Magia Sexualis: Sex, Secrecy, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism

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Although the forces of Eros and Magic have long been linked in western esoteric traditions, it is really not until the nineteenth century that we see the emergence of a large and sophisticated body of literature on the art of sexual magic. This article examines the rise of sexual magic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, placing it in the context of the larger discourse surrounding sexuality in American and British society of the Victorian era. Specifically, I focus on the teachings of the American spiritualist Paschal Beverly Randolph; the infamous "Great Beast 666," Aleister Crowley; and the founder of the first Tantrik Order in America, Pierre Bernard. Following the lead of Michel Foucault, I argue that this new literature on sexual magic was part of the larger interest in sex that pervaded Victorian culture. Far from being a period of repression and prudery, the Victorian era witnessed an unprecedented explosion of discourse on sex, particularly in its "deviant" and nonproductive forms. The rise of sexual magic at once reflects and yet also subverts many of the sexual values of mainstream Victorian culture. At the same time, however, I argue that Randolph, Crowley, and Bernard were all in their own ways somewhat ahead of their times and foreshadowed much of the obsession with sex and its liberation in contemporary America at the turn of the millennium.

> What is peculiar to modern societies is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as *the* secret.
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> —Michel Foucault (1978: 35)

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> If this secret [of sexual magic], which is a scientific secret, were perfectly understood, as it is not by me after more than twelve years' almost constant study and experiment, there would be nothing which the human imagination can conceive that could not be realized in practice.
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> —Aleister Crowley (1969: 767)

IT MIGHT SEEM AT FIRST somewhat surprising and not a little ironic that the period of the late nineteenth century—the Victorian era, with its rather restrictive attitudes toward the human body and sexuality—gave birth to a large body of literature on the subject of *magia sexualis*.[1] The same period that saw the proliferation of medical manuals on deviant sexuality, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), also saw the proliferation of a growing body of occult works on "affectional alchemy" and the mysteries of love as a profound source of spiritual power. However, as Michel Foucault and others have argued, the Victorian era was by no means simply an era of prudish repression and denial of sexuality; on the contrary, the late nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented explosion of discourse about sex, which was now categorized, classified, and discussed in endless titillating detail (Anderson; Foucault 1978; Mason). A key part of this discourse on sexuality, I would suggest, was the new literature on sexual magic, which spread throughout America, England, and Europe from the mid–nineteenth century onward.

Sexuality and the occult arts had, of course, long been associated in the western imagination. Since at least the time of the Gnostic heresies, and continuing with the persecution of the Templars and the witch hunts of the late Middle Ages, illicit sexuality was often believed to go hand in hand with secret ritual and the black arts (Coulianu: 87–129; King 1971; Stephens). But it was really not until the middle of the nineteenth century, with figures like the American Spiritualist Paschal Beverly Randolph and his European followers, that we see the birth of a detailed and sophisticated system of sexual magic (Deveney; Godwin, Chanel, and Deveney). And here by *sexual magic* I mean not simply the use of sexual union as a metaphor for spiritual experience but, rather, the explicit use of sexual intercourse and genital orgasm as a source of creative magical power that can be harnessed and manipulated by the practitioner. At the same time, perhaps not accidentally, western occult traditions were being increasingly

[1] Here I am using the phrase "Victorian era" primarily in the strict sense as referring to the dates of Queen Victoria's reign, ending in 1901. However, various historians have argued that, as a cultural phenomenon embodying certain attitudes toward society, morality, and sexuality, the "Victorian era" lasted well into the twentieth century (see Hall: 1–2; Mason: 1–3; Seidman: 1–8).

mingled with esoteric practices drawn from recently discovered eastern traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism—and perhaps above all, from the esoteric sexual rituals of Indian Tantra. Indeed, most of the popular literature now being sold in Barnes and Noble on the topics of "Tantra" and "sacred sex" is for the most part a melding of nineteenth-century sexual magic and a somewhat garbled version of Indian Tantra, usually with a healthy dose of the *Joy of Sex* thrown in (Urban 2000, 2003).

In this article I will critically examine the rise of sexual magic in America and Europe from the mid–nineteenth to the early twentieth century, placing it in its larger cultural contexts. Specifically, I will trace the transmission of *magia sexualis* from the United States to Europe, as it was passed on through authors such as Randolph and the infamous "Great Beast 666," Aleister Crowley. At the same time, I will also examine the impact of Indian traditions such as Tantra, which was introduced to the United States by figures like Pierre Arnold Bernard and soon became fused (and perhaps hopelessly confused) with western sexual magic. Rather remarkably, although there is a vast body of popular literature on sexual magic, there is little critical scholarship on the subject. Apart from the important work of John Patrick Deveney, Joscelyn Godwin, and a few others, most of this literature has yet to be taken seriously by the academic study of religion. Moreover, there has been little attempt to place this literature in its larger social contexts, in relation to broader cultural forces in European and American history.

The rise of sexual magic in the late nineteenth century, I will argue, is not only a fascinating and neglected piece of the history of modern religious movements; more important, it gives us some remarkable insights into modern western culture and its attitudes toward sexuality during this critical period. Ironically, most of these advocates of *magia sexualis* were portrayed—both by their critics and in their own writings—as rebellious dissidents working against the grain of modern western society and mainstream values. Both Randolph and Bernard, for example, were arrested for their alleged practice of "free love"; and Crowley not only was reviled throughout the media as the "wickedest man in the world" but took an apparent delight in overthrowing the sexual values of his Victorian youth. As I will argue, however, these three figures are best understood not as subversive enemies of modern society but, rather, as *reflecting some of the deepest ideals, tensions, and contradictions at the heart of modernity itself*.[2] As several recent authors have argued, most of the new religious and occult movements of the late nineteenth century

[2] The concept of "modernity" is notoriously difficult to define; here I am following Jürgen Habermas, who suggests that modernity is rooted in currents going back to the eighteenth century

do not represent so much a rejection of modernity; on the contrary, as Paul Heelas suggests, they are often better described as powerful *affirmations* of certain basic modern ideals, such as progress, individualism, and free will, and thus represent a "celebration of the self and sacralization of modernity" (169; cf. During; Owen 2001; Thurschwell). Figures like Randolph, Crowley, and Bernard would take these ideals to their furthest extremes, by affirming the inherent divinity of the human self and proclaiming the dawn of a new era in human history.

Above all, these three figures reflect the growing preoccupation with sexuality and its liberation in the modern period (see Thurschwell: 2).[3] Here I will adapt some of the insights of Foucault and others who have examined the role of sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Foucault suggests, much of the past literature on the Victorian era has been burdened by what he calls the "repressive hypothesis"—that is, the belief that Victorian society was hopelessly repressed about sexual matters and that our own generation has liberated us from the prudish shackles of our forefathers. In fact, Foucault observes, the Victorian era was anything but a period of silence and was instead a period of intense proliferation of discourse about and scientific classification of sexuality, particularly in its "deviant" forms such as homosexuality and masturbation. Increasingly, sexuality was identified as the innermost essence of human nature, as *the secret* of life and the body, and as the most important force in the health and productivity of modern capitalist society (Birken: 40–56; Foucault 1978; Weeks 1981).[4] Finally, with the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century, the "liberation" of sex from its alleged repression would be seen as the key to personal and social health as well.

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and the project of the Enlightenment. Among other things, this project was an attempt to develop an objective science and a universal law with the goal of human emancipation and liberation from the irrationalities of myth, religion, and superstition. Perhaps above all, the project of modernity rested in a fundamental belief in the value of the individual self and the possibility of progress, moving forward toward a truly free but well-ordered society (see also Owen 2001: 71–77).

[3] As Thurschwell observes in her study of magic and science in the late nineteenth century, "Anxieties about the permeability and suggestibility of bodies and minds erupt in crises around sexuality. Sexual and gender panic manifests itself in representative figures such as the New Woman and the dandy, in public scandals such as Oscar Wilde's trials and in the reification of medicalizing, pathologizing and criminalizing discourses around homosexuality. Deep and far-reaching anxieties about the stability of the traditional grounds of gender and sexuality pervade *fin-de-siècle* culture" (2).

[4] Foucault writes: "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" (1978: 69).

