Artaud’s Sacred Triad
A Qabalistic Analysis of a Certain Passage in a Letter to André Breton

In this essay, I will use some of the attributions to the Hermetic Qabalah devised by Aleister Crowley to analyze a passage from Artaud’s letter to André Breton, written in Paris on June 2, 1946. It is unknown whether or not Artaud had any contact with Crowley’s writings or whether he or Crowley where even aware of each other. Either case is probably unlikely. But what cannot be disputed is that Artaud was fully aware and often skeptical, if not furious, about the many aspects of a hermetic tradition that included Tarot, Qabalah, and Eastern mysticism. In fact, we have a late letter to Jacques Prevel from Ivry-sur-Seine, dated June 4, 1947, where Artaud speaks explicitly about the Qabalah, and rejects what he sees as a “cock-and-ball stew … [a] larva coming out all over in an angry rash of the rejected angels of the mind.” He writes,

These rejects never made it as angels and never were a mind. If God is above all innumerable and unfathomable, and nobody ever could or did have God’s number, then why not cease and desist from incessantly measuring and enumerating all these shadows of non-being into which, according to
the Kabbala, he is in the process of withdrawing, beyond any possible return or recourse, from innumerable numbers of creation.

And yet there is a word, “sacrosanct” (or “supra-reality”) that comes up in the late letters written between 1945 and 1947. It is a curious word in light of these pronouncements and many others, in these letters, which reject the idea of God. Is this a Catholic residue that haunts Artaud’s investigations into religion and the nature of being? Indeed, his obsession with the mysteries of God and the problem of being has something of the “defrocked priest” about it. Whatever the case, the Hermetic Qabalah created by Aleister Crowley is a skeptical one, and nothing about its mystical function or practical importance is taken for granted. Crowley writes, “We do not believe in any supernatural explanations, but insist that this source may be reached by the following out of definite rules, the degree of success depending upon the capacity of the seeker, and not upon the favour of any Divine Being.” Crowley’s system accords the body a central position in the discussion of mysticism and magick, that is he creates a link between sexuality and spirituality; the sacred and the profane are not considered as separate. For this reason, its use here is appropriate. I believe it can be used to elucidate some aspects of Artaud’s preoccupations with magic and, more importantly, its connection to sexuality.

The essential practices among the many occult orders, including the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.) — the lodge that Aleister Crowley joined in 1910 that employs his Thelemic system of initiation — is a training of the consciousness to specific ends. Crowley writes that the function of meditation is “the restraining of the mind to a single act, state, or thought.” In the O.T.O., for example, there is the daily adoration of the sun, Liber Resh; there is yoga, meditation and rituals such as The Mass of the Phoenix, all aimed at the discipline of the mind and the body. And the importance of this with regard to sexuality is known in the many occult traditions in the East. In their book,
Awake Kundalini, Rajnikant Upadhyaya and Gopal Sharma, quoting Swami Sivananda write, “The Yogi who draws his semen up and preserves it, conquers death.”

In this letter Artaud writes that the training of the consciousness with respect to “sexuality” is a means of creating states of “near eternal overcoming” of the base materialism of the world. The ultimate project of Artaud was the theft of Promethean fire — the creative “sexual” function of God, to assert the preeminence, rather, of man as deity, creator, and supreme ruler of all things spiritual. It is in training the “orgasm,” the source of the creative sexual energy so central, for example, to Egyptian cosmologies, that one is able to retain power over the “infernal swamp” of spiritual emptiness, “the slime of Khem set up in the Gates of Amennti.” It is important to note that Artaud speaks elsewhere of the “sacrosanct consciousness” and that he means something very different than the idea of the sacred that was inherited from the Abrahamic religions and in fact perpetuated in such systems as Qabalah as it is traditionally known.

For Crowley, Eros is holy and the world of the senses, the crude manifestations of Assiah, the lowest kingdom of Malkuth, are to be alchemically transformed by the initiate into Kether, the crown. In one sense this does not mean “ascending” from Malkuth to Kether since on the Qabalah the tree of heaven grows downward like a flaming sword. Furthermore, when we look up at the stars, we are not really looking up at all but down within ourselves. There is no difference between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Kether is in Malkuth. Malkuth is in Kether.

