391
 Geertz, Armin W., ix
 Geffarth, Renko, 453
 Gentile, Carlo, 452
 Gentile, Sebastiano, 178
 George of Trebizond, 185–186, 193
 Gero, S., 11, 16, 18
 Gertrude the Great, 154
 Geyraud, Pierre, 370, 468
 Ghosh, Atul Behari, 497
 Gibbons, B.J., 292–293
 Gichtel, Johann Georg, 283–296, 336, 343
 Gikatilla, Joseph, 98
 Gilbert, Robert A., 355
 Giller, Pinchas, 91
 Ginsburg, Elliot K., 113
 Ginzburg, Carlo, 249
 Giudelli de Cressac Bachelerie, Jean-Pierre, 460
 Godwin, Joscelyn, 310, 395, 418
 Goldberg, Jonathan, 260
 Gorceix, Bernard, 283, 289
 Goshen-Gottstein, Alon, 79
 Gottifredi, Bartolomeo, 175
 Gottlieb, Ephraim, 78, 92

- Gouge, William, 240
 Gozze de Raguse, Niccola Vito de, 175
 Grant, Kenneth, 429, 431–433
 Grant, R.M., 34
 Grass, Karl Konrad, 466
 Great Maggid of Medziretch, The
 118–121, 132, 141–142, 146, 152
 Greeley, Horace, 326
 Green, Arthur, 132
 Greenblatt, Stephen J., 240–241
 Gregorius, Gregorius A., 446–447, 449
 Gregory of Nyssa, 44
 Gregory the Great, 157, 163, 165–166,
 170–171
 Greven, Philip, 271
 Grien, Hans Baldung, 237–238
 Griffing, Jane R., 320–321
 Grof, Christina, 486
 Grof, Stanislav, 486, 496
 Grosche, Eugen, *see* Gregorius,
 Gregorius A.
 Gruenwald, Ithamar, 72–73
 Grumbach, Argula von, 255
 Guaïta, Stanislas de, 374–377
 Guedemann, Moritz, 144
 Guénon, René, 370, 374, 392–393, 490
 Gupta, Mahendranath, 493
 Gupta, Sanjukta, 407
 Gurwitsch, Aron, 137
 Gutierrez, Cathy, iv, xvi, 309, 328, 521
 Guyader, Abbé, *see* Geyraud, Pierre
 Guzzo, Christian, 453
- Hadewijch, 154
 Hakl, Hans Thomas, iv, xii, xiv, xix, 17,
 61, 445, 461, 521
 Hall, Marie Boas, 225
 Hallamish, Moshe, 95
 Halperin, David M., 187
 Hamilton, Edith, 181
 Hanegraaff, Wouter J., i, iv, ix, xi–xiii,
 xv–xvii, xix, 175, 177, 206, 308–309,
 315, 489–490, 499, 521
 Hankins, James, 185–186
 Hansen, H.T., *see* Hakl, Hans Thomas
 Harper, Steve, 497
 Harris, Marvin, 176
 Harris, Thomas Lake, xxi, 333,
 335–338, 340–342, 336–349,
 351–352, 364, 487
 Hartlib, Samuel, 220
 Hartmann, Franz, 453
 Harvey, David Allen, 376
 Harvey, Gabriel, 233
 Harvey, William, 253
 Hasan al-Basri, 55
 Hasdai Crescas, Rabbi, 131, 147
 Hatch, Cora L.V., 311
 Hausen, Karin, 235
 Hawi, Sami S., 128
 Hayes, Rutherford B., 334
 Hayman, A. Peter, 72
 Hayyim Vital, Rabbi, 134
 Heard, Gerald, 481, 485–486, 516
 Heidegger, Martin, 511
 Heider, Anne, 502
 Heider, John, 479, 501–508, 510, 513
 Heliodorus, 38
 Hell, Bertrand, 61
 Helmont, Joan Baptista van, 225
 Hemberger, Adolf, 446, 449–450
 Heraclion, 25, 29
 Héritier-Augé, Françoise, 254
 Heschel, Abraham Joshua, 142
 Heseler, Baldasar, 235
 Hill, Christopher, 235, 352
 Hirsig, Leah, 434
 Hiyya, Rabbi, 74–75
 Hodgson, Brian, 412
 Holl, K., 11
 Honorius Augustodunensis, 153
 Hopenko, Moïse, 466
 Horowitz, Maryanne C., 258, 271
 Howe, Ellic, 370, 394, 419, 422, 428
 Hubbs, Joanna, 266
 Hunter, Michael, 240
 Huss, Boaz, 91
 Hutchinson, Anne, 255
 Hutin, Serge, 289, 293
 Huxley, Aldous, 497, 507, 516
 Hyatt, Christopher S., 429
- Idel, Moshe, iv, xvii, 66, 69, 78, 86–89,
 93–95, 111–112, 114–116, 118–121,
 123–125, 128, 130–132, 134,
 136–138, 140–141, 143–147, 152,
 521
 Institoris, Heinrich, 242–243, 246–248,
 258, 273
 Introvigne, Massimo, 359, 370, 376,
 390, 395, 450, 452, 466
 Irenaeus, 12, 17, 25, 27–28, 30, 33–35,
 40–42
 Isaiah ben Joseph, Rabbi, 129–130
 Isenberg, W.W., 7
 Isidore of Sevilla, 163
 Israel of Kuznitz, Rabbi, 121
 Israel of Ruzhyn, Rabbi, 120, 152