With their emphasis on sexual magic as the most powerful ritual secret, authors like Randolph, Crowley, and Bernard epitomize this modern fascination with sex. And with their bold call for a liberation of sex from its Victorian shackles, they would take the "repressive hypothesis" to its furthest extreme. For them, the liberation of sex is not only a means to psychological health in Freud's sense but the ultimate key to magical power. Particularly for Crowley and his students, sexual magic offered a powerful source of *transgression*, in Georges Bataille's (1986, 1991) sense of the term: by deliberately overstepping the moral boundaries of respectable society, the magus hoped to unleash a tremendous source of power and an exhilarating sense of liberating bliss. Yet as Foucault (1999: 117) also points out, the alleged "liberation" of sex in the modern era has proven to be less some kind of radical freedom from our Victorian past than an increasing preoccupation, obsession, and a kind of "hyperdevelopment of discourse" about sex. And it has also brought with it an increasing *commodification of sex* in the context of consumer capitalist society. As we will see, the seemingly liberating power of sexual magic was always a deeply *ambivalent* thing. Like sex itself in the modern era, it would always bear the potential to become co-opted by the logic of the consumer marketplace.

After a brief discussion of the historical background of western sexual magic, I will focus in turn on Randolph, Crowley, and Bernard, suggesting that they are powerful reflections of three broader trends in modern culture and attitudes toward sex. In the case of Randolph, we see an increasing *sexualization of love*, an emphasis on the sacred nature of sex itself, and a concomitant anxiety about the dangers of "free love" in nineteenth-century America. In the case of Crowley, we see an emphasis on *sexual transgression* and the explicit use of nonreproductive acts such as masturbation and homosexual intercourse as a source of liberating power. Finally, in the case of Bernard's "Tantrik Order in America," we see an increasing *commodification of sex* in the context of early-twentieth-century American capitalism. To conclude, I will suggest that these three figures not only are remarkable reflections of their times but also anticipated some of our own obsessions with sex and transgression at the turn of the millennium.

SEX POWER IS GOD POWER: P. B. RANDOLPH AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN SEX MAGIC

> The whole power of Magic is founded on Eros. The way Magic works is to bring things together through their inherent similarity.
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> —Marsilio Ficino, *Amore* VI, 10 (Coulianu: 87)

True Sex-power is God-power.

—Paschal Beverly Randolph,
The Ansairetic Mystery (Deveney: 317)

The belief in the magical potency of the sexual fluids and the spiritual power of sexual intercourse has a long history in western esoteric traditions. Throughout the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, as Marie-Hélène Huet observes, there was a widespread belief in the links between the creative imagination and the act of intercourse, during which the male and female could magically "impress" their desires onto the child in the moment of conception (Doniger and Spinner; Huet: 126–128). Many medieval Jewish Kabbalists also believed in the sacred power of marital sex as a kind of theurgic rite that united the male and female aspects of God. By joining the active and passive aspects of the human being, sexual union represents both the reintegration of the primordial human nature and the infusion of the transcendent spirit into the material world (Wolfson: 92–93).[5] During the Renaissance a variety of authors like Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno began to explore the connections between Eros and Magic, as the basic principles of attraction at work among all parts of nature (Coulianu: 87–89; Walker: 82–83). Meanwhile, alchemists like Paracelsus began to employ both the "seminal" power of Imagination (*Imaginatio*) and the spiritual power of semen in magical arts. According to Paracelsus, the Imagination itself has a kind of seminal efficacy; for "God planted the seed in all its reality and specificity deep in the Imagination of man" (Jacobi: 33). This seminal power can be manipulated by the magus in order to impress his will and bring about effects in the physical world. And in turn, the semen also has a spiritual power that can be manipulated for magical ends (Urban forthcoming; Waite, 1: 124).[6]

However, perhaps the first author to develop a detailed, systematic method of sexual magic was the enigmatic Spiritualist and Rosicrucian Paschal Beverly Randolph (Figure 1). Born in 1825 to a wealthy Virginian

[5] Wolfson has observed: "The relationship between the male and female below mirrors the relationship of the masculine and feminine potencies above. . . . By means of carnal intercourse . . . the union of a man and his wife assists in the unification of the male and female aspects of God" (92; see *Sefer Ha-Zohar*, II, 89a–89b, in Tishby, 3: 1391). However, Wolfson argues that Kabbalist practice is by no means egalitarian but, rather, is clearly androcentric and reasserts the superiority of male over female, ultimately even absorbing the female into the male.

[6] For example, semen may be planted in the ground and impregnated with Imagination to create an artificial human being or homunculus, generated without need of a physical mother. On Paracelsus's view of Imagination, see also Urban forthcoming; Waite, 1: 122. As Kayser summarizes, "Imagination is *Exstasis*, that is, a magical projection, self-copulation and impregnation which precedes . . . a sensible action and makes the power of the Astral Spirit substantial" (458).

father and a slave from Madagascar, Randolph was raised a poor, self-taught free black in New York City. Orphaned at age seven, he ran away from his foster parents as a teenager in order to travel the world. Eventually, he would emerge as one of the leading figures in nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the most famous scryer (crystal seer) of his times. At once a famous medium, an outspoken advocate of black rights, and "one of the century's great feminists," Randolph was remarkable for both his spiritual and political ideals (Godwin: 256). Tragically, he would suffer a series of personal misfortunes in his later years. After falling from an elevated train, he was left a paralyzed invalid; increasingly intoxicated and suspicious that his wife had betrayed him, he committed suicide in 1875.

Today Randolph is best known as America's foremost exponent of magical eroticism or affectional alchemy. In sexual love Randolph saw nothing less than "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" (Rosemont: xv). In the course of his wanderings through Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, Randolph encountered a wide variety of esoteric traditions, which included not

Figure 1. Paschal Beverly Randolph.

simply European Spiritualist and Rosicrucian orders but also certain Sufi lineages. In fact, he claims to have derived much of his knowledge from his experiences in the areas of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, where he was first initiated into the mysteries of sex magic: "One night—it was in far-off Jerusalem or Bethlehem, I really forget which—I made love to and was loved by, a dusky maiden of Arabic blood. I of her and that experience learned—not directly, but by suggestion—the fundamental principle of the White Magic of Love" ([1874] 1978: 48). Shortly thereafter he claims to have become affiliated with a group of fakirs, which may have been a branch of the unorthodox mystical order of the Nusa'iri, a group long persecuted by orthodox Islam because of its alleged Gnostic sexual rituals (Deveney: 211).[7]

Whatever his primary inspiration, Randolph began to teach a form of sexual magic that would have a profound impact on much later western esotericism. For Randolph, the sexual instinct is the most fundamental power in the universe, for it is the natural attraction between positive and negative forces that flow through all things. Borrowing the language of "magnetic attraction" (probably drawn from Franz Anton Mesmer and his students; see Godwin: 151–168), Randolph sees the male and female as complementary electromagnetic forces.[8] On the physical plane the male genitals are positive and the female genitals are negative; conversely, on the mental plane the female mind is positive and the male mind is negative. Hence the two have an innate attraction that is at once physical and spiritual:

> In effect, the entire universe, all living beings . . . are ruled by the principle of two contrary forces, exercising, one or the other, a power of inescapable attraction. One calls the forces positive and negative, and one rediscovers them in good and bad, emission and reception, life and death, idea and action, man and woman (positive and negative magnetic poles) in the material plane and, conversely, the woman (active pole) and man (negative pole) in the mental plane. . . . [W]hile the phallus of the man is positively polarized and the kteis of the woman is negatively polarized, the head of the man . . . is negative and magnetic for rapport

[7] As Deveney explains, "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" (211). Some speculate that Randolph may have encountered Tantric practices in the course of his wanderings, though there is no real evidence of this (Douglas: 85).

[8] Godwin notes: "To Newton's gravitation, the Austrian doctor Franz Anton Mesmer . . . added the concept of 'Animal Gravity,' a force that works upon and in our bodies through substances more subtle than matter. . . . [H]e became convinced that he was able to harness this force and employ it for healing" (151).

