The return of the repressed

(Anti)religious anarchism and Protestant presuppositions

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Contents

This article, foremost, is a response to a critique published on my work *Against Individualism* by a certain Aleph. In short, Aleph is not convinced of my account of the Creative Nothing and is concerned with a "Christian" basis for my mystical methods — among other minutiae. This, he feels, undermines my reading of the apophatic, unsayable Self beyond self, and problematizes my relationship to pagan authors like the divine Plotinus and Porphyry. I will explore all of these in-depth, as I am always one for meaningless chatter. However, this essay is also an exploration of what I believe to be one of the major problems of (anti)religious anarchists: the reproduction of an uncritical Protestant basis in its image of what the "religious" entails.

For those uninterested in long discussions of philology and theology (and for that I do not fault you), really only the final section (*Coda*) is important here — everything else is largely just apologia. Further, I apologize for the unfinished feel of this article. I began writing this shortly before leaving for an archaeological excavation and promptly forgot it after returning. I have finished it, practically, to get it off my to-do list. Nonetheless, I hope this can help problematize the assumptions at the base of (anti)religious anarchism and contribute to emerging modes of liberatory engagement with the sacred and profane.

Stirner, the dead man

The main part of Aleph's argument is based on his reading of Stirner's individual — that is, when Stirner speaks about the self, he is concerned with the liberal-enlightenment model of the individual as an atomized object in relation with other objects but nonetheless existing "in and of itself" — identified with a biological human subject: in his words, "that the central subject is still an individual, at least insofar as Stirner is quite explicit in that he is talking about himself, and therefore the I."

Perhaps this is what Stirner intended (if we are to be beholden to authors and their intentions.) Even so, it is a surface-level, plain reading Stirner's "I", "mine", or "own." It is an indication of a very uncritical mode of analysis — a sterile lens concerned first and foremost with historical figures and their opinions, rather than the innately polyvocal, multifaceted nature of the text. The mystical mode of analysis eschews surface-level readings and searches for the hidden, that is to say *occult*, readings that lie secreted away in the crypt of inscriptions and epigraphs. Materialist analysis of heroic relics may reveal only bits of stone and cloth, even the bones of some extinct beast altogether unknown to our forebears — shrouded in the patina of superstitious cultural accretion. But the oil dripped on them is just as powerful, and I anoint myself with it nonetheless.

Certainly from a historical perspective Stirner is not a Christian, or even a theist. But I argue the apophatic method he deploys is nonetheless theological, and I argue this strategy can be traced to Hegel's engagement with the Christian mystical tradition. It is entirely plausible, even certain, that Stirner would take great offense to my genealogical reading of the Creative Nothing. But that is of no importance to me. I take no shame in being a heretical Stirnerite, as I pay no heed to orthodoxy. Thus, when Aleph uses Stirner as an authority to transplant my own reading of the individual in juxtaposition with Platonism, it is irrelevant. I have little interest in being "authentic" to Stirner, or to Plotinus for that matter. I deploy their concepts for my own purposes, for my own uses — I suck out the marrow and toss away the bones. I can draw them out from their graves and make them speak blasphemous things for me, as I am the magus adept in such things. If I show them any piety, it is ritual piety, self-generation, in which I bring them within

myself and abrogate the boundary between us. Thus: pseudepigrapha, in which I *become* Stirner, I *become* Plotinus.

Therefore, my project of drawing out the trace of apophasis in Stirner is a productive, rather than historical, method. Having identified this theological impulse in Stirner, I can apply a mystical reading to problematize or ambiguate the subject-object distinction. Such a mystical interpretation Stirner can thus read the "I" or "my own" in radically different ways: is this "I" Stirner, or is it "I" as the reader, who recites the passage in the very act of reading and thus speaks it? Indeed for all texts, is the narrator self or Other? For the mystic it is both, and it is neither. Failing to grasp this, Aleph misses the overall heart of my arguments, wondering only if what I say would be recognizable to a long-dead German.