- Jacob Isaac ha-Levi Horowitz, Rabbi, 123, 152
 Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, Rabbi, 118, 121, 132, 136–139
 Jacobs, Louis, 142
 Jacobsen Buckley, J., 11
 Jacques-Chaquin, Nicole, 294
 Jalâl al-dîn al-Suyûtî, 53
 James I, 239, 260
 James, Nathan, 500, 508–511, 513
 James, William, xvii, 336, 350, 488–489, 491
 Janssens, Y., 34
 Jayne, Sears, 184–186, 191
 Jefferson, Thomas, 358
 Jellinek, Adolph, 96
 Jennings, Hargrave, 423
 Jerome, St., 249, 252
 Jogand-Pagès, Gabriel, *see* Taxil, Léo
 John of Morigny, 153–173
 Jonathan ben Uziel, 70
 Jones, Ernest, 253
 Jones, James, 232
 Jones, William, 412
 Jong, Albert F. de, xi
 Jong, Heleen de, 210
 Jonge, Henk Jan de, 380
 Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, 78, 138
 Joseph ben Shalom, Rabbi, 138
 Joseph of Hamadan, Rabbi, 141
 Joyce, Michael, 181
 Judah, Rabbi, 102
 Jung, Carl Gustav, 122, 218, 221, 257, 261, 494, 497–499, 509, 511
- Kahn, F., 37
 Kant, Immanuel, 147, 231
 Kapstein, Matthew, 516
 Kaske, Carol V., 183, 206
 Katz, Jacob, 453
 Katz, Steven, 95
 Kaufman, G., 254
 Kawerau, Waldemar, 270
 Keller, Evelyn Fox, 257, 266
 Kellner, Carl, 418–422
 Kelly, Gerald, 434
 Kelly, Henry A., 258
 Kelly, J.N.D., 44
 Kennedy, Leon Engers, 397
 Kent, Austin, 327–328
 Kepnes, Steven D., 142
 Kerényi, Karoly, 461
 Kern, Steven, 411
 Kerouac, Jack, 481
- Khunrath, Heinrich, 282
 Kieckhefer, Richard, 155
 Kilcher, Andreas, xviii
 King, Francis, 370, 413, 415, 424, 432–433, 449
 King, Francis X., 355
 King, Karen, 24
 King, Margaret L., 254
 King, Richard, 403, 412, 439
 Kirchberger, Niklaus Anton, 290, 293–296, 305
 Klaw, Spencer, 327, 336
 Klein, Melanie, 265
 Kleinbaum, Abby Wettan, 240
 Klein-Braslavy, Sara, 73, 90
 Knox, John, 239–240
 Kohout, Petr, 474
 König, Peter-R., 369, 376, 396–397, 419–420, 422, 424–426, 432, 438, 449
 Könneker, Barbara, 272
 Koresh, David, 232
 Krafft-Ebing, Richard von, 411–412
 Kramer, Henrich, 243, 246
 Kraye, Jill, 183–184, 186, 194, 196
 Kremmerz, Giuliano, xiv, 450–460, 462–463
 Kripal, Jeffrey J., i, iv, ix, xvi, xviii, xix, 50, 68, 479, 522
 Krishnananda, 436
 Krishnananda Agamavagisha, 410
 Kuriansky, Judy, 402, 437, 439–440
- Lablatinière, Claude, *see* Ygé, Claude d'
 Labouré, Denis, 453
 Lacquer, Thomas W., 270
 Lactantius, 4
 Lafond, J., 235
 Lambert, Jean, 63
 Lambspringk, 210, 261
 Lampe, G.W.H., 12
 Landino, Christoforo, 178
 Lang, B., 281
 Lanzi, Claudio, 459
 Larner, Christina, 239
 Lasenic, Pierre de, *see* Kohout, Petr
 Laurant, Jean-Pierre, 375, 377
 Laurens, Pierre, 184
 Laurent, Gisèle, 468
 Lawrence, D.H., 429
 Lawton, George, 337, 340–343, 346
 Layton, B., 11, 30, 41–43
 Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, Alexandre Joseph II, 371

- Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, Georges-Philippe-Alphonse-Marie-Alexandre, 369–398, 424, 455
 Le Clément de Saint-Marcq, Philippe Auguste Joseph, 371
 Leade, Jane, 292–295, 308
 Leary, Timothy, 486
 Lebano, Giustiniano, 453
 LeGates, Marlene, 235
 Leigh, Richard, 385
 Lemay, H., 38
 Lemery, Nicolas, 226
 Leopold II, King of Belgium, 376
 Leto, Pomponio, 193
 Levack, Brian, 233
 Levi Isaac of Berditchev, Rabbi, 119–121
 Lévi, Eliphaz, 355–356, 453
 Liebes, Yehuda, 66, 73–75, 79, 91–92, 96, 100–101, 103, 131, 138, 288
 Lincoln, Henry, 385
 Linden, Stanton J., 211
 Llull, Ramon, 157–158, 160, 171
 Locke, John, 260
 Lomazzo, Gian Paolo, 189
 Longley, Mary T., 321, 324
 Lorberbaum, Yair, 114
 Lorenzo de' Medici, 189, 207
 Lory, Pierre, iv, xv, 49, 522
 Louis XIV, 372
 Lovejoy, Arthur O., 180
 Lowes, John Livingstone, 199
 Lucian of Samosata, xi
 Luria, Isaac, 101
 Luther, Martin, 236, 244, 267–268, 282

 Machiavelli, Niccolò, 417
 Maddalena, Giuseppe, 453
 Madison, Gary B., 95
 Maggi, Armando, 184
 Magre, Maurici, *see* Thimmy, René
 Mahé, Jean-Pierre, 9
 Maier, Michael, 210, 226, 261, 265
 Maimonides, 67, 70, 73, 77, 84–86, 88–90, 92, 124, 127–128, 131
 Mâlik ibn Anas, 5
 Malter, Henry, 128
 Marcel, Raymond, 175, 178, 184, 187–188, 192–193
 Marchetti, Paolo, 459
 Marconville, Jean de, 240
 Marcus (Valentinian), 25
 Marcuse, Herbert, 439
 Margolin, Ron, 116, 118, 124, 139, 142

