Ravish the Republic: The Archives of The Iron Garters

Crime/Art Collective

Michael L. Berger

Published by Punctum Books

Berger, Michael L.
Ravish the Republic: The Archives of The Iron Garters Crime/Art Collective.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76471

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2655760
If we are using the word “Sacred” does that mean we, the Garters, are a religious group?

Speaking for myself, merely one “member” of the Garters I will say this:

Foremost, it implies that I was probably raised (which I was) in a religious educational environment (Roman Catholic) and that early exposure to ideas or experiences of God and the sacred left indelible marks on me.

And they certainly did. One’s childhood can never be overlooked or discredited. The Garters teach certain methods, however, to grasp childhood and infantile fixations, moments, forces and traumas—and alchemize them towards more joyous (and thus, more potentiality-fueled) expression. But my sense of the sacred was always bound up with the powers of art and language (the symbolic/creative realm) and also nature, even at its most suburban: its beauty, sublimity, alluring chasms, and sensory disorientations. The sacred then was felt most viscerally through expressions,
whether of culture, nature, ritual, or their ambiguous intersections, and the transporting energies they entailed.

The world, Deleuze says, is nothing without its expressions. Do we accept this as a proposition for change, though, for the ongoing re-working of the “social imaginary”? As a teacher I ask my students this: how can we conceive of chaos and instability as a “good” thing? How do we express these parts of the real in affirmative terms?

Often, for me growing up, these were expressions of things that were difficult to express, verbalize or conceptualize, but the adventure of trying to do so was, itself, a rapturous and transformational occasion. And the sacred too was often experienced through transgressions of what my authorities had forbidden or rigidly demarcated. Transgression was a mode of expression that crossed boundaries or borders, imbuing my experience with transformational novelty, a confrontation with something Other. Often what was transgressed was something called “reason,” which seemed to me a versatile concept tailored to the specific needs of whoever said the word with the most authority.

Here, the Sacred became closely allied with a concept of Ecstasy, as a necessary transport across levels of awareness, and as a method of refining consciousness in defiance of more restrictive and dogmatic psychic positionings. And I think that religion is one of very few realms where ecstasy, whether of the body, of thought, of the imagination, or whatever, is still revered as a necessary aspect of consciousness.

My feelings for the sacred/god/religious faith have gone through (and continue to) many permutations and subtleties, which tend to provoke more questions than answers, more strayings than certainties. Did it begin with the intensity of Catholic ritual, or with the feverish notes from my own, often, solitary imagination? Was it really
there in the Transubstantiation of the Eucharist? Was it then complicated by the changes in my body, wherein desire and movement and Eros all pointed to other expressions of the Sacred? At some point too, a near-obsessive love for reading and writing entered the fray, in which the Sacred was equated with the possibility of a “new world,” one which I could help create, participate in and share with others.

And yet there was no shock of illumination, or *satori* that I recall. No burst of light, or reverberations of angels. No smash on the head with a mallet as in certain Zen anecdotes. Violent enlightenment was not mine. But there was a gradual and subtle unfolding of images and tendencies, obsessions and suspicions, experiences and encounters that have led me to where I am today, to something that is, indeed a *calling* but that is also a *hearkening*, or a deep listening to all that has come before me and which echoes inside me.

So yes the Garters have religious tendencies insomuch as they are in love with and are bound to the invisible energies that animate this world.

**But what do you mean by the Sacred?**

I think “my sense of the Sacred” resides in the capacities, often latent or suppressed, of entities to *express* (and thereby embody, actualize, entail) some harmony (a beautiful integration of disparate parts) with the cosmos in its myriad, non-human energies, among its luminous differences, and throughout its dizzying, maze-like complexities. How such harmony is expressed and the intensities and transports of its manifestations, varies, and these variances obsess me as someone committed to expression. Whether or not “cosmos” is further equated with god, the divine or the numinous is also ground for rich discourse, as well as for many powerful aesthetic and devotional practices.
So then I would say, perhaps feebly, inadequately, that the sacred, as a term, connotes the presence of some imperishable and impenetrable vitality, or the sheer, indestructible otherness that illumines and animates the world in multifarious forms, and that would behoove us to be enchanted by, reverential towards and engaged with in thoughtful and complex ways. It is a force that is, at once, the most archaic and the most immediate; the most grounding and the most unsettling.

I may not always feel the Sacred as intently or naturally as I desire, or think I need to desire; or I may feel it only as something withheld by or suppressed by the powers that keep me busy and worried in a world largely composed of business and worry; or it may also be a lure that goads me down paths of research and exploration only to arrive back where I started, feeling even more beset by ambiguity. Whether it is all these things, or none, there remains the fact that It speaks. And I’m trying to listen as sincerely as I can.

**How does the Body connect to the Sacred?**

For the sake of a grounding provocation: We are daily robbed of our bodily potentials, transports and epiphanies. These primordial revelations are being obliterated by cultures that value hyper-rationality, attention deficit, the linear blows of Time, the amassing of material goods and superficial comforts and the reduction of any somatic, mental or emotional movements that are not purposeful or lucrative. When a student of the Garters becomes physically receptive to the Numinous and the Hyper-Speculative, she becomes more attuned to non-dualistic ways of being/becoming, which can be *initially* painful or unsettling passages to endure. But the intrepid Garter will eventually experiences a more ecological, and thus magical—to
reassert an often naïve word—way of being in the world: we embody thru experience and empowerments the numerous strands and layers which compose our souls and which connect and diffuse them with others, whether human, animal, plant or netherwordly. This becomes a sensation of true wilderness entering in, and channeling/changing us. This voluminous Wild, whether it’s urban or forested, coastal or mountainous is what we are after; it is the Garter Gnosis, the persisting of the Wild which we can ride upon, and among, without dissolution.