The failure to grasp the finer, more esoteric points undermines the entire criticism that Aleph outlines. He is adamant that "mysticism and individualism, in the sense that Stirner allows us to understand the concept[s], are actually well-aligned with each other, in that both are ultimately similarly concerned with a black box subject." On the other hand, my insistence that the "individual cannot be so" is two-fold: one, the vulgar notion of the 'individual' as the liberal model can indeed be divided and thus it is not truly *in-divisble*; and two, the One, the in-dividual, is *not* because it is prior to that which *is*. Indeed it is "not an in-dividual" in an ultimate sense — because binaries of in/divisibilty cannot grasp it. Being able to simultaneously affirm and negate a proposition is one of the properties of apophatic language, that is, a unity of opposites. But Aleph writes:

> Calabrese says that the individual is not so [...but] the individual ultimately can't not be so, because of [t]he very apophatic principle of the One.

In this he supplants mystical logic with Aristotelian analysis. It neither is an in-dividual nor dividual, and furthermore, it cannot be even this ("neither dividual nor in-dividual") and so on. It is neither so, nor not-so, nor not-not-so. When Plotinus speaks on the Pythagorean etymology of Apollo, he notes that it results in "the apophasis of *even that*." (*Enneads* 5.5.6-26-33, emphasis my own.) To affirm any single negation as "the final" negation is to reify the vacuity which animates apophasis — apophasis is characteristically marked by infinite, even fractal regress. Michael A. Sells, historian of Western mysticism, describes it thusly:

> Apophasis is a discourse in which any single proposition is acknowledged as falsifying, as reifying. It is a discourse of double propositions, in which meaning is generated through the tension between the saying an the unsaying.

Misunderstanding this, Aleph accuses me of establishing a mitigated dualism between nonbeing and being approaching that of Gnosticism. Such a wrongheaded analysis of Gnosticism aside, it reifies the animating vacuity; ignoring that I explicitly negate nonbeing in the text:

> ...silence, nothing, nothing-past-negation, negation-of-the-negation-which-is-not-positive.

In short, the "negation-of-the-negation" of being is not simply nonbeing but something beyond both being and nonbeing. It is articulated outside of the Aristotelian logic of double-negation reduction. In the nihilist drive to negate all things, I negate even individualism

and nihilism, and through this secret rite I reveal an *in-dividualism*: abnegation of the self, that is, ecstasy. In service of this goal, the final paragraph in *Against Individualism* begins to approach mystical poetry, complete with ecstatic shouts of homage, paradoxically accenting the first-person nature of the text. Per Sells, apophasis is the literary parallel of mystical union.

Late Platonism and the denial of self

Even further than my inauthenticity to Stirner, Aleph also argues that I am inauthentic to late Platonism because it does not "deny the individual." Such a claim is also based on a fundamental misunderstanding of late Platonism. Indeed, in his discussion of late Platonism, it becomes clear that Aleph does not totally understand that the emanative unfolding of the One into the Many is both a cosmogony and an inverted description of mystical ascent: since this cosmogony is placed conceptually before the understanding of time, it should not be understood merely as a "creation myth" nor as the affirmation of the lowest tiers of emanation. It is beyond the three aeons of past, present, and future. Therefore the return to the One, completely exterior to relations of coming and going, is the very same process as the emanation from the One. Individuation and de-individuation are the same process: the turn-away is a turn-towards. This ἐπῐστροφή (epistrophḗ) of apophasis "entails a folding of the multitiered hierarchy of being back into itself to a moment of equality." (Sells, p. 208) Late Platonic mystical ascent was marked by self-denial, in the sense of an undoing of self, because it is a means of working 'up the ladder' of creation. Thus the last words of Plotinus: "Strive to bring back the god in yourselves to the God in the All." This is not Aleph's only error when engaging with this tradition, but a brief historical overview of apophasis is needed to unpack this.

A traditional historiographical origin for apophasis in the Western tradition is Plato's *Parmenides*, though the contours of religion in late antiquity enabled a cross-pollination between Egyptian, Jewish, Persian, and even Indian philosophy that makes any singular narrative of progression impossible. If Plato himself is to be trusted, then the roots of apophasis were already sowed by the pre-Socratics long before his compositions. The ἄπειρον (ápeiron) of Anaximander is an earlier possible origin, for example. This being said, Plotinus is the true watershed thinker in Western apophasis, generally considered the initiator of the late period of ancient Platonic philosophy (so-called "neoplatonism.") Plotinus' lineage continues through his student Porphyry, then his student Iamblichus (where a break occurs between his theory of god-working and the orthodox Platonism of Porphyry), then little-studied Plutarch, and finally Proclus. Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus are certainly the best representatives of pre-Christian apophasis. It is through Proclus that Platonism enters Christianity, particularly through a pseudepigraphic text entitled *Mystical Theology*, attributed to a certain Dionysius the Aeropagite. This character was lifted from a passage in *Acts*, mentioned in a single line as an early pagan convert. The influence of Dionysius on later Western mysticism cannot be overstated.