 Mark, Zvi, 118
 Markides, Kyriacos, 343
 Markschies, C., 24
 Marlowe, Christopher, 245, 250
 Marsuppini, Carlo, 178
 Marsuppini, Cristoforo, 178
 Martin, D.B., 39
 Martin, Stoddard, 435
 Marx, Karl, 328
 Marx-Aveling, Eleanor, 419
 Maslow, Abraham, 495
 Mason, Michael, 404
 Mather, Cotton, 271
 Mathiesen, Robert, 357
 Matt, Daniel C., 95
 Matter, Ann, 153
 Matter, Jacques, xi
 Mauss, Marcel, 133
 McCalman, Iain, 452
 McCue, J.F., 27
 McCutcheon, Russell, 177
 McGinn, Bernard, 154–159
 McIntosh, Christopher, 355, 453
 McLaughlin, Eleanor C., 271
 Mechtild of Magdeburg, 154
 Medick, Hans, 270
 Meir ha-Levi of Apta, Rabbi, 121
 Mellinkoff, Ruth, 242
 Memmo, Paul Eugene, 197
 Menahem Mendel of Rimano, Rabbi, 143
 Menahem Nahum Friedmann of Stefanesti-Itzkani, Rabbi, 147
 Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, Rabbi, 132–136, 140–141
 Ménard, J.E., 34
 Merchant, Carolyn, 257, 266
 Mercier, Alain, 355
 Merkur, Dan, 218
 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 94–95
 Meroz, Ronit, 91
 Meslin, Henri, 473–474
 Meylan, Edouard F., 175, 194
 Meyvaert, Paul, 163
 Michaelson, Scott, 432
 Michelangelo, 258
 Miller, Henry, 481, 485
 Minor, Ronnie, 434
 Möller, Helmut, 370, 394, 419, 422, 428
 Monaco, Gaetano, 453
 Monier-Williams, 412
 Monter, E. William, 233
 Montfaucon de Villars, N.de, 345, 458
 Montrose, Louis, 260

- Moon, Rev. Sun Myung, 232
 Moore, Cornelia N., 254
 Moore, G.F., 29
 Mopsik, Charles, 91
 Moscherosch, Hans Michael, 254
 Moses Cordovero, Rabbi, 136
 Moses de León, 74, 76–77, 94–99
 Moshe Cordovero, Rabbi, 138
 Moshe Elyaqim Berī'ah of Kuznitz,
 Rabbi, 121, 144
 Moshe Hayyim Ephrayyim of Sudylkov,
 Rabbi, 131–133
 Moshe of Kiev, Rabbi, 116, 152
 Moxey, K., 256
 Muktananda, Swami, 496
 Müller von Hausen, 427
 Murphy, Gardner, 489
 Murphy, Michael, 479–481, 485–486,
 489, 496–497, 499
 Musonius, 36
 Myers, F.W.H., 488
 Mylius, Johann Daniel, 210

 Nagłowska, Maria de, 364–366, 455,
 462, 465–474
 Nahman of Bratzlav, Rabbi, 122
 Nahmanides, 89, 130
 Nasr, Seyyed Hussein, 490
 Nathan ben Sa'adyah Harar, Rabbi, 128
 Nathan-Neta' of Sieniawa, Rabbi, 117
 Nau, F., 18
 Needham, Joseph, 267
 Nelson, John Charles, 175–176, 180,
 194
 Neuberger, Victor, 396, 433
 Neugebauer-Wölk, Monika, xviii
 Newman, William R., 191, 215, 218,
 221, 266
 Newsom, Carol, 69
 Nicolaus, 11, 13
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 247, 460
 Nifo, Agostino, 183
 Nigal, Gedalya, 131
 Nihilananda, Swami, 514
 Nobili, Flaminio, 175
 Nock, A.D., 4
 Nogarola, Isolta, 254
 Noonan, John T., 36, 249, 256
 Novalis, 460
 Noyes, John Humphrey, iv, 326–327,
 333–336, 348–352, 506

 O'Malley, Charles D., 253
 Obrist, Barbara, 210, 218–220
 Okin, Susan, 235

 Oliphant, Laurence, 341, 343, 346–348
 Ong, Walter, 240
 Onofri, Arturo, 462
 Oppenheim, Michael, 142
 Orgel, Stephen, 260
 Origen, 24, 44, 163–166, 170
 Ormsby-Lennon, Hugh, 254
 Osho, 439, 496, 510–511
 Osler, Margaret J., 215
 Owen, Alex, 428–429, 433
 Ozment, Steven, 260

 Padoux, André, 403, 405
 Pagels, Elaine, 27, 32, 34, 268
 Paine, Tom, 358
 Panormita, Antonio, 185
 Papus, 374–378
 Paracelsus, xv, 261
 Paramahansa, Mahatma Agamya, 418
 Paré, Ambrose, 253
 Park, Katherine, 234, 257
 Parrott, D.M., 10
 Partington, J.R., 224
 Pasi, Marco, iv, xii, 17, 197, 369, 386,
 392, 394–395, 419, 424, 455, 522
 Paul, 32, 35, 69, 249, 289
 Paul II, Pope, 192–193
 Pearson, Birger A., 11
 Pedaya, Haviva, 115, 124
 Péladan, Joséphin, 374–377, 473
 Pelagius, 44
 Pentheus, 232
 Perl, Jeffrey M., 489
 Pesic, Peter, 266
 Peters, Edward, 250
 Peters, Hugh, 255
 Petersen, Johann Willhelm, 292
 Petersilea, Franz, 319–320
 Petrarch, 195, 197
 Pettazzoni, Raffaele, 461
 Pflaum, Heinz, 194–195, 207
 Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni, 175,
 186, 250–251
 Pickarz, Mendel, 139, 144
 Pierini, Pier Luca R., 450–451, 454
 Pierpont, John, 324
 Pike, Kenneth, 176
 Pillault, Paul, 392
 Pines, Shlomo, 136
 Piper, Mrs., 489
 Plato, xix–xx, 10, 38–39, 70, 125,
 178–179, 181, 184–188, 191–194,
 206–207, 252–253, 270, 322–323,
 326–327, 331, 461, 509
 Platvoet, Jan G., 176