1 Crowley writes, in the key text for the O.T.O. IX degree rite, De Arte Mag-icka, which is included in Francis King's The Secret Rituals of the O.T.O, “Like the Jews, the wise men of India have a belief that a certain particular Prana, or force, resides in the Bindu, or semen. ... Therefore they stimulate to the maximum its generation by causing a consecrated prostitute to excite the organs, and at the same time vigorously withhold by will. After some little exercise they claim that they can deflower as many as eighty virgins in a night without losing a single drop of the Bindu. Nor is this ever to be lost, but reabsorbed through the tissues of the body. The organs thus act as a siphon to draw constantly fresh supplies of life from the cosmic reservoir, and flood the body with their fructifying virtue.”
Man is God. Artaud imagines himself as a kind of furious Christ who suffered on the cross against his will. He writes in a letter to Henri Parisot from Rodez, December 6, 1945:

In any event, the police and the rabbis of the time decided one day to get rid of me and arrested me at night in a garden of olive trees where I slept under the stars, not having a roof to shelter me. I went to trial, but although I was recognized as innocent of any crime by a certain Pontius Pilate, the people, filled with imbecility, rose up to demand that I be crucified.  

And, like Christ, he rises from the dead, furious,

I was so horrified at my own state and at all things that a shiver of fury overtook me, an earthquake which made me overturn everything, and all of us fought for more than a day in Judea.

It also bears noting, in the context of Artaud’s letters, that the lower world, Assiah, is where the spirits dwell, those beings that ceaselessly harass Artaud.

In the letter to Breton, Artaud writes,

There is nothing indeed, André Breton, like coital orgasms when they are methodically pushed to the limit to train the consciousness in certain states of near eternal overcoming of things to which, I think, this line of Villon may correspond (the ancient verse)

*Empress of the infernal swamps.*

Artaud writes that this “near eternal overcoming of things” corresponds the verse of Villon, “Empress of the infernal swamps.” Perhaps in choosing this quote Artaud was thinking of The

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2 Unless otherwise noted, all the excerpts are from *Succubations & Incubations: Selected Letters of Antonin Artaud (1945–1947)* published by Infinity Land Press and translated by Peter Valente and Cole Heinowitz.
Empress tarot on the Qabbalistic tree of life whose path is between the two Sephiroth, Understanding (Binah) and Wisdom (Chokmah). This path forms the base or foundation of the uppermost triad whose pinnacle is Kether, the crown. While the triads below point downwards and form the sign of water the single uppermost triad above the abyss, the “Supernal Triad,” forms the sign of fire. Furthermore, the path connecting Binah to Chokmah is a bridge that connects both fire and water above the abyss that is represented by the “false” Sephira, Daath. The Hebrew word associated with this path means “door.” This is the door that connects the microcosm to the macrocosm and asserts the original unity of man as God in the dissolution of duality.

Artaud writes, “it is in this way and not another, André Breton, that the masses of which you speak dominate us” and “that is to say by the sinister way of their longing for ass.” Here we are in the lower world, Malkuth, the world of the senses, sexuality understood as bodily function. But Artaud continues, “Ass, I mean sexuality, is useful, André Breton, I’m not saying the opposite; it is an excellent means of expansion, emission, and I would dare say propulsion. But that is not all.” Sexual magick is perhaps the highest and most difficult practice in magick, but it is easy to see, for example, the ways in which sexuality can be used magically in common practice. I am thinking of the use of glamour as a seductive tool in Anton LaVey’s *The Satanic Witch*. But more importantly, Artaud believes sexuality can be a means of propulsion. Crowley writes, “love is always bold, virile, ecstatic, even orgiastic. … Mighty and terrible and glorious as it is, however, it is but the pennon upon the sacred lance of Will.”

Sex is the “Ecstasy” that is shaped “like a spear” that “pierces the ancient dragon that sat upon the stagnant waters.” While Artaud recognizes sexuality’s propulsive force, he is also aware

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of its ability to enslave the consciousness. The masses, Artaud writes, dominate us by a “sinister longing for ass.”

We must pause for a moment before we can continue in order to examine the meanings of certain numbers in the following passage by Artaud where he is speaking of a “destruction by fire”:

BECAUSE, ON THE THIRD OF JUNE, 1937, THE FIVE SERPENTS APPEARED, WHO WERE ALREADY IN THE SWORD Whose STRENGTH OF DECISION IS REPRESENTED BY A STAFF!