> with the head of the woman which is positive and electric. (Randolph 1988: 10–11)[9]

Because sexual attraction is the most fundamental force in nature, the experience of orgasm is the critical moment in human consciousness and the key to magical power. As the moment when new life is infused from the spiritual realm into the material, it is the crucial instant when the soul is 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" (Deveney: 218–219). 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 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 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. (Randolph 1874 [1997b]: 339–340)

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, one can attain not only spiritual insight but also the mundane goals of physical health, financial success, or regaining the passions of a straying lover. According to Randolph, the major uses of sex magic are the following:

> 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. . . . IV. prolonging

[9] One of the more intriguing aspects of Randolph's sexual magic is his frequent use of the language of modern science, magnetism, and electricity. Not only does he conceive of the entire universe in terms of a polarization between positive and negative energies, but he also sees the manipulation of the laws of magnetic attraction as the key to magical power. For example, among his many magical techniques is the use of "Volts" or solid fluid condensers (1988: 59–67). Volts are small figurines, which are molded in the shape of the persons one wishes to influence. They are then "charged" with vital energy by being painted with special fluid mixtures, such as white wine, the juice of lily leaves, extract of mandrake, etc. The charged figurine is then placed in one's bedroom for eight days, so that it "may be seen during the coition of the operator." When properly made, the Volt is so powerful that it gives complete influence over the intended subject, putting into one's hands "the life and death of the person" (Randolph 1988: 64–67).

> 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. (1874 [1997b])[10]

However, perhaps the most striking feature of Randolph's sexual magic is his insistence that both male and female partners must have an active role in the process. In fact, he places great emphasis on the importance of orgasm for both man and woman—ideally a simultaneous 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" (1931: 76–77). The resulting pleasure the partners feel in this union is nothing less than the overflowing joy of the divine emanating from above like the breath of God: "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. . . . [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!" (Randolph 1974: 126; see [N.d. (1873)] 1997a).

Randolph was not, however, merely a sexual reformer calling for a kind of erotic liberation. Like many nineteenth-century Spiritualists, he was also a social reformer, calling for a liberation of women and oppressed minorities as well (see Owen 1990). During the Civil War he threw himself behind the cause of the Southern slaves and worked to enlist black soldiers into the Union Army. At a speech in Syracuse, for example, he gave a rousing call for black freedom and a new social vision for the future, declaring: "We are here to ring the bells at the door of the world, proclaiming to the nations, to the white man in his palace, the slave in his hut, kings on their thrones, and to the whole broad universe, THAT WE ARE COMING UP!" (Bell: 21–22). Randolph's hope for a "regeneration of the world," in other words, involved both a social and a personal liberation in order to create a truly "nonrepressive" civilization.

Not surprisingly, many of Randolph's writings on sexuality and liberation would generate fear, suspicion, and outrage from the surrounding

[10] Elsewhere, Randolph lists over 100 uses for sexual magic, which include "frustrating bad plans of others," "relating to money dealings," "the grand secret of domestic happiness," "the power of influencing others, solely financially," "to derange the love relations of those not one's lover," and "the grand secret of life prolongation" (Deveney: 319–325).

Victorian American culture. In 1872 he was arrested on suspicion of distributing immoral "free love" literature. Although the case was never brought to court, Randolph capitalized on his arrest and his time in jail by publishing a fictional transcript of a trial entitled *P. B. Randolph, His Curious Life, Works and Career: The Great Free-Love Trial*. In it he depicts a prosecuting attorney as "finding nothing worse to say than that Randolph encouraged women to think of themselves as equals to men" (Godwin: 256).

Yet, despite the fears of social and moral subversion that it aroused from the surrounding society, Randolph's practice of sexual magic is anything but mere hedonistic license. Sex, for Randolph, is strictly for married couples united by the bond of love, to be undertaken with the purest intentions and safeguarded by moral and physical sanctions. In this sense, I would argue, Randolph's sexual magic is by no means a radical antisocial practice going against the grain of mainstream American society of the nineteenth century; on the contrary, it embodies many of the basic sexual values of his day. For example, with his language of electrical charges and the magnetic attraction between the sexes, Randolph reflects much of the discourse current in the nineteenth century on the natural attraction between males and females. As Frederick Hollick put it in his widely read 1855 text, *The Marriage Guide, or A Natural History of Generation*, "This mutual attraction is a species of Animal Magnetism, the male being positive and the female negative, so that they are drawn irresistibly together" (183). Still more important, however, Randolph also reflects Victorian attitudes toward sexuality within the sacred context of marriage. As Steven Seidman has argued in his study of nineteenth-century American sexuality, Victorian culture held a strong "spiritual ideal of love"; marriage should be rooted in a spiritual affinity and companionship, of which sex was an "obligatory and healthy expression." However, the Victorians also warned of the dangers of sexual desire as a powerfully creative but potentially destructive force that had to be controlled within the guarded strictures of marriage: "Far from denying and devaluing the importance of the sex instinct, the Victorians believed in its omnipresence and power. Indeed, they even exalted it as a benevolent power. The obverse side to assuming the power of sex is its potential danger. . . . The Victorians imagined a drama of an omnipresent powerful sex drive propelled toward pleasure but susceptible to the dangers of excess and ruin" (Seidman: 18).

At the same time, however, I would suggest that Randolph also foreshadowed some of the changing attitudes toward sex that would follow toward the end of the Victorian era. As Seidman argues, the period from 1880 to 1900 witnessed an increasing shift from the Victorian

"spiritualization of love" to a new kind of *sexualization of love*. That is, there was a marked shift from the Victorian emphasis on the importance of love within marital bounds (and fears of the dangers of sex) to a post-Victorian emphasis on sex as a vital component to any male–female relationship: "The language of love now intermingles with that of sex. Sexual attraction is taken as a sign of love; the giving and receiving of sexual pleasures are viewed as demonstrations of love. . . . The Victorian antithesis between love and sex . . . disappears" (Seidman: 7–8; cf. Birken: 1–39). With his emphasis on the awesome power of intercourse as a source of both material happiness and divine knowledge, Randolph was an important figure in this shift from love to sex in the late nineteenth century. And with his call for social liberation and the scandalous controversy that his alleged "free love" teachings generated, he also reflects much of the intense anxiety that surrounded sexual liberation in the late Victorian era (see also Thurschwell: 1–5). But in any case, however we interpret their broader cultural significance, Randolph's teachings would have a lasting impact on many later occult traditions, introducing sexual magic into the mainstream of western esotericism: "Through Randolph's influence the genie had been released from the bottle. . . . A multitude of sexual mysticism flourished" (Deveney: 252).

UNLEASHING THE BEAST: ALEISTER CROWLEY AND THE ORDO TEMPLI ORIENTIS

> Our Order possesses the Key which unlocks all Masonic and Hermetic secrets, it is the teaching of sexual magic and this teaching explains all the riddles of nature, all Masonic symbolism and all religious systems.
>
> —*Oriflamme*, 1912 (Clymer: 541)

> The sexual act is a sacrament of Will. To profane it is the great offense. All true expression of it is lawful; all suppression or distortion of it is contrary to the Law of liberty.
>
> —Aleister Crowley, *The Law Is for All* (1996: 42)

Once Randolph's teachings on sexual magic took root in the late nineteenth century, they would quickly flower and give birth to a wide array of occult movements throughout America, England, and Europe. At the same time, they would also be reinterpreted in ways that might have been quite horrifying to Randolph himself, as they were now mingled with the most transgressive acts of homosexual intercourse, autoeroticism, and even bestiality as a form of sexual magic.