- Plotinus, 179–180
 Pluquet, Marc, 466
 Pohlenz, M., 36
 Poliziano, Angelo, 184
 Pomeroy Parker, C., 36
 Ponte, Renato del, 462, 463
 Pordage, John, 292–293, 295, 308, 336,
 339, 342–343
 Porta, Giambattista della, 240
 Pratapa, Bhima Sena, 418
 Pratt, Mr., 351
 Price, Richard, 479–480, 496–497
 Priesner, Claus, 210
 Priestley, Joseph, 383
 Principe, Lawrence, iv, xiv, 209–210,
 215, 218, 220–221, 522
 Proclus, 179
 Prunicus, 13
 Ptolemy, 25
 Pythagoras, 187
- Qimhi, R. David, 113
 Quadrelli, Ercole, 463
 Quintscher, Wilhelm, 446
 Quispel, Gilles, 34
 Qutayba, Ibn, 54
- Rabb, Theodore K., 234
 Rabelais, 241
 Ramakrishna, 492, 494, 511, 514–517
 Ramus, Petrus, 240
 Randolph, Paschal Beverly, 333,
 355–366, 386, 395, 404, 417,
 415–418, 425, 430, 432, 438, 445,
 469–470, 486–487
 Rasputin, 466, 474
 Reghellini de Schio, M., 384
 Reghini, Arturo, 450
 Reich, Wilhelm, 439, 481, 486, 505, 509
 Renevey, Denis, 154
 Reuss, Theodore, xix, 370, 386,
 393–397, 401, 404–405, 415,
 418–428, 430–432, 436–439, 445
 Reynolds, S.E., 339
 Rhazes, 52
 Rhodes, James M., 70
 Ricciardelli, Libero, 451
 Rice, Eugene F., 231
 Richard of St Victor, 157
 Ricoeur, Paul, 249
 Riffard, Pierre, xi
 Ripa, Cesare, 252
 Ripley, George, 211
 Robb, Nesca A., 175, 194, 196–197
 Robertson, Pat, 274
- Robinson, Catherine, 498
 Robinson, Charles, 506
 Robinson, J.M., 2
 Rocke, Michael, 186, 189–190, 193
 Rolf, Ida, 496
 Rolle, Richard, 154
 Romei, Annibale, 175
 Romero, Marina T., 512
 Roper, Lyndal, 256, 258, 268–270
 Rorem, Paul, 156
 Rosemont, Franklin, 416
 Rosport, G. de, 376
 Rota, Nino, 459
 Rothenberg, Alan B., 270
 Rougemont, Denis de, 194
 Rousseau, A., 27, 35, 40–41
 Rowland, Ingrid, 197
 Rubenstein, Jeffrey L., 79
 Ruiz Sanchez, Arjuna, 372
 Rumi, 509
 Rupert of Deutz, 153
 Ruska, Julius, 211, 266
 Russell, Bertrand, 491
 Russell, Cecil Frederick, 434
 Ryan, Mary, 319
- Sade, Marquis de, 266
 Sagnard, F., 28, 30–31, 45
 Saint-Martin, Louis-Claude de,
 293–296, 376
 Samuel bar Nahman, 90
 Sanchez, Thomas, 256
 Sanderson, Alexis, 407, 409
 Sangro di San Severo, Raimondo di, 452
 Sansovino, Francesco, 175
 Sarno, Antonio, 200
 Satter, Beryl, 349
 Saunders, C.M., 253
 Saussure, Ferdinand de, 94
 Schachter, Marc, 184, 191
 Schaefer, Grete, 142
 Schäfer, Peter, 72
 Schatz-Uffenheimer, Rivka, 119, 132,
 142, 152
 Schenke, H.-M., 7
 Schiebinger, Londa, 235
 Schipffinger, Thomas, 281, 288, 308
 Schlitz, Marilyn, 479–480
 Schmidt, Leigh Eric, 488
 Schneider, Herbert, 337, 340–343, 346
 Scholem, Gershom G., 66, 69, 72,
 77–79, 82–83, 86, 89, 91–92, 95–96,
 114–115, 128, 140, 142–143, 152
 Schreck, Nikolas, 402, 406, 410, 435,
 437

- Schreck, Zecna, 402, 406, 410, 435, 437
 Schücking, Levin L., 260
 Schuon, Fritjof, 490
 Schütz, Catherine, 255
 Schutz, William, 502, 505
 Sedgwick, Mark, 490
 Segelberg, E., 34
 Seidman, Steven, 312
 Selliers de Moranville, Léonard de, 376
 Sellon, Edward, 413–414
 Servadio, Emilio, 462
 Servis, Pasquale de, 453
 Sevi, Sabbatai, 453
 Shakespeare, William, 258, 260, 270, 323
 Shattuck, Roger, 231
 Sidī ‘Alī ben Hamdūsh, 58, 62
 Sidī Ahmad Dghūghī, 58–59, 62
 Sidī Mūsā al-Dukkālī, 59
 Siggel, A., 211
 Silberer, Herbert, 218
 Simeon bar Yehosadaq, 90
 Simeon ben Gamliel, 71
 Simeon ben Yohai, 75, 76, 99, 100
 Skinner, Stephen, 433
 Slaughter, Margaret M., 234
 Smith, G. Rex, 57–58
 Smith, Gibson, 361
 Smith, Hannah Whitall, 335, 340–341
 Smith, Huston, 490
 Smith, Jonathan Z., 232, 383
 Snock, Jan A.M., 176, 207
 Soliman ben Aifa, 418
 Soranus, 37, 38
 Spanneut, M., 36
 Spedalieri, Nicola Giuseppe, 453
 Speroni, Sperone, 175
 Speusippus, 187
 Spinoza, Baruch de, 125
 Sprenger, Jacob, 242–243, 247–248, 258, 273
 Staes, Anne-Catherine, 371
 Stählin, O., 26, 29, 33, 35–36
 Stallybrass, Peter, 252
 Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, 328
 Starkey, George, 220–224
 Starr, Martin, 397
 Steiner, Arpad, 250
 Steiner, George, 68–69, 253
 Stephens, Walter, 243–247, 273
 Stürner, Max, 460
 Stockham, Alice Bunker, 348–352
 Stoltzius von Stoltzenberg, Daniel, 210
 Stone, Lawrence, 268
 Stroumsa, Guy G., 70
 Struck, Wilhelm, 292
 Stuckrad, Kocku von, xviii, 175, 491
 Sullivan, Margaret M., 257
 Suster, Gerald, 435
 Sutin, Lawrence, 392, 428, 434
 Swainson, W.P., 339–340, 343
 Swedenborg, Emanuel, 309, 311, 313–316, 318, 323, 327, 331, 337–340, 342–343
 Symonds, John, 396, 429–430, 432–433
 Tachenius, Otto, 224–226
 Take, Heinz-Herbert, 224
 Tansillo, Luigi, 251
 Tardieu, M., 11, 16
 Tarnas, Richard, 482
 Tasso, Torquato, 175
 Taufer, Alison, 257
 Taxil, Léo, 390
 Taylor, Eugene, 485
 Taylor, Kathleen, 414, 497
 Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, 484, 492
 Telle, Joachim, 282
 Temme, Willy, 292, 308
 Tertullian, 25, 30, 33, 41–42, 44, 46
 Theodotus, 25
 Thimmy, René, 466–468, 471
 Thomas Gallus, 156–157, 159, 171
 Thomas of Perseigne, 166
 Thomassen, E., 27
 Thompson, Keith, 483
 Tiles, Mary, 266
 Tirinnanzi, Nicoletta, 200, 207
 Tishby, Isaiah, 91–92, 95–96, 100–101, 113, 115, 152, 253
 Torre, A. della, 178
 Tränker, Heinrich, 446
 Traversari, Ambrogio, 185
 Trevisan, Bernard, 223
 Trinkaus, Charles, 251
 Tripp, D.H., 34
 Tucci, Giuseppe, 404, 461
 Turner, Denys, 153–156, 165–166
 Tzevi Hirsch of Galina, Rabbi, 139, 144
 Überfeld, Johann Wilhelm, 283, 285–286, 288–290, 295–296
 Underdown, D.E., 256
 Urban, Hugh B., xii, xix, 17, 61, 370, 386, 402–403, 405, 407, 409–410,