What does this mean?
It means that I who am speaking have a Sword and a Staff. A staff with 13 knots, and this staff bears on the ninth knot the magic sign of the thunderbolt; and 9 is the number of destruction by fire and

I FORESEE A DESTRUCTION BY FIRE

The number 13 is very significant in Crowley’s Qabalistic symbolism. The Hebrew words for “love” (Ahava — אהבה) and “one/unity” (Echad — אחד) all have the numerical value of 13. If you add 13 to 13 you get 26 whose attribution on the Tarot is the Devil. The Hebrew letter for “eye” (Ayin — ע) is also connected to this card. In Crowley’s system this is Lucifer, the light-bringer who opens the eyes of the blind and those chained by dogma and law.

The number 9 is important for Artaud since it indicates “destruction by fire.” The 9th letter of the Hebrew alphabet is Teth — ת. Its numerical value is 9. In the Qabalah, the number represents the ninth Sefirah, Yesod — יסוד (whose meaning in the Arcanum is “sex”). The word also means “foundation.” It is also an elemental letter that symbolizes the serpent. The “five serpents” Artaud is speaking of could be the five serpents of the Book of Revelation who were followers of Apophis, an Egyptian demon. Teth — ת also appears in the Torah in the word tov of Genesis 1:4, meaning beneficial. Artaud is speaking of a fire that
destroys the created a (false) world at the very foundation. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, tov is the word in the Torah used to describe the Hidden or Primordial Light. Artaud’s search for this Primordial Light led him to a rejection of the normative sexuality of the lower world.

Artaud’s work can be seen as a vast exorcism in which sexuality forms an integral part. Artaud uses images of rape, masturbation, and fornication to demystify their control over the body and the mind. Indeed, language itself, that “terrible violence of wording,” that “violence with the rigor of poetic tone,” is performed, as above, with a kind of ecstasy (think of the “theatricality” of cruelty) that is solar and phallic. Artaud concludes, “In any case it is not, according to fact, a means of divination, much less of domination,” and whoever surrenders to the ass, I mean to that assylum, to that seminal inflation of the paunch which during orgasm acquires a super-brain, does not gain from that asscent, in abjection, enough to dominate my seminal containment, mine, Antonin Artaud.

For Artaud, “sexuality” is not a means of divination or domination since each case would presuppose the intervention of a higher entity. Artaud is against the idea of God as a higher being distant or distinct from man, a conception that Western civilization has propagated in the form of Judeo-Christian monotheism. It is this idea of a higher power or authority that leads to the “domination” of that mass of people who congregate in worship of a single God. It is interesting to note that in Crowley’s system the idea of a suffering Christ “rising from the dead” is based on the old Osiris worldview of the dying god and thus this view is corrupt. In Artaud’s view Christ was reborn in abjection because he was crucified, thus man has nothing to gain from the resurrection. As we’ve seen, Artaud embodies this abjection as a furious Christ in his letters so as to deflate the idea of a superior being and to place man in his physical agony above the spirit. He writes to Henri Parisot from Rodez on December 6, 1945,
... feeling my hands pierced and leaking with blood, the putrid stench of my body, and my face dried up with shit on my surviving corpse ...

Whoever surrenders to the _ass_ surrenders to the _ass-ylum_, the gross materialism of the Assaitic world that is like a prison of illusion, indeed like an _asylum_. During the orgasm, the inflated paunch, or pregnant belly, creates a “super-brain.” In the Qabalah, this is Ruach, where one identifies the self with the intellect, which is limited.

Artaud equates sexuality with reproduction. Sexuality as reproduction has no control over Artaud. For him it is born of the same bodily abjection, since the proliferation of beings leads to the loss of the primordial unity, that which Crowley writes is the “secret of the Sphinx” that no man will understand who is not, “pure and voluptuous … chaste and obscene … androgyne and gynander.” This also suggests Artaud’s disgust with the way humanity has progressed and his belief that any further birth would be an attack on his own life. In the lower world, Malkuth, the energies of the “abject” earth rule the body that engages in sexual acts. One is trapped and bound in the abjection of the lower world. It is here that Artaud witnesses men laughing at him and masturbating in front of him to bar his passage to an alternate world, the “supra-reality” or “sacrosanct consciousness.”