Perhaps the most important vehicle for the transmission of Randolph's teachings on sexual magic was the highly esoteric movement known as the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.). Inspired by Karl Kellner (d. 1905) and later founded by Theodor Reuss (d. 1923), the O.T.O. became the main conduit through which western sexual magic began to merge with a (somewhat deformed) version of Indian Tantric practices. A wealthy Austrian chemist and industrialist, Kellner claimed to have been initiated into Indian sexual techniques in the course of his Oriental travels, citing a Sufi and two Indian yogis as his masters (Symonds 1958: 95; cf. Koenig 1992, Howe and Möller 1993).[11]

Others, however, believe that Kellner and Reuss's true inspiration was in fact P. B. Randolph, whose sexual-magical teachings had been spread to Europe by a group of disciples in the late nineteenth century. Many of Randolph's ideas were transmitted to Germany through a little known but extremely influential group known as the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor (H. B. of L.), begun by Max Theon (d. 1927) and Peter Davidson (d. 1916) probably sometime in the 1880s (Godwin: 258–259, 347–361). Following Randolph, the H. B. of L. made sex central to its metaphysical system and spiritual practice: it is the polarity of male and female energies that creates the universe, and it is the sexual union of males and females that leads to the "reunion of the divine Ego and to angelhood" (Godwin, Chanel, and Deveney: 71). At the same time, however, the H. B. of L. was even more emphatic about the dangers that arise from the abuse of sexual magic. Indeed, it warns that Randolph himself was led to his ruin by his sexual excesses.[12] Nonetheless, the teachings of the H. B. of L. would be one of the most important means by which Randolph's work was transmitted and had a formative impact on most later esoteric traditions in the West: "Once the secret was out of linking occultism with sex, it was impossible to ignore and . . . practically every occult order after the 1880s had some debt to the H. B. of L." (Godwin, Chanel, and Deveney: 67).

Once these sexual techniques were transmitted to new movements like the Ordo Templi Orientis, however, they would also undergo some profound transformations. Much of the O.T.O.'s ritual practice centered

[11] Kellner claims to have been initiated by the Arab fakir Soliman ben Aifha and the Indian yogis Bhima Sen Pratap and Sri Mahatma Agamya Guru Paramahamsa, from whom he learned "the mysteries of yoga and the philosophy of the left hand path which he called sexual magic" (Symonds 1958: 95). On Reuss and his knowledge of Tantra, see Naylor. Peter Koenig (1992, 1993) argues that the O.T.O. was not founded by Kellner but formed after his death under Reuss.

[12] According to a text called "The Mysteries of Eros: Expressly Arranged for the Exterior Circle of the H. B. of L. by T. H. Burgyon," "Especially must all sexual relations be carefully guarded and only participated in after due thought. . . . It is this very fatal mistake of sex that has ruined thousands of . . . aspirants for occult initiation" (Godwin, Chanel, and Deveney: 273).

around this "inner kernel" of sexual magic—though already quite different from the more conservative system of Randolph. As the O.T.O. proclaimed in the journal *Oriflamme* in 1912, "One of the secrets which our order possesses in its highest grades is that it gives members the means to re-erect the temple of Solomon in men, to refind the lost Word. . . . [I]it is the teaching of sexual magic" (Clymer: 541; cf. Koenig 1997). The O.T.O. developed a system of nine degrees (later expanded to eleven), the first six of which were more conventional Masonic initiations. The seventh, eighth, and ninth degrees, however, focused respectively on the theory of sex magic and on the techniques of auto- and heterosexual magic. Homosexual intercourse also played a central role in the rites (Koenig 2002). Through the magical act of intercourse, by focusing all one's will and imagination on a desired goal in the moment of orgasm, one is said to achieve success in any occult operation, from the invocation of a god to the finding of hidden treasure. One may, for example, use these techniques to magically empower a talisman or other magical object: by focusing one's entire will on the desired object during the act of auto- or heterosexual orgasm, and then afterward anointing that object with the semen, one can use that empowered object to achieve virtually any desired end (King 1977: 79–80). Yet, although the sex magic of the O.T.O. may have found some of its inspiration in the techniques of Randolph, there were also fundamental differences between the two. As Godwin (255) points out, the autoerotic and homosexual techniques developed by Kellner and Reuss would have horrified the more reserved Randolph, for whom sex was a sacrament between married couples, guarded by ritual sanctity and moral injunctions.

Surely the most infamous member of the O.T.O. was the notorious magician and self-proclaimed Great Beast 666, Aleister Crowley (1875–1947; figure 2). Reviled by the popular press as the "king of depravity, arch-traitor and drug fiend," Crowley is today one of the most influential figures in the revival of western occultism and neopagan witchcraft. Yet surprisingly, despite many popular and hagiographic works on Crowley, he has seldom been taken seriously by modern scholarship, and even scholars of western esotericism have typically dismissed him as either a demented pervert or a ridiculous crank. However, as his most recent biographer, Lawrence Sutin, has persuasively argued, Crowley was far more than the satanic drug fiend attacked by the media; he was, in fact, a striking reflection of some of the most important literary, philosophical, and cultural forces of the early twentieth century (cf. Symonds 1952; Urban 2001a).

Born in 1875, the son of a minister in the highly puritanical Plymouth Brethren sect, Edward Alexander Crowley embodied some of the deepest tensions within British Victorian culture as a whole. A child raised in strict

Figure 2. Aleister Crowley dressed as an Oriental sage, in publicity photos to attract students.

Christian morality, he would later turn to the occult arts and to extremes of sexual excess. Educated at Trinity College in Cambridge, Crowley inherited a large amount of money while still young and was free for many years to pursue his passions of poetry, mountain climbing, and the occult arts. While still at Trinity, he would also adopt the name "Aleister" (an homage to the hero of Shelley's poem "Alastor, the Spirit of Solitude") and also publish his first book of poetry and his infamous erotic collection, *White Stains*.

Crowley's first real initiation into the world of esotericism and magic occurred in 1898, when he was introduced to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. An eclectic movement that drew on a wide range of esoteric traditions, from Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism to Kabbalah, the Golden Dawn attracted a number of prominent intellectuals and artists of the day, such as the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, among many others (Gilbert; Godwin: 222–225).

However, it was in 1904 that Crowley came to believe that he had received his first great revelation and the knowledge that he was to be the herald of a new era in history. According to his own account, his guardian angel, Aiwass, appeared and dictated *The Book of the Law* or *Liber Legis*.[13]

[13] Actually, the revelation came first through Crowley's wife, Rose, during their trip to Cairo, when the voice of the god Horus allegedly 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.

We have now, *The Book of the Law* declares, entered the third great age in history: the first eon was that of Isis, based on matriarchy and worship of the mother goddess; the second eon was that of Osiris, during which the patriarchal religion of suffering and death (i.e., Christianity) was dominant. Finally, with the revelation of *The Book of the Law*, the corrupt age of Christianity had come to an end, and a new eon of the child Horus was born. The guiding principle of this new era is the Law of Thelema, derived from Greek, meaning "Will." According to Crowley's maxim: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law." In place of servile submission to some imaginary God, the Law of Thelema is the full affirmation of the Self and the free expression of the individual will: "The Law of Thelema avows and justifies selfishness; it confirms the inmost conviction of each one of us that he is the centre of the cosmos" (Crowley 1969: 873, 939).

The key to Crowley's Law of Thelema—and also the primary reason for the scandalous reputation that followed him—was his practice of sexual magic. For Crowley, sex is the most powerful force in human nature and the supreme expression of the will; but it has been stupidly repressed by the church and so given birth to all manner of social and psychological ills:

> Mankind must learn that the sexual instinct is . . . ennobling. The shocking evils which we all deplore are principally due to the perversions produced by suppressions. The feeling that it is shameful and the sense of sin cause concealment, which is ignoble and internal conflict which creates distortion, neurosis and ends in explosion. We deliberately produce an abscess and wonder why it is full of pus, why it hurts, why it bursts in stench and corruption.
>
> The Book of the Law solves the sexual problem completely. Each individual has an absolute right to satisfy his sexual instinct as is physiologically proper for him. The one injunction is to treat all such acts as sacraments. (1969: 874–875)

Crowley's sexual magic is itself a complex melding of both eastern and western traditions. In fact, Crowley would become one of the most important figures in the transmission of Tantra to the West—though with significant transformations. As early as 1902 Crowley had been introduced to Tantra during his travels in India and Sri Lanka (Sutin: 92).[14] But he would also combine his knowledge of Tantra with the growing tradition of sexual magic in the West, as transmitted by Randolph and the O.T.O. Crowley became involved with the O.T.O. beginning in

[14] On Crowley's Tantric influences, see Sutin: 92, 127; Urban 2001a. As Symonds comments, "His greatest merit was to make the bridge between Tantrism and the Western esoteric tradition and thus bring together Western and Eastern magical techniques" (Crowley 1969: xxv).