- 412, 414, 428, 431, 435–436,
438–439, 445, 447, 487, 495,
499–500
- Vajda, Georges, 114–115
- Valentinus, 24–26, 28–29, 33–34, 46,
210
- Vanhaelen, Angela, 260
- Varchi, Benedetto, 175
- Verginelli, Vinci, 460
- Verniero, A., 451
- Véronèse, Julien, 156, 158–159, 170
- Versluis, Arthur, iv, xii, xvii, 281, 283,
286, 290, 292–293, 303, 308, 310,
326, 330–331, 333, 336, 339–340,
487, 523
- Vesalius, 235
- Viaud, Gérard, 58
- Victorinus, 44
- Vieri, Francesco de', 175
- Vinci, Leonardo da, 189, 253
- Virio, Luciano, 459
- Virio, Paolo M., *see* Marchetti, Paolo
- Vivario, Michel, 371
- Vivario, Philippe, 371
- Vivario, Regnier, 371
- Vivario-Roussaux, Françoise, 371
- Vivekananda, Swami, 492–494,
515–516
- Voltaire, 196
- Vona, Piero di, 450
- Waddington, Raymond B., 256–257
- Wadsworth, James B., 189
- Walsh, Carey Ellen, 200
- Ward, William, 412
- Warne, Randi R., ix
- Warner, Marina, 253
- Waters, Emily, 337
- Watson, Nicholas, 155, 159
- Watts, Alan, 350
- Weber, Eugen, 390
- Weidner, Daniel, 66
- Weinholtz, August, 419
- Wendland, P., 36
- Wewers, Gerd A., 69
- Wheeler, Gordon, 496
- White, David Gordon, 17, 403, 406,
408, 499–500, 506
- Wiedemann, Eduard, 211
- Wiesner, Merry E., 236, 257–258, 267
- Wilde, Oscar, 429
- William I of the Netherlands, 371
- William of St. Thierry, 157, 165–166
- Williams, F., 11
- Williams, J.P., 70
- Williams, Michael, 2, 11–12, 16–17,
24, 34
- Willoughby, Henry, 356
- Wilson, D.W., 235, 240
- Wilson, H.H., 412
- Wind, Edgar, 257
- Winter, Justus Gottfried, 292
- Wirz, Johann Jakob, 288
- Wolfson, E.R., iv, xiv, xvi–xvii, 65–74,
76–78, 80–81, 84, 86–90, 92–93,
95–97, 99, 101, 103, 115, 130, 133,
136, 139–140, 152, 523
- Wolther, Guido, 449
- Woodhouse, J.R., 259
- Woodhull, Victoria, xxi, 321, 328–329,
331
- Woodroffe, John, *see* Avalon, Arthur
- Woods, Susanne, 257
- Woolf, Virginia, 175
- Wunder, Heide, 258
- Yarker, John, 425
- Yehudah Leib of Yanov, Rabbi, 123
- Ygé, Claude d', 467
- York, Michael, 498
- Yorke, Gerald, 370
- Zadrobilek, Vladislav, 474
- Zakariyyâ Râzî, Muhammad ibn, 52
- Zandee, Jan, 5
- Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, Rabbi, 119,
136, 142–145
- Zeffirelli, Franco, 460
- Zell, Matthew, 255
- Zika, Charles, 236, 242, 258
- Zimmer, Heinrich, 492, 494–495,
497–499, 514–517
- Zosimus, 211