During the Renaissance, it was shown that Dionysius could not have predated the 6th century, as he shows a dependence on Proclus. He was most likely a student of the academy at Athens, as the theology he outlines is derivative of Proclus. Some scholars go further and propose that Pseudo-Dionysius was none other than Damascius, the so-called "last neoplatonist," or as Bellamy Fitzpatrick shared with me, even Proclus himself. There is significant scholarly debate regarding whether Dionysius was a pagan, a Christian, or something in between. Regardless of what he may

have identified as, he was clearly intimately familiar with both pagan and Christian philosophy — enough so that his philosophical influences were enough to out him as a pseudepigraphist. Thus, rather than "not understanding what the Platonists were saying," many early Christians were very adept Platonists.

Of course, this is to say nothing of the late Platonist attitude towards Christianity. Aleph denies that late Platonists "had anything to do with monotheism," attributing this to a "fraud" sustained by the closure of the Platonic Academy, or the "fact that the Christians simply didn't understand what the [late Platonists] were saying." However, it is abundantly clear from their own writing that they saw no cleft between monotheism and their own "monism" which Aleph defends.

For Aleph, afraid to give even the most superficial piece of territory to Christianity, the One is something which cannot be equated with the deeply personal Christian God. But the One, as the "divine principle, subsistence [sic], or ground" as Aleph describes it, is precisely what is meant by Western mystics when speaking of God, from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, to the mendicant saints of the counter-reformation, to modern revivalists such as Thomas Merton. Indeed, Plotinus writes that "God…is outside of none, present unperceived to all," (p. 58) (although Plotinus does seem to make a distinction between the One and God — Sells writes that the Plotinian God is somewhere in the tension between the One and Nous). Porphyry (as identified by Pierre Hadot) explicitly equates the One with God. Franke points out this "historical irony": Porphyry, "abominated as the enemy of Christianity…astonishingly anticipates the orthodox Christian thinking of God as Being itself." (Franke, pp. 64-65) I would argue this is not so "astonishing," as Porphyry was deeply interested in Judaism. The middle Platonist Plutarch of Chaeronea, writing in the character of his teacher Ammonius of Athens, argues that "Apollo is only a faint image of the real God," equated with Being (to on). Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris* describes Osiris in similar terms. (Plutarch on Literature, Graeco-Roman Religion, Jews and Christians) Porphyry praises the monotheism of the Jews, citing none other than Apollo himself in *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda*:

> Only Chaldaeans and Hebrews found wisdom in the pure worship of a self-born God.

Interestingly, Porphyry reverently calls Moses simply "the prophet" or "the theologian" (cf. *De antro nympharum* and *Ad Gaurum*.) Rather than being some opponent of monotheism, he was more concerned with Christianity's novelty: Porphyry's critique of Christianity is its apparent abandonment of Jewish tradition. (van der Horst) Porphyry traces the mystical lineage of Pythagoras to the Hebrews among others (De vita Pythagorica 11: "Then Pythagoras visited the Egyptians, the Arabians, the Chaldeans and the Hebrews, from whom he acquired expertise in the interpretation of dreams, and he was the first to use frankincense in the worship of divinities."), which is repeated and extended by his student Iamblichus, in his own *De vita Pythagorica*. Porphyry's high opinion of Judaism even led to the development of a legend that he was married to a Jewish woman. (van der Horst, pp. 188–202)

Porphyry was not the only late Platonist to admire Judaism, however. Numenius, one of the great Platonic philosophers prior to Plotinus who had a deep influence on Porphyry, went as far as to call Plato "nothing but a Moses who spoke Greek." The late Platonist Cornelius Labeo equates the quadrivium of Hellenism with none other than the Jewish God, quoting Apollo again:

> [YHWh is the supreme god of all. In winter he is Hades, when spring begins he is Zeus, in summer he is Helios, while in autumn he is the delicate Iacchus.