Often these primal explorations are unsettling or disarming because they ask you to realize the body as a laboratory of forces, spirits and vectors, to view the mind as a potentially fathomless realm of metamorphosis and to start viewing ritual, discipline, devotion and apprenticeship as not just part-time hobbies but unwavering commitments.

The Iron Garter must go against the grain of contemporary self-realization movements and self-commodification attitudes. There is no quick fixes or guaranteed ecstasies. There is no obsessing over your “profile” or “identity” to make it more exciting, appealing and ideal. In the terminology of Chogyam Trungpa, there are no “credentials” you can pin to your ego after a couple superficial sessions. You are asked to labor against these kinds of (also Trungpa’s term) “spiritual materialisms” to reach the deeper radiances of the soul. Appearances aren’t just superficial validations of ourselves nor are they anxiety-driven ornaments for the vanity of our egos, but instead they are pathways into deeper embodiments and transformations.

A Garter Precept is:
Appearance = Passage
Isn’t this search for spiritual harmony a purely individualistic pursuit, a quest for self-actualization?

I think that this harmony is not and should not only be sought by individuals but also by groups, organizations, societies, states and whatever other social, erotic, spiritual and political assemblages can be imagined. The sacred, as I see it, is irreducible to dogma, fundamentalism, proscriptions of behavior, etc.; rather it is rooted in a tradition of differences, variously expressed and variously unfolding, which all feed from the same archaic source of Mystery and the resonances this Mystery unleashes on earth.

So I’m particularly interested in how the sacred can regain its influence in political and social formations (of diverse people, interests and affiliations), while hopefully undoing many of the tendencies that render politics so inimical to what is sacred. This is not asking for a dissolution of the barrier between church and state—for that is well under way in many nations already, with mixed results—but a more radically generous opening of the political realm to forces and entities that may seem alien to its “interests.” That being said, the Garters, in their varied mobilizations strive to bring back the sacred into the social, but without the baggage of organized, fundamentalist religions.

Truly, the only “interests” that should be native to politics are the “real differences of and between beings,” which is also the province, but through other rhetorics and methods, of certain religions. So it seems then, possibly, that religion and politics could, at some distant juncture be collapsed into a reverential practice of ecology—the harmonization of different expressions and entailments of being. The Garters are many things to many people, but among these manifestations they are the most agile unity of the sacred and the profane in a creatively political context.
But if you’re really religious, you want to transcend this life, right? You live for an after-life or another world of being, right?

Some religious people do, certainly. But we Garters do not. We look at religion in its etymological origins: “reverence, vow, bind” and we understand the attitude we want to embody. It is indeed an attitude of reverence, an expression of a vow, and often a doubt-stricken, wavering vow at that— but a vow primarily to this world as the flowering of multifarious presence, and our own psyches as the vehicles through which this presence is intimately felt and through which it powerfully resounds.

This vow, however, does nothing on its own to directly combat my or your fears of annihilation, disorder, nothingness or the withdrawing of presence; but it may—and this is another motivation—lead us to methodologies through which such fears can be bravely met and benefited from, not just for my or your own life, but also for my or your life as it impacts and interacts with others. And these methods can be found in certain religious systems, just as they can be found in certain philosophical systems.

So yes, we believe that this pursuit of harmony, this intense intersecting with the Sacred is not a transcendence of the cosmic, material or earthly realms but a deepening of their beauty, presence, knowledge and radiance. Any sort of faith, for it to exist for us Garters, requires the unhampered, multi-faceted expressions of matter and the complex proliferations and intersections of what is alive, vital, mysterious and wondrous in the “here and now.” It is also deeply rooted in a celebration of being «entity» in all its bodily profusions and frenzies which, themselves are often markers of the Sacred.
There is no withdrawing from the flux of creation, no restraining of the sensory faculties or pious distancing of myself from the constructions of the human imagination but, rather, there is a constant and rigorous refinement of how and why I engage with such beings and forces in the first place. It is a mode of attention that requires constant attention. Not everyone needs this mode of attention. Not everyone requires such refinements. In fact, such attentions and refinements exist outside of religious practice.

**But uncountable bad things happen in This World all the fucking time.**

Yes, and always will probably—but still, I at least have to recoil at notions of futurism, so-called accelerationism, the lust for interplanetary immigration or any kind of apocalyptic cynicism where the dying earth is abandoned, the historical nightmares finally exited. The “here and now,” despite its incalculable miseries and injustices, its unsolvable ideological oppressions and inequities, and the ineradicable harms we have done to the earth, is also, in spite of our own human fears and prejudices, the flowering of the infinite expressions of entities as they interact with the living cosmos.

Living with a sense of the sacred, I think, is re-discovering daily this *newness* of the immediate earth, the fertile primacy of the living ground as it vibrates under the stars, the essential novelty and mystery of being conscious in a cosmos. It is to re-experience sensually, erotically, ethically and aesthetically a vibrant, sacred materialism flush with non-human and alien forces, all of which are native to the cosmos.

To abandon that process of expression and inquiry, to turn our backs upon this real ground of Mystery, to disown the symbolic and creative practices that are dependent
upon the earth and its positioning in space-time, seems a cowardice, and a condemnation of any human experiment. Abandoning this process of stewardship—whose abandonment has reached an alarming rate anyway—seems then to be giving up on the mystery of being alive at all. More mystery = more devotion.

**END BULLETIN**