INDEX OF SUBJECTS

- Abel, 27, 33–34, 46
 Achamoth, 27
 Actaeon, xvi, 202
 Adam, 7, 33–34, 46, 63, 89, 249–250, 253, 261, 284–285, 287–289, 292, 470, 507
 Adultery, 313, 316, 318, 330, 434
 Advaita Vedanta, 494, 514, 516
 Aeth, 359, 363
 AIDS, 509
 ‘Aisha Bahriyya, 59
 ‘Aisha Gnawiyya, 59
 ‘Aisha Hamdūshiyya, 59, 62
 ‘Aisha mūlet al-wed, 59
 ‘Aisha Qandīsha, *see* Lalla ‘Aisha
 ‘Aisha Sūdāniyya, 59, 62
 Aissawa, 58
 Alchemy, xiv–xv, 49, 208–228, 244, 261, 266, 375, 424, 488
 “internal alchemy”, 397, 452, 457
 in Islam, 50
 in Taoism, 460
 Amazons, 239, 240, 257–258
 Amidah, 100–101
 Amor hereos, 199
 Amrita, 409, 440
 Ananga Ranga, 414
 Ancient and Accepted Primitive Rite of Memphis and Mizraim, 419
 Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, 374, 419, 446
 Androgyny, xx, 4–11, 19, 39, 257, 292, 309, 322, 324, 331, 333, 349–451, 461
 Angelic Brethren, 289
 Angels, 6, 18, 27, 29–30, 33, 37, 43–46, 51–53, 57, 61, 69, 79, 158, 244–245, 248, 251, 311, 314, 327–328, 344, 359, 432, 448, 450, 454
 Antinomianism, 232, 351–352
 Apocryphon of John, 12, 17
 Ars notoria, 155–156, 158–159, 170
 Asceticism, 2, 14, 144–145, 154, 514
Asclepius, 2–5, 8–11, 19, 251
 Asiatic Brethren, 453
 Association of Symbolical and Alchemical Studies, 451
 Astral beings, Creation of, 448
 Astral body, 179
 Astral plane, 57
 Astrology, xv, 49, 178, 244, 375, 446
 Astrum Argentinum, 446

Bahir, 71, 73, 114, 116, 152
 Baptism, 29–31, 42
 Baraka, xx, 59, 62
 Barbelites, 11
 Barbelo, 11, 13
 Bâtin, 49
 Beauty, 179–180, 182, 184, 204, 327
 Berlin Club, 357
 Bilqīs, 55
 Birhat Tantrasara, 408–409
 Blending, 360, 362–364
 Bogomiles, 18
 Borborites, xii, 2–3, 11–20, 391
 Bridal chamber, xix–xx, 10, 32, 35, 45–46
 Brocton Community, 346, 351
 Brotherhood of Miriam, *see* Fratellanza Terapeutica Magica di Miriam
 Brotherhood of Rosicrucians, 366
 Brotherhood of the New Life, 337
 Bulletin mensuel du Bureau permanent d’étude des phénomènes spirites, 378

 Cain, 27, 33–34, 46
 Cannabis, 448
 Carpocratians, 36
 Cathars, 18, 334, 415
 Celibacy, 23, 154, 247, 267, 295, 314, 326, 337, 481, 511
 Cénacle d’Astarté, 474
 Chastity, xv, xxi, 140, 203, 247, 254, 291, 447–448, 456–457, 468
 Christ, Jesus, xi, xix–xx, 12–13, 16, 18, 20, 25–27, 29–31, 35, 37, 42, 45–46, 153, 161–162, 166–168, 172, 255, 281, 284, 287–288, 292, 294, 299, 301, 303–304, 337, 342, 352, 369, 380–384, 388, 391, 424, 459, 469, 471, 510, 517
 Christian Theosophy, 281–307, 338
 Circe, 201, 203
 Clairvoyance, 360–361
 Coddians, 11

- Coitus reservatus, 334–335, 349,
 506–507
 Concealment (*see also* Secrecy), xv–xvi,
 xx, 49, 65–68, 71–82, 84–85, 92–93,
 213, 218, 220, 222, 224, 226–227,
 382, 421, 508
 Conception, 39
 Confrérie de la Flèche d'Or, 465, 467
 Conspiracy theories, xi, 385
 Corpus Hermeticum, 2, 365
 Courtly love, 194, 196
 Curiosity, 231–232, 249–252

 Daedalus, 250
 Death by Kiss, 130
 Decknamen, 211, 218, 220–222, 224
 Decretism, 362–363
 Demons, iv, 29, 32, 46, 50–51, 53,
 56–57, 59, 236, 238–240, 244–248,
 308, 343, 402, 406, 410, 432, 435,
 437, 448, 450, 459
 Devequt, 116, 143
 Devil, *see* Satan
 Diana, 200–202
 Doppelgänger, 63
 Drugs, 357, 360–361, 365, 448, 488, 495

 Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, 438
 Ecstatic Kabbalah, 123–131, 145–146
 Elemental beings, 458
 Eleusinian mysteries, 422
 Emblems, 210
 Emic/etic, 176
 Eros, ix–x, xiii–xiv, xvi, xx, 43, 56, 65,
 68–69, 76, 80, 91, 104, 146–147,
 153–156, 163, 171, 187, 199, 204,
 313, 322, 326–327, 461, 480–481,
 487, 492
 Esalen, ix, xvi, 479–518
 Esotericism
 Islamic understanding, 50
 Western, ix–xxi, 350, 369, 416,
 487–491, 499, 500
 Eucharist, 11–12, 14, 20, 31, 371, 374,
 379–381, 388–390, 394, 396–397,
 424, 426
 Eve, 7, 14, 33, 46, 89, 236, 249–250,
 252, 261, 284, 292
 Excerpts of Theodotus, 30, 45
Exegesis on the Soul, 30, 43
 Exorcism, 58

 Faeries, 345
 Fall, xx, 6, 249, 284

 Fasting, xv, 14, 104, 159, 456–457
 Fauns, 248
 Faust, 250
 Fays, *see* Faeries
 Feast of Fools, 241
 Fedeli d'Amore, 451
 Fédération Spirite Nationale Belge, 378
 Florence, 189–190
 Fountain Grove, 337, 341, 345–346
 Fratellanza Terapeutica Magica di
 Miriam, 454, 463
 Fraternism, 392
 Fraternitas Rosicruciana Antiqua, 438
 Fraternitas Saturni, 438, 445–450
 Free love, xxi, 325–331, 333, 336
 Freemasonry, 373–374, 376, 379, 384,
 390, 397, 418, 420, 427, 446, 452
 Frenzies, 182, 187, 199–200, 204

 Gestalt, 480, 511
 Ghûla, 54
 Gnawa, 59, 61
 Gnosis, xvii–xviii, 1–2, 23–26, 81, 288,
 491, 505, 509
 Gnostic Mass, 431, 434
 Gnosticism, 1–3, 11–18, 24, 391,
 422–423, 426, 507
 Gold und Rosenkreuzer, 395, 452–453
 Gospel of Philip, 7, 12, 41–43
 Gospel of Thomas, 7
 Gospel of Truth, 25
 Grand Orient, 374
 Grobian literature, 271–272
 Groupe des Polaires, 467, 473
 Groupe Indépendant d'Études
 Esotériques, 375–377