Even rank-and-fil]e pagans were not nearly as anti-Christian as Aleph seems to imply. Jesus had a wide reputation as a powerful exorcist even among these polytheists. In Asia Minor and on the coast of the Black Sea, there was monotheistic cult dedicated to Zeus Hypsistos, which John North called a "pagan vision" of Judaism, and which Vasiliki Limberis attributed to a syncretism between Zeus Sabazios and the Jewish God. Further, despite Aleph's study of the PGM, he does not seem to have picked up on the constant usage of the name of Jesus or Hebraic-Aramaic barbaric names throughout the entire corpus. There is a curious curse conjuration in *No. 9. PGM XII.376-96* which mentions Jesus alongside Amun and Bast:

> I call upon you, great god, Thathabathath Pepennabouthi Peptou Bast Jesus Ouair Amoun …. Let her, N.N., lie awake thought the whole night and day, until she dies, immediately, immediately, quickly, quickly.

Other examples are not hard to locate. My "conflation" of a monotheistic God with the One is clearly in line with Platonism, despite any Protestant neopagan pearl-clutching. Indeed, such a close intertwining of these traditions make Aleph's claim that I rely on "Christian negation" rather than a pagan apophasis meaningless. First, as I identify the root of Stirner's apophatic argument in Christian mysticism, it is entirely "authentic" to the Christian mystical tradition to give recourse to pagan philosophers. Second, Christian mysticism can only be fully understood in the context of Hellenistic mysticism from which it is derived. This is apparently met with revulsion from Aleph. When I cite none other than Anaximander: "What is divine? That without beginning, without end" — it is apparently shocking enough to attribute it to "esoteric and mystical pagan theology" rather than "religion." Later, Aleph notes the fact that despite the "rhetoric of Christian mysticism and apophasis," my antecedent is "none other than Plotinus […] and the other Neoplatonists." Noting this at all is strange: I have always located my mystical works as flowering from the Platonic tradition and I have never denied this. Even in *Against Individualism*, I call Plotinus "[t]he great neoplatonist sage" and I make reference to his refusal of portraiture in Porphyry's *De vita plotini*.

Having no loyalty to Christianity or paganism, I am unperturbed by sectarian boundaries between "Christian" and "pagan" philosophy and I see no need to respect them. In the face of orthodoxy, Christian or pagan, I am a heretic.

The return of the repressed

I believe this illustrates an uncritical acceptance of a Protestant theology which consciously rejected the "superstitious" or even "magical" philosophy of the Catholics who they opposed, which eschewed esotericism in favor of radically exoteric "plain" reading. Therefore for Aleph, the esoteric and Christianity are radically opposed, and the esoteric itself must be the very doctrines rejected in evangelical Protestantism. Protestantism, indeed, demarcates the entire horizon of religious thought: Aleph allows this repressed Protestant theology to shape his understanding of Christian-pagan relationships in antiquity. Whereas the line between monotheism and polytheism in the late Roman Empire was ambiguous and seemed to cause no problem for pagan philosophers such as Numenius, Plutarch, and Porphyry, Aleph anachronistically projects a hard boundary backwards in time to fit a sectarian view, in particular, some sort of "hard polytheism" understood as antithetical to Christianity — indeed, probably constructed specifically to oppose

Christianity. In service of this goal he grossly overstates the animosity between Christianity and Platonism in the first few centuries of the common era. In his introduction to Porphyry, he writes that

> [Porphyry] was also very notably anti-Christian, having written polemic works against Christianity in defense of pre-Christian polytheism, such as Against The Christians, which was banned by the Roman Empire under Constantine I and burned by order of Theodosius II.

Let us put aside the simple fact that Constantine banned no books, let alone *Adversus Christianos.* This strongly implies that Porphyry, ever the philosemite and defender of monotheism, was defending a sort of hard polytheism in the face of Christian opposition. This hard boundary is fundamentally Christian, derived from a Christian theology exterior to classical paganism; thus Aleph constructs his new paganism in deference to the Christian memory of paganism. It is a