1910 and would soon become its most infamous leader. According to Crowley, sex magic is the most powerful of all magical operations, for it is the raw power of human creativity, which has the potential to bring into being anything one desires: "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 experiment, there would be nothing which the human imagination can conceive that could not be realized. . . . If it were desired to have an element of atomic weight six times that of uranium that element could be produced" (1969: 767). In Crowley's revised system the O.T.O.'s original nine degrees were expanded to eleven. The eighth, ninth, and eleventh of these focused on more explicitly nonreproductive sexual acts, including masturbation, the consumption of sexual fluids, and homosexual intercourse:

> 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 (or one's own) 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. (Koenig 2002; cf. Crowley 1997)

Many of Crowley's sexual rites centered around explicit transgressions and calculated inversions of conventional morality and religious practice. Not only did the eighth and eleventh degrees of Crowley's O.T.O. initiations call for masturbation and homosexual intercourse as the supreme keys to magical power (something Randolph would have found repugnant), but they also often involved the oral consumption of semen and vaginal fluid as the supreme "elixir" and source of magical power (Crowley 1986; Sutin: 243–244; Symonds and Grant: 45–50). However, Crowley's most explicitly transgressive practices began in the years between 1920 and 1923, when he founded his own Abbey of Thelema at a farmhouse in Sicily. According to his diaries from this period, Crowley believed that he had transcended all moral bounds and material distinctions, such that even the most defiling substances became for him divine. Thus, he describes one performance of his Gnostic mass in which the sacred Host was replaced with the excrement of his consort, Leah Hirsig, which she forced him to eat as the true Body of God. As Crowley recounts, "My mouth burned; my throat choked, my belly wretched; my blood fled wither who knows. . . . 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" (Symonds and Grant: 235). On another occasion in 1921 Crowley describes the performance of a blood sacrifice that involved both ritual and sexual transgression. The ceremony was to consist in the beheading of a goat at the very moment that it ejaculated as it had intercourse with his "Scarlet Woman," Leah, so that the drinking of its blood could be a true "drinking thereof from the Cup of our Lady of Whoredom" (Sutin: 293). Unfortunately, the goat seemed uninterested in performing the sexual part of the ritual, and Crowley was forced to complete that portion of the ceremony himself.

Crowley found in these explicit acts of transgression the key to a tremendous source of power. Through these occult manipulations of impure substances, such as semen, blood, and excrement, he claimed to have unleashed a magical will that could fulfill any spiritual or material desire, from intercourse with the gods to financial well-being (in fact, many of his magical operations were performed in order to generate some quick cash when he had begun to deplete his bank account): "A Sorcerer by the power of his magick had subdued all things to himself. . . . He could fly through space more swiftly than the stars. Would he eat, drink, and take his pleasure? There was none that did not obey his bidding. In the whole system of ten million times ten million spheres . . . he had his desire" (1952: 63). In his most exalted moments Crowley believed that he could achieve a supreme spiritual power: the power to conceive a divine child or spiritual fetus that would transcend the mortal failings of the body born of a mere woman. This goal of creating an immortal child, Crowley suggests, lies at the heart of many esoteric traditions through history: "This is the great idea of magicians in all times: To obtain a Messiah by some adaptation of the sexual process. In Assyria they tried incest . . . Greeks and Syrians mostly bestiality. . . . The Mohammedans tried homosexuality; medieval philosophers tried to produce homunculi by making chemical experiments with semen. But the root idea is that any form of procreation other than normal is likely to produce results of a magical character" (1911: 385–386). In sum, the secret of sexual magic has the potential to unleash a power of almost messianic proportions, a power that heralds the dawn of the new eon.

Clearly, Crowley was going somewhat against the grain of the conventional values of the Victorian world in which he was born. As Patricia Anderson observes in her study of nineteenth-century British sexual attitudes, much of the discourse of the Victorian era was

particularly focused on the importance of heterosexual marriage for the stability of society. In an era that valued economic productivity, generation of capital, and restraint in consumption, healthy sexuality had to be useful, productive, and efficient: "Normal heterosexuality appeared in one guise . . . attraction between men and women that led to marriage and family. Normal sex was consistent with the values of Victorian industrial society—it was another mode of production" (Anderson: 17–18). However, this did not mean that there was a simple silence about those forms of sexuality that did not fit into the heterosexual norm. On the contrary, the nineteenth century witnessed a tremendous proliferation of medical treatises on sexuality, with an almost obsessive classification and scientific description of every imaginable perversion. Among the most popular works in late-nineteenth-century England was Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which became the most influential catalog of deviations (Birken: 40–56). Under the protective cover of "medical nomenclature" and the "posture of moral outrage," Victorian readers "could indulge in this 'medicoforensic' peep-show of sexual hyper-aesthesia, paresthesia, aspermia, polyspermia, spermatorrhea, sadism, masochism, fetishism, psychic hermaphroditism, satyriasis, and nymphomania" (Kern: 334–335; cf. Foucault 1978: 38).

However, as Michael Mason (9–12) suggests, the first two decades of the twentieth century in England also gave birth to a powerful reaction against the sexual values of the Victorian era. As we see in a wide array of authors such as Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, and D. H. Lawrence, there was a growing critique of the repressive prudery of the Victorian age and an increasing call for social and sexual liberation. As Carpenter put it, "The strange period of human evolution, the Victorian Age . . . marked the lowest ebb of modern civilized society: a period in which . . . cant in religion, the impure hush on matters of sex . . . the cruel barring of women from every natural expression of their lives, were carried to an extremity of folly difficult for us now to realise" (321–322).

Crowley is a clear key example of this growing attack on Victorian morality and this call for sexual freedom. Yet at the same time Crowley would also go a great deal further than most others of his time would have dared, by setting out deliberately to destroy that productive Victorian social order through the most extreme acts of consumption and excess. Much of his magical practice centered specifically around "nonproductive"—and, by Victorian standards, physically and morally dangerous—acts such as masturbation and homosexual intercourse. As Lesley Hall observes, masturbation was "reprobated universally throughout Victorian society" and considered a source not just of moral decay but of epilepsy and insanity. So too, homosexuality was foremost among those

acts seen to violate the "borders of masculinity" defined by middle-class Victorian society and thus among the greatest threats to a productive, efficient, and healthy social body (Hall: 26). Finally and perhaps most shockingly, Crowley violated the sacred boundary between religion and sensuality by making sex a holy sacrament and treating semen, menstrual blood, and excrement as the supreme elements in his magical rites.

Much of the awesome power that Crowley found in sexual magic, I would suggest, lay precisely in the act of *transgression*: the deliberate violation of the most sacred taboos and social norms. As Georges Bataille observes, transgression is not a matter of simple hedonism or unrestrained sexual license. Rather, its power lies in the dialectic or play between taboo and transgression, sanctity and sacrilege, through which one systematically constructs and then oversteps all laws. Indeed, the stricter the taboo, the more powerful the experience of transgressing it through impurity and the overturning of law. As Bataille comments, quoting Marquis de Sade, "It is always a temptation to knock down a barrier. Fear invests [the forbidden act] with an aura of excitement. 'There is nothing,' writes de Sade, 'that can set bounds to licentiousness.' The best way of enlarging and multiplying one's desires is to try to limit them" (1986: 48). For it is the experience of overstepping limits that brings the blissful sense of continuity and communion with the other: "Ecstasy begins where horror is sloughed off. . . . More than any other state of mind, consciousness of the void about us throws us into exaltation. . . . [W]e pass beyond that into an awareness of the act of transgression" (Bataille 1986: 69). Nowhere is this dialectic between taboo and transgression more apparent than in the case of Crowley's magic, which centers in large part around the explicit violation of the moral boundaries of the Victorian Christian world in which he was raised.

In this sense, like Randolph, Crowley was a striking reflection of the conflicts and anxieties of his own era, but he was also somewhat ahead of his time. Not only did he critique the Victorian culture in which he was raised, but with his law of the Will, he also set out to destroy that Victorian world and to create a whole new era of human history. More than one author has suggested that Crowley anticipated the sexual revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s and perhaps our own age of mass consumption at the turn of the millennium. As Leslie Shepherd observes, "It is just as well that Crowley was ahead of his time; had he been unleashed today," amid our own obsessions with sex and transgression in contemporary consumer society, "he might have taken the world by storm" (Crowley 1970: vii).