Artaud writes that whoever surrenders to sexuality does not gain enough to “dominate my seminal containment, mine, Antonin Artaud.” Artaud’s “seminal containment” is an assertion of the absolute body, the body he conceives of as being without organs, the autonomous body not born of mother and father, thus free from the burden of generation yet in possession of a far more powerful magic.

The power of Artaud’s magic can be clarified if we examine his view of sexuality more closely and use Crowley’s discussion of witchcraft, a special case in his formula for the creative function, that is, sexuality, to further clarify the matter. In _Art and Death_ (1925–27) Artaud writes, speaking of Abelard, “What a beautiful eunuch.” In his essay, “Lacan with Artaud,” Lorenzo
Chiesa writes, “Castration is an attractive imaginary lure, the mirage of a *re-conquered unity* [my emphasis], which accompanies him from the self-identification with Abelard.” Artaud proposes a kind of Dionysian castration. In *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*, Artaud writes,

By having him undergo once more but for the last time an autopsy
in order to remake his anatomy.
I say, in order to remake his anatomy.
Man is sick because he is badly constructed.
We must decide to strip him in order to scratch out this animalcule
which makes him itch to death,

          god,
          and with god
          his organs,

For tie me down if you want to,
but there is nothing more useless than an organ.

When you have given him a body without organs,
then you will have delivered him from all his automatisms
and restored
him to his true liberty.

Then you will teach him again to dance inside out
as in the *delirium* [my emphasis] of dance halls
and inside out will be his true side out. [As above so below,
as within so without. The duality of microcosm/macro-
cosm no longer exists.]

Furthermore, Chiesa writes, “Virility [for Artaud] lies in asceticism and love between man and woman has to remain platonic. … Organic generation and the phallic *jouissance* it entails are for Artaud, *a priori*, a synonym of the de-generation insofar as
they follow the loss of a primordial unity." One recalls Artaud’s insistence that he was not born of a father or mother but like a god generated by his own will. Artaud writes in a letter to Marthe Robert from Espalion, March 29, 1946:

There is a mystery in my life, Marthe Robert, whose basis is that I was not born in Marseilles on the 4th of September 1896, but that I passed by there that day, from elsewhere, because in reality I was never born and in truth I cannot die.

In the passage above Artaud is describing the qualities of a god who dwells “elsewhere” and “cannot die” because he is “unborn.”

Crowley writes that witchcraft is “restricted to the use of such women as are no longer women in the magical sense of the word, because they are no longer capable of corresponding to the formula of the male, and are therefore neuter rather than feminine.” As an example, he speaks of the masculine, “Amazon type” woman. Furthermore, Crowley writes, “I am hard and strong and male but come Thou! I shall be soft and weak and feminine.” The body without organs is also neuter with regard to sexuality. This body can only create through destruction. But Crowley writes that the effect of a specific use of this magical power:

consecrate[s] the Magician who performs it in a very special way. … The great merits of this formula are that it avoids contact with the inferior planes, that it is self-sufficient, that it involves no responsibilities, and that it leaves its masters

4 In a letter to Anie Besnard, written in Paris on February 16, 1947, Artaud writes, “There are people in Paris and elsewhere eminently interested that our former bonds of friendship, affection, and even love, never be resumed. / Yet those bonds of love were truly innocent. / But it is their very innocence that afflicts the world. A heart, yours, faithful to me without having had sexual relations with me, this is not to be found anymore in the world, Anie. To love someone with a pure love, without any bodily contact, and that this love be based on honor and to devote oneself and to do good, to serve and to help another to live without expecting anything in return but an identical attachment.”
not only stronger in themselves, but wholly free to fulfill their essential Natures.