 Hai Gaon, 85
 Hamadsha, 61
 Hashish, xxi, 358, 360
 Hasidei Ashkenaz, 144
 Hasidism, iv, 95, 116–123, 131–147, 152
 Hell, 311, 313, 316, 329–330
 Hermaphrodite, xxi, 211, 219, 222, 227,
 234, 256–257, 261, 461
 Hermes Trismegistus, 1, 8–10, 188, 251,
 263, 365
 Hermetic Brotherhood of Light, 418
 Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, 356,
 365–366, 395, 418–419, 445
 Hermetic Definitions, 7
 Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn,
 356
 Hermetism, 1–11, 18, 26

- Hills of Coral Concerning the Status of the Jinn*, 53
 Holistic Sexuality, 512–513
 Holotropic breathwork, 486
 Holy Spirit, 281
 Homoeroticism, xix–xx, 103, 184–187, 189, 194, 196, 204, 481, 508, 510, 515
 Homosexuality, xiii, 15, 184–186, 189, 257, 312, 387, 394–396, 404, 411, 425, 432, 449, 500, 503, 508–509
 Homunculus, 191, 261, 452
 Human potential movement, xxi, 350, 479, 495, 512
 Iblis, 51, 54
 Icarus, 250–251
 Idolatry, 52, 74, 86, 470
 Imagination, 37, 285, 290, 294, 296
 Immortality, 6, 8, 19, 359, 420, 452, 459, 465
 Incest, 227, 256
 Incubi, 245, 248, 364
 Ineffability, xvii, 40, 70, 238
 Initiation, x, xvi, 1, 16, 25, 73, 92, 101, 171, 181, 217, 349, 355, 359, 365, 374, 376, 385–386, 408, 420, 424–425, 427, 432, 438, 445–447, 450, 458, 469, 472–474, 487, 490, 499, 509
 Insanity, 253
Intercourse of Friends, 26
 Internal respiration, 342
 Intimacy, xvi–xvii
 ISKCON, 498
 Ja-Hel, 454
 Jesus, *see* Christ, Jesus
 Jewish Sufis, 124
 Jilála, 61
 Jinn, 50–61, 63
 Kabbalah, 65–151, 309, 331
 Kama Shastra Society, 414
 Kama Sutra, 414
 Karezza, 349, 506
 Kaula, 408
 Kaulajnananirnaya, 409
 Khlystics, 466, 474
 Kiss, 166, 197
 Knights Templar, 415
 Kula dravya, 408–409
 Kularnava Tantra, 407
 Kumris, 375–377
 Kundalini, 486, 498, 499, 517
 Lalla 'Aisha, 57, 59–62
 Levites, 15
 Libertinism, 2, 23, 352, 431
 Love Theory, 175–178, 194
 LSD, 486, 488, 496, 509
 Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohut, 130
 Magic, 117, 119–120, 250, 355–356
 Magic mirrors, xii, 357–358, 361
 Maithuna, 407, 409, 448, 506
 Marcionites, 25
 Marcosians, 39
 Marijuana, 507
 Marriage, xviii, 2, 10, 19, 23, 32–37, 39–42, 44, 46, 52, 55–57, 63, 127, 190, 211, 235, 249, 256, 258, 265, 267–269, 286, 289, 291, 294, 301, 304, 309, 312–315, 318–321, 325–328, 330–331, 334, 337–338, 341, 349, 426, 473, 517
 Martinism, 376–377, 453
 Mary, xix–xx, 18, 153, 158–159, 161–162, 166–168, 253, 284
 Mary Magdalene, xi, 13
 Masturbation, 253, 270, 404, 432–433, 435, 456
 Menstrual blood, xx, 12–13, 16, 61, 217, 219, 260, 394, 405, 408, 432, 456, 458, 460
 Mescaline, 488
 Mesmerism, 356, 358
 Metatron, 89
 Milk, 61, 72, 167–168, 171, 265, 288
 Misogyny, 201, 246, 247
 Monogamy, 312, 319, 326, 331
 Monte Verità, 427
 Mormonism, 351
 Moses, 66–67, 76, 81, 83, 98, 133, 135, 169, 171, 284
 Mu'tazila, 52
 Muhammad, 50, 52, 63
 Muhāsibī, 63
 Mutus liber, 210
 Mystery cults, xi, xx, 10, 383, 385–386, 509
 Mysticism/Mystical experience, xvii–xviii, 68, 123, 124, 127, 128, 130, 488–491, 495
 Nag Hammadi, 2, 4, 9–10, 22–23, 26, 29–30, 41–43
 Natural magic, xv, 240, 244
 Nawādir al-usūl, 55
 New Age, 315, 350, 403, 489–490, 500
 Nicolaitans, 11, 13