THE OMNIPOTENT OOM: PIERRE BERNARD AND THE AMERICANZATION OF TANTRA

> In this day and age, when matters pertaining to the sexes are generally avoided, and we are taught that the sexual appetite is an animal craving that should be subdued and concealed . . . it is not surprising that the great majority of persons are blind to the vast importance of the sexual nature. . . . [T]hey fail to realize that not only is the cause of our individual existence, but . . . the well-spring of human life and happiness.
>
> —Pierre Bernard, "Tantrik Worship: The Basis of Religion" (1906: 71)

> Wily con man, yogi, athlete, bank president, founder of the Tantrik Order in America and the Clarkstown Country Club . . . the remarkable "Doctor" Bernard was all of these. He was also the Omnipotent Oom, whose devoted followers included some of the most famous names in America.
>
> —Charles Boswell, "The Great Fuss and Fume over the Omnipotent Oom" (31)

Already in the works of Kellner, Crowley, and others involved with the O.T.O., much of the western tradition of *magia sexualis* had begun to mingle and perhaps become hopelessly confused with the Indian tradition known as Tantra. A vast and enormously complex body of texts, traditions, and rituals, Tantra is essentially a form of religious practice that emerged within the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions from about the fourth or fifth century C.E. Tantra has long had a rather scandalous reputation in both the Indian and western imaginations, in large part because of its use of the physical body, sensual pleasure, and in some cases sexual intercourse as a means of spiritual liberation (see Urban 2001b, 2003; White: 9–10); however, as Tantra entered the western world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it would become increasingly identified with its sexual aspects and increasingly defined simply as "spiritual sex" (Urban 2000).[15]

One of the most important figures in the transmission of Tantra to the West, and also in its fusion with western sex magic, was the colorful, mysterious, and quite scandalous figure known as Pierre Arnold Bernard.

[15] There are many conflicting definitions of Tantra, a generic label that covers a vast array of texts, traditions, and practices. Among the more useful is White's definition of Tantra as "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" (9). See also Urban 2003.

Infamous throughout the press as "the Omnipotent Oom," Bernard claimed to have traveled throughout the Orient in order to bring the secrets of Tantra to this country and so found the first "Tantrik Order in America" in 1906. Surrounded by controversy and slander for the sexual freedom that he and his largely female followers were said to enjoy, Bernard is in many ways an epitome of Tantra in its uniquely American incarnations. And foreshadowing later American gurus such as the infamous Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, he was also the first to *commercialize* Tantric sex in a very lucrative way.

Virtually nothing is known about Bernard's early life. In fact, he seems to have gone to some lengths to conceal his background behind a veil of fictitious identities and false biography, often using the persona of "Peter Coons" from Iowa.[16] Probably born in 1875 to a middle-class family from California, Bernard left home in his teens to work his way to India to study the "ancient Sanskrit writings and methods of curing diseases of mind and body." After studying in Kashmir and Bengal, he claimed to have won the title of "Shastri" and been initiated into the inner mysteries of Tantra. Upon returning to America and now introducing himself with the title of "Dr.," he worked at various odd jobs and began to study hypnotism. By 1900 he had become moderately famous as a master of hypnosis who could use yogic techniques to place himself in a state simulating death (Douglas: 192; figure 3).

In 1904 Bernard established a clinic in San Francisco, the "Bacchante Academy," where he taught his own version of self-hypnosis and yoga. Even then, Bernard had become something of a scandal in the California press, which charged that the academy "catered to young women interested in learning hypnotism and soul charming—by which they meant the mysteries of relations between the sexes" (Douglas: 195). Sometime in the years 1906–1907 Bernard also founded the Tantrik Order in America, with an accompanying journal, whose document for initiation reads as follows:

> As a tear from heaven he has been dropped into the Ocean of the TANTRIK BROTHERHOOD upon earth and is moored forevermore in the harbor of contentment, at the door to the temple of wisdom and to him will be unveiled the knowledge of the Most High. . . .

[16] Described as "both a prophet and showman," Bernard was a man "who could lecture on religion with singular penetration and with equal facility stage a big circus, manage a winning ball team or put on an exhibition of magic which rivaled Houdini" (Charles Potter in Seabrook: 359). The few studies of Bernard's life and works include Urban 2001a, Douglas, Ward, and Shepard. There are many popular accounts, including Goodman, Lardner, and Boswell.

> Armed with the key to the sanctuary of divine symbolism wherein are stored the secrets of wisdom and power, he no longer lives upon the appearance . . . but has proven worthy to be entrusted with the knowledge . . . to soar above the world and look down upon it; to exalt the passions and quicken the imagination . . . to treat all things with indifference; to know that religion is the worship of man's invisible power . . . to enjoy well-being, generosity, and popularity. . . . He has learned to love life and know death. (1906: 96–97)

After the San Francisco earthquake in 1906 Bernard left California and relocated to New York City, where he would open his "Oriental Sanctum" in 1910. Teaching Hatha Yoga downstairs and offering secret Tantric initiation upstairs, the sanctum quickly became an object of scandal in the New York press. The notorious "Omnipotent Oom" was charged with kidnapping and briefly imprisoned, though the charges were later dropped. "I cannot tell you how Bernard got control over me or how he gets it over other people," said the alleged kidnappee, Zella Hopp: "He is the most wonderful man in the world. No women seem able to resist him" (Sann: 190). Similar controversy surrounded the "New York Sanskrit College," which Bernard founded a few years later. The press reported "wild Oriental music and women's cries, but not those of distress" (Douglas: 195).

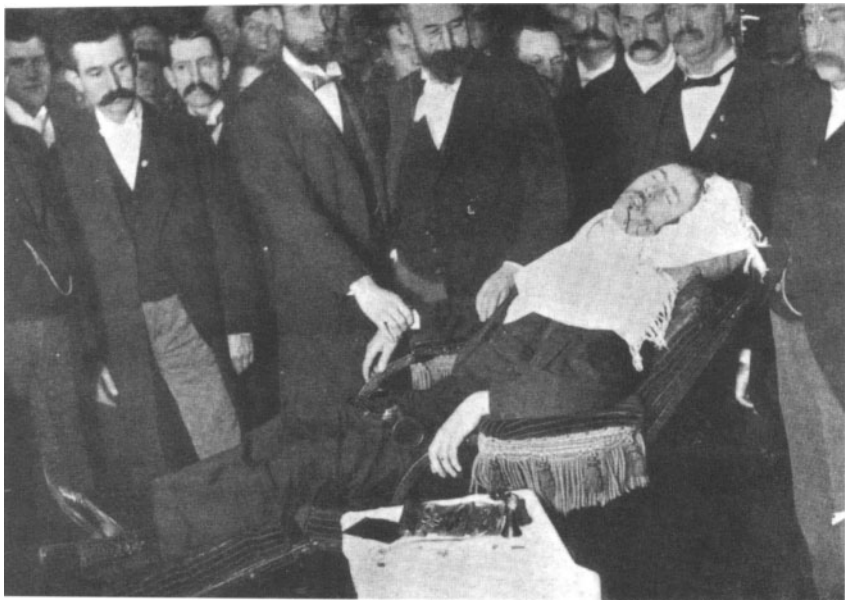

Figure 3. Pierre Bernard performing the "Kali Mudra" (Douglas: 192).

By 1918 Bernard had moved out to a large seventy-two-acre estate in Nyack, New York, which he renamed the "Clarkstown Country Club" and made the site of his own utopian Tantric community. A sumptuous property with a thirty-room Georgian mansion, the club was designed to be "a place where the philosopher may dance, and the fool be provided with a thinking cap!" (Bernard 1935). Eventually, he would also purchase a huge property known as the Mooring and open a chain of Tantric clinics, including a center in New York and summer camp on Long Island. His clinics were known for attracting the wealthiest, most affluent clients, including members of the Vanderbilt family, composer Cyril Scott, and conductor Leopold Stokowski, among others. According to *Town and Country* magazine of 1941, "Every hour of the day limousines and taxies drove up to the entrance of the Doctor's New York clinic. In the marble foyer behind the wrought-iron portal . . . a pretty secretary handled appointments" (Douglas: 198). It is not surprising that Bernard quickly achieved a remarkable degree of wealth, fame, and status: "Almost overnight, Oom found himself showered with more money than he had ever dreamed of and chieftain of a tribe of both male and female followers. . . . [E]ventually it would number well over 200 and carry on its roster some of the best-known names in America" (Sann: 189).