Furthermore, Crowley speaks here of the Mercurial “Virgin” and the “Hanged Man” and states that in this special use of magic “the creative force is employed deliberately for destruction, and is entirely absorbed in its own sphere of action” as is the absolute body of Artaud, impenetrable and autonomous. Nevertheless, this work is regarded as holy. Artaud writes,

A natural force altered by woman will free itself against and by woman. This force is a death-force. IT HAS THE DARK RAPACIOUSNESS OF THE GENITAL. IT IS PROVOKED BY WOMAN BUT MAN DIRECTS IT. THE MUTILATED FEMININITY OF MAN, THE ENCHAINED TENDERNESS OF MEN THAT WOMAN HAD STAMPED ON HAVE REVIVED A VIRGIN ON THAT DAY. BUT IT WAS A VIRGIN WITHOUT BODY, WITHOUT SEX, ONE WHICH ONLY THE MIND CAN PROFIT BY.

There also exists a connection between the Hebrew word, Ayin (eye), and non-reproductive hence “destructive” sexuality. In the Arcanum, the “eye” can refer to the anus and thus to homosexual sex. But it can also refer to the phallus. In The Book of Lies Crowley writes:

5 The actual meaning of the word, ALIM, may be taken as indicating the formula. Aleph may be referred to Harpocrates. Lamed may imply the exaltation of Saturn and suggest the “Three of Swords” in a particular manner. Yod will then recall Hermes, and mem “The Hanged Man.” We have thus a Tetragrammaton which contains no feminine component. The initial force is here the Holy Spirit and its vehicle or weapon the “Sword and Balances.” Justice is then done upon the Mercurial “Virgin,” with the result that the Man is “Hanged” or extended and is slain in this manner. Such an operation makes creation impossible. The virgin is hung and slain. This is Artaud’s castrated body, a “body without organs,” non-generative, and “destructive.” Artaud writes in his Diagram of Horoscope of June 15, 1937 — on the Tortured Man, “I also preach total Destruction, but Conscious and Rebellious Destruction.”

6 In Spermo-Gnostics and the O.T.O. Peter Koenig writes: “Crowley’s VIIIth degree unveiled … that masturbating on a sigil of a demon or meditating
Shiva, the Destroyer, is asleep, and when he opens his eye the universe is destroyed. … But the “eye” of Shiva is also his Lingam [phallus]. Shiva is himself the Mahalingam, which unites these symbolisms. The opening of the eye, the ejaculation of the Lingam, the destruction of the universe, the accomplishment of the Great Work — all these are different ways of saying the same thing.

This is not a Genesis story. It reverses the act of creation. Through the inversion of the sexual act there is a movement toward primordial unity. This is through the destruction of the duality that came into being with the created universe.

This non-creative power that “destroys” does give birth yet in a very particular way. In the *The Vision and the Voice*, Crowley writes:

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* [my emphasis] is likely to produce results of a magical character.

Here are Artaud’s “daughters of the heart to be born”; unborn because virtual, essential, limitless — magical. In *The Screaming Body*, Stephen Barber speaks about this image, says they were

upon the image of a phallus would bring power or communication with a divine being. … The IXth degree was labeled heterosexual intercourse where the sexual secrets were sucked out of the vagina and when not consumed … put on a sigil to attract this or that demon to fulfill the pertinent wish. … In the XIth degree, the mostly homosexual degree, one identifies oneself with an ejaculating penis. The blood (or excrements) from anal intercourse attract the spirits/demons while the sperm keeps them alive.”
a group of warrior girls whom Artaud in the isolation and sterility of his internment, had elaborated as the embodiment of his desired liberation. He named them his “daughters of the heart to be born.” This fantasy included women Artaud knew and admired as well as his grandmothers who “were genealogically inverted, to become feral, erotic children ready to battle for Artaud’s release.

Here is the connection between Inversion (ascetic, non-generative, “destructive”), the Feral (Luciferian destruction by fire), and the Body reborn (ecstatic castration, the re-construction of the body). This is Artaud’s Sacred Triad.

Artaud concludes his letter to Breton by stating the essential problem of existence: “The Hindus say that this world is an illusion and that we are a part of it and that we must leave it to discover reality.” For Artaud, this world, that is, the kingdom of Malkuth, is illusory, dominated by vile spirit magic. He writes, “The human consciousness is not clean.” We are part of the illusion and “the true anatomy of being is not the one that is taught and dissected on the anatomic tables, but that of a negligible skeleton dead at the bottom of some of us.” The “dead” body must be re-vitalized and transformed into the true magical anatomy, a kind of astral body without organs, un-generative, autonomous and above all, impenetrable.

Works Cited