- Nitrous oxide, 488
 Noria, 13
 Nusa'iri, 61, 365, 416
- Occultism, 219, 359, 365, 370–371, 373, 375, 377, 386, 388, 397–398
 Oneida, 326–327, 333–336, 351, 506
 Opium, 356, 448
 Ordine Essenico Occidentale, 459
 Ordine Osirideo Egiziano, 450, 453–455, 460
 Ordo Templi Orientis, iv, 376, 386, 393–397, 404–405, 415, 418–434, 436, 438–440, 445–447
 Ordo Templi Orientis Antiqua, 438
 Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix, 376
 Ordre Souverain Interne et Hermétique d'Atoum, 460
 Orgasm, 56, 362–363, 408, 416–417, 424, 465, 510
 Orientalism, 405, 411–412, 428, 440
 Original sin, 249, 415, 425–426, 495
 Orion, 211, 213, 226, 264
 Orpheus, 187–188
 Orphic Circle, 357–358
- Pansophical Lodge of Lightseeking Brethren of the Orient, 446
 Pantaeus, 36
 Papyrus Mimaut, 4
 Pederasty, 190, 449, 510
 Peraqim be-Hatzlahah, 124
 Phallus, xix, 5, 91, 93, 101, 118, 138–139, 141, 242, 258, 284, 401, 422–423, 432, 447, 509
 Phibionites, 11, 390
 Philadelphians, 339
 Philosophers' Stone, 213, 217, 220–221, 223, 225–226, 261
 Pistis Sophia, 16
 Platonic Love, 184, 194–197, 322
 Poimandres, 2–8, 19
 Polygamy, 314
 Pornography, 243, 413, 423, 462, 481
 Posism, 362–363
 Possession, 58, 60
 Prayer of Thanksgiving, 4
 Procreation, 4, 6, 8–9, 14, 19, 34, 36–37, 40–41, 44–45, 180–181, 183, 198, 211, 216, 218, 235, 247, 249, 253–254, 312, 314, 334, 350, 380, 426, 509
 Prometeo/Agape, 451
 Prometheus, 250
 Prostitution, 193, 316–317, 321
 Proteus, 250, 266
 Protocols of the Elders of Zion, 427
 Psychoanalysis, xiii, xxi, 177, 462, 495, 511
- Qarîn, 63
 Qatâda, 55
 Qumran, 29, 69
- Ranters, 351–352
 Rastafarianism, 507
 Ripley Scrolls, 211
 Roman Academy, 192–193
 Rosicrucianism, 418, 420
 Royal Society, 221, 251
- Sabbateanism, 147
 Sadosomochism, 194, 201
 Satan, x, xxi, 51, 54, 234, 238, 258, 270, 273, 288, 337, 390, 469–470, 473
 Satanism, 467–468, 470, 475
 Satyrs, 248
 Scuola di Napoli, 452
Second Book of Jeu, 16
 Secrecy/Secrets, x–xiv, xvi–xvii, xx, 2, 9–10, 14, 17, 19, 25, 53, 65–71, 73–78, 80–81, 84–92, 94, 97–100, 103–104, 122, 126, 182, 211, 217, 221, 225–226, 288, 335, 347–348, 360–362, 365–366, 369, 379, 382, 385–386, 389, 391–397, 402, 407, 409, 411–412, 414–415, 418, 420–421, 423–425, 428, 430, 433, 436, 438, 452–453, 459, 486, 494, 496, 502, 514, 517
- Secundians, 11
Sefer ha-Merkawah, 86
Sefer ha-Qomah, 86
Sefer ha-Rimmon, 77
Sefer ha-Temunah, 77–81, 83, 86
Sefer Yetzirah, 72–73, 85–86, 138
 Semen, xx–xxi, 12–13, 16–17, 44–45, 61, 122, 190–191, 213, 217, 219, 245, 253, 261, 264, 266, 271, 323, 359, 369, 380–381, 388, 391, 394–395, 397, 405, 408, 424, 431–432, 447–448, 455–456, 458
- Serpent, 258
 Seth, 27, 33, 46
 Sethians, 12
 Sexual liberation, xv, 386, 403, 406, 411, 437, 439, 457, 462, 500
 Sexual magic, xxi, 333, 361–362, 364–365, 370, 386, 388–389,

- 393–397, 401–404, 415–418,
421–425, 429–430, 432–434,
438–439, 445–475, 500
Sexual Revolution, xiii, 184, 349, 439,
486
Shakti, 406–407, 409
Shayâtîn, 51
Shekhinah, 66, 101, 116, 138, 146–147
Shemoneh Esreh, *see* Amidah
Sheridan, 254
Shibli, 51–56, 58, 63
Siddhis, 485, 495–496, 517
Sincériste, Le, 378–379, 384, 392–393
Socialist League, 419
Société Egyptienne Secrète, 474
Socrates, 178, 181, 185–186, 189, 193
Socratic Love, 184–194
Sod Illan ha-Ašîlut, 80, 82
Sodomy, 181, 185, 187, 189–191, 193,
196, 247, 256, 433, 435
Sokratites, 11
Song of Songs, iv, xvii, 62, 111,
114–115, 152–173, 200, 207, 282,
291, 485
Sophia
 in Christian Theosophy, xvii, xxi,
 281–306, 339
 in Valentinianism, 23, 29–30, 33, 37,
 42, 44–45
Spermatophagy, xx, 369, 373, 381–382,
 384–390, 392, 394, 396–397
Spiritualism, iv, xvi, xxi, 309–332,
 357–360, 369, 371, 373–375,
 377–379, 384, 386–388, 391–393,
 397–398, 416
Stratiotics, 11, 12
Succubi, 245, 364
Sufism, xix, 50, 61, 124, 128, 517
Summer of Love, 486
Suyûtî, 50–52, 54–58, 63
Swedenborgianism, 335, 337, 342, 344

Ta'abbata sharran, 54
Ta'anug, 111–148
Taboo, xii–xiii, 407, 429, 433–435

Tantra, iv, xxi, 17, 22, 61, 335, 340,
 401–407, 410–415, 418, 420, 422,
 424, 428–429, 431, 436–440, 444,
 460, 485–487, 492, 494–497,
 499–501, 504–514, 516, 518
Tha'âlibî, 55
Theosophical Society, 467
Theurgy, 113–114, 116–117, 119, 132,
 145, 147
Transgression, xii, xvi, 51, 86, 92,
 246, 274, 404, 406–407, 409, 428,
 433–435, 444, 496
Trattati d'Amore, 175–178
Tripartite Tractate, 29, 30

Ufficiali di notte, 190
UFO abduction stories, 56
UR Group, 460, 462–464, 467

Vagina, xxi, 408, 424, 432, 447–449,
 506–507, 509
Vajroli mudra, 408
Valentinian Exposition, 29
Valentinians, xii, xvii, xix, 2, 7, 10, 17,
 19, 23–46
Viscum, 376–377
Volantia, 362
Vurgcy, 376, 377

Western Esotericism, *see* Esotericism,
 Western
Will, 362–363
Witchcraft, 230–274
Witches' ointment, 448
Witches' Sabbath, xxi, 237, 239, 241,
 247

Yoga, iv, 61, 404, 421–422, 431, 438,
 446, 497–498, 510–512, 517

Zachaeuses, 11
Zâhir, 49
Zâr ceremonies, 58
Zoroaster, 188, 358
Zuhrî, 55