In many ways the colorful life and scandalous career of Pierre Bernard was parallel to that of the infamous Great Beast, Aleister Crowley. In fact, the two did briefly intersect. Not only do many of Crowley's teachings on sex magic bear some resemblance to Bernard's American Tantra, but Crowley also had direct contact with the members of the Tantrik Order in the 1920s. Crowley was first introduced to his Scarlet Woman by her sister Alma in New York in 1918. Alma was herself a disciple of Bernard and deeply involved in his Tantrik Order in New York; however, she would later go on to publish an exposé of Bernard's group, under the pseudonym of Marion Dockerill, entitled *My Life in a Love Cult: A Warning to All Young Girls* (1928). As Lawrence Sutin describes her, "Alma was intensely interested in the occult and would go on . . . to become a disciple of a master named Pierre Bernard, who . . . taught the members of his 'Secret Order of Tantriks' a form of sexual magic. Alma served for a time as the High Priestess of Oom, but later recanted. . . . There are . . . obvious parallels in the paths of Alma as High Priestess and Leah as Scarlet Woman" (274). This parallel between the sister-consorts of Crowley and Bernard is quite fitting. After all, both Crowley and Bernard were to become notorious in the western popular imagination as high priests of secret Tantric rites; and both would soon face intense slander and media attack, largely because of their scandalous sexual practices.

Like Crowley's sexual magic, Bernard's Tantric teachings were surrounded with a tantalizing aura of secrecy, described as teachings so profound that they must be reserved for the initiated few. Thus, the *International Journal, Tantrik Order* quotes the *Kularnava Tantra*, that "the principal rites of Tantrik worshippers take place in secret with closed doors. This secrecy is strictly in accordance with the Tantrik precept . . . 'One should guard the Kaula system from uninitiated beasts . . . just as one guards money . . . from thieves' " (Bernard 1906: 27). According to the police reports of a raid on Bernard's clinic, entry involved a secret signal and a complex series of taps on the bell. There also seems to have been a hierarchy of disciples, with the lower-level initiates performing yoga and physical exercises downstairs, while the inner circle or "Secret Order of Tantriks," engaged in the more esoteric rites upstairs: "Downstairs, they found a bare room where Oom's physical culture clients, paying a $100 bite, toiled through exercises designed to produce the body beautiful. Upstairs . . . on canvas-covered mattresses, Oom's inner-circle clients participated in secret rites. . . . [T]he upstairs customers, following physical examinations, had to pay large sums and then sign their names in blood before they could be initiated into the cult" (Sann: 189).

The popular press offers us some fairly vivid and probably rather imaginative accounts of Bernard's secret Tantric rituals and the occult initiations into arcane esoteric techniques.

> During Tantrik ceremonies, Oom sat on his throne wearing a turban, a silken robe and baggy Turkish pants, and flourished a scepter. While so engaged, he invariably smoked one of the long black cigars to which he was addicted. . . .
>
> The novitiate looks upon Doctor Bernard as a high priest—indeed, as a sort of man-god. He kneels before Doctor Bernard and recites: "Be to me a living guru; be a loving Tantrik guru." Then all present bow their heads . . . and repeat in unison: "Oom man na padma Oom." It is sung over and over in a chanting monotone, like the beating of drums in a forest, and is supposed . . . to induce a state of ecstasy. (Boswell: 32)

There does appear to have been some need for the secrecy in Bernard's Tantric practice—particularly in the context of early-twentieth-century American anxieties surrounding sex and liberation. According to most of the accounts that came out of Bernard's Clarkstown Country Club, much of the spiritual practice there centered around the full enjoyment of the body and the liberation of sexual pleasure. As we read in the *International Journal, Tantrik Order*, the human body is the supreme creation in this universe and the most perfect place of worship—a truly embodied, sensual worship that requires no churches of stone or external priesthood:

"The trained imagination no longer worships before the shrines of churches, pagodas and mosques or there would be blaspheming the greatest, grandest and most sublime temple in the universe, the miracle of miracles, the human body" (Bernard 1906: 105).

Like dance, yoga, and other forms of physical expression, sex is, for Bernard, a spiritual discipline and a means of realizing the divine within the physical body. As he put in his article "Tantrik Worship," "The animating impulse of all organic life is the sexual instinct. It is that which underlies the struggle for existence in the animal world and is the source of all human endeavor. . . . That affinity which draws the two sexes together . . . is the most powerful factor in the human race and has ever been the cause of man's most exalted thought" (1906: 71). Yet in modern western culture the mysteries of sexual love have been stupidly repressed, relegated by self-righteous prudes to the realm of depravity: "In this day and age, when matters pertaining to the sexes are generally avoided, and we are taught that the sexual appetite is an animal craving that should be subdued . . . it is not surprising that the great majority of persons are blind to the vast importance of the sexual nature" (Bernard 1906: 71). As one disciple describes him, Bernard was the only teacher in modern America who recognized the natural beauty and power of sex, which is nothing other than an expression of our union with the Divine: "Sex is discussed naturally. . . . Doctor Bernard believes that men and women can learn a lot about living by learning a lot about playing and loving. He teaches the Oriental view of love as opposed to the restrained Western idea. Love, in its physical aspects, is akin to music and poetry. It unites men and women with the infinite" (Boswell: 31). Apparently, Bernard also believed that certain individuals—particularly the repressed women of modern America—needed more drastic surgical measures to liberate their sexual potential. Hence, sexually unresponsive or "desensitized women" could be helped by a form of partial circumcision in which the clitoral hood was surgically removed, an operation believed to improve receptivity by exposing the clitoral gland to direct stimulation (Douglas: 197).[17]

Not surprisingly, the popular press took no end of delight in sensationalizing Bernard's scandalous Tantric practices. Indeed, Bernard's clinics seem to have represented something terribly shocking yet strangely

[17] Bernard's wife, Blanche de Vries, also became a teacher of oriental dance and yoga. She developed her own "Tantric health system," which she marketed to the wealthy New York upper classes. She argued that Tantra is the most-needed remedy for modern America's social ills, most of which derive from repression: "Half the domestic tragedies . . . and not a few suicides and murders . . . are due to the inherent stupidity of the average Anglo-Saxon man or woman on the subject of love" (King 1971: 155).

tantalizing in the early-twentieth-century American imagination—something deliciously transgressive in a world where sex for the sake of procreation within heterosexual marriage was the unassailable pillar of decent society: "The rites are grossly licentious and are most often invoked in veneration of the Shakti, the goddess of female energy. . . . A couple skilled in the rites . . . are able to make love hour after hour without diminution of male potency and female desire" (Boswell: 85).

It seems inevitable that Bernard's Tantric clinics should have elicited some complaints from his neighbors and attracted the attention of the authorities. F. H. Gans, who occupied an apartment across the way, summed up the neighborhood grievance: "What my wife and I have seen through the windows of that place is scandalous. We saw men and women in various stages of *dishabille*. Women's screams mingled with wild Oriental music" (Sann: 190). In Nyack, where Bernard was an affluent, respected citizen, the authorities received a host of complaints about his scandalous Tantric clinic; reluctantly, the police were forced to investigate and rode into the estate on horseback:

> Nyack concluded Oom was running a love cult. The local prudes clucked and gasped their alarm. Oom, obviously, was a danger to the young of the community and would have to be run out of town. But the Nyack police refused to act. Oom was a big taxpayer. So the prudes complained to the New York State Police. . . . The night they received the complaint, a squad of troopers galloped to Oom's estate and swung down from their saddles near the main building. (Boswell: 91)

After his brief rise to celebrity and his rapid descent into scandal, Bernard seems to have retired into a relatively quiet and comfortable later life. Enjoying an affluent lifestyle, Bernard was known for his lavish wedding and anniversary celebrations, his generous patronage of professional baseball and boxing, and his investment in sporting venues like baseball stadiums and dog tracks, as well as his building of an airport. With a fondness for collecting fine automobiles, such as Rolls Royces, Stutzes, and Lincolns, Bernard is said to have been worth over $12 million at his peak. "I'm a curious combination of the businessman and the religious scholar," as Bernard once described himself (Douglas: 204). He died in New York City in 1955 at the age of eighty.

In sum, we might say that the enigmatic character of Pierre Bernard is of vital importance to the history of sexual magic for at least three reasons. First, he was a pioneer in the early transmission of Tantra to America, where it became increasingly popular and increasingly fused with western traditions of sexual magic. Second, he was one of the first

figures in the reinterpretation of Tantra as something primarily concerned with sex and physical pleasure. In fact, most of the texts on "Tantra" and "sex magic" one finds today on the shelves of popular bookstores are mixtures of Crowleyian magic and a (rather distorted) form of Indian Tantra. Thus, we now find a wide range of magazines, videos, and texts bearing titles like *Sex Magic, Tantra and Tarot* and *Secrets of Western Tantra*, most of which are based on the fundamental equation of Indian Tantra and Crowleyian sex magic (see Douglas; Frater; Hyatt and Duquette; Kraig). Finally, like many later American Tantric gurus, Bernard also generated intense scandal and slander from the surrounding society, foreshadowing Tantra's role in the American imagination as something wonderfully seductive and deliciously transgressive.

In this sense Bernard reflects and embodies many of the sexual attitudes of post-Victorian American society of the early twentieth century. He is an especially clear exemplar of what Seidman (7–8) calls the "sexualization of love" that took place in the decades after 1890, with the increasing interest in the sexual nature of love as a good in itself. And like Crowley, he also reflects the post-Victorian urge toward *transgression* in Bataille's sense of the term—the deliberate, even ecstatic overstepping of the moral boundaries of mainstream society as an exhilarating source of liberating bliss. A large part of the attraction of his teachings, it would seem, lay in the possibility of transgressing the narrow limits of the dominant social and religious institutions of early-twentieth-century America to achieve a truly godlike kind of pleasure and freedom.

Yet at the same time, even more so than Crowley or Randolph, Bernard also foreshadowed many of the trends that would emerge in the later twentieth century. Not only did he anticipate many of the debates about sexual liberation that would take place in the 1960s and 1970s (see Seidman: 8), but he foreshadowed much of the commodification of sex that now pervades modern consumer culture. With his affluent Tantric clinics and country clubs, catering to the wealthiest elite society, Bernard seems to have created a brand of Tantric sexual magic uniquely well suited to the consumer market of American capitalism. As Jeffrey Weeks argues, it is perhaps too simple to assume that the twentieth century was characterized by a radical sexual revolution, with a complete breakdown of sexual prohibitions. Rather, what has taken place is more of a commodification of sex, as part of the larger socioeconomic process of the expansion of capitalism to all domains of modern culture: "Sex had long been something you were. By the 1950s it was also something you could buy, not just in the form of prostitution, but in the form of glossily marketed fantasy. . . . Not only was sex an area that could be colonized by capitalism, it was also one that could expand ever more exotically"

(Weeks 1985: 23–24). Bernard's Tantrik Order was among the earliest and most remarkable examples of this commercialization of sex as a spiritual good promising not only this-worldly pleasure but otherworldly bliss as well.

CONCLUSIONS: SEXUAL MAGIC AND "SEXUAL LIBERATION" TODAY

> Sex is one of the most (some say THE most) powerful energies on the planet. . . . Within our loins lies an energy that has the potential to create ANY reality we want. . . . Religion has done much to suppress our divine sexual nature and has kept the masses ignorant of the potential uses of sexual energy. . . . Sex Magic is based on the belief that the most powerful moment of human existence is the orgasm. Sex Magic is the art of utilizing sexual orgasm to create a reality and/or expand consciousness. . . . It is a moment when a window opens to the unlimited abundance of the unlimited universe.
>
> —Jeffrey Tye, "Tantra: Sex Magic"

> We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have . . . carried it to its limits: the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos.
>
> —Michel Foucault (1999: 57)

To close, I would like to offer some general comments on the importance of figures like Randolph, Crowley, and Bernard for understanding our own larger cultural and religious history. With their elaborate, often scandalous and shocking techniques of sexual magic, they give us some keen insights into the changing attitudes toward sex in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England and America. Rather than dissident rebels subverting modern western society, they might be better described as extreme embodiments—and even *intense magnifying glasses*—of some of the most central tensions and contradictions in modern society itself. If we compare the sexual techniques of Randolph, Crowley, and Bernard, and if we compare the reactions they generated in the surrounding society, then we can see several broader shifts in the sexual values of modern western culture. Randolph's more conservative system of sexual magic, for example, embodies the Victorian emphasis on the sacredness of love within heterosexual marriage. Crowley's sex magic, conversely, reflects the post-Victorian urge toward transgression and excess, the desire to shatter the productive bourgeois domestic life through explicit inversions of Victorian morality. And finally, Bernard reflects in vivid, often

amusing detail the growing commercialization of sex in the context of early-twentieth-century consumer society.

But more than simply reflecting the sexual tensions of the late Victorian era, these three authors also foreshadowed many of the sexual anxieties in our own society at the turn of the millennium. In the last thirty years, in fact, both Crowleyian sex magic and Tantra have become increasingly influential in western pop culture and new religious movements. Not only can we now discover the secrets of western Tantra or browse the "E-sensuals catalogue" on the Tantra.com Web site, but the phrase "American Tantra" is now a registered trademark, representing a line of books, videos, and other sexual magical accessories through its on-line gift shop (Urban 2000). As one enthusiastic neo-Tantrik guru, Swami Nostradamus Virato, puts it, "The art of Tantra could be called spiritual hedonism, which says eat drink and be merry, but with full awareness!"

As such, Randolph, Crowley, Bernard, and their contemporary disciples are not only clear illustrations of the "repressive hypothesis" or the belief that sex has been prudishly repressed by our Victorian forefathers; rather, they are also striking embodiments of the modern search for *liberation*, the titillating pleasure and seemingly magical power that derives from the overstepping of taboos:

> If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition . . . then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. . . . We are conscious of defying established power. . . . We know we are being subversive. What stimulates our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation and manifold pleasures. (Foucault 1978: 6–7)

Yet in fact, Foucault argues, we have really not so much "liberated" sex in any radical way but, rather, continued a long history of preoccupation with and discourse about sex, which has been described, debated, and categorized in endless titillating detail. In our own generation sex has perhaps not been so much liberated as increasingly commodified and commercialized to a degree far beyond that imagined by Crowley or Bernard: "Today's media, while claiming to be shocked by the subversiveness of carnal desires, deluge the public with explicit sexual imagery to sell everything from Calvin Klein jeans to Black and Decker power drills. Sexuality . . . has invaded every aspect of public life. Sexual identity has become a key defining category in the twentieth century" (McLaren: 1). But perhaps what we *have* done is to push sex to the furthest possible extremes—to extremes of transgression and excess, not resting until we

have shattered every law, violated every taboo: "The twentieth century will undoubtedly have discovered the related categories of exhaustion, excess, the limit and transgression—the strange and unyielding form of these irrevocable movements which consume and consummate us" (Foucault 1999: 69). Though it may have lost much of its once seemingly awesome magical power, sex remains for us a tantalizing secret, a source of endless transgression and infinite debate.

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Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Hebrews 13:2

Welcoming the other, the stranger, the guest is both a risk and an invitation to widen the conversation and entertain another point of view. Abraham's hospitality to the three men led to their miraculous pronouncement that he and his wife, Sarah, who had outlived her childbearing years, would have a child. Strangers can sometimes open our world to mystery and even miracle. They can help us to see what we otherwise would not see. It is human to prefer like-minded people, to stick to our own neighborhood, economic class, race or religion. In describing the ministry at St. Paul's in the wake of 9/11, a priest talked about practicing "radical hospitality." Police, firefighters, clergy, rescue workers, therapists, cooks, musicians, and doctors formed a cohesive whole. To practice hospitality is to open the door of our hearts to the other and sometimes to be met by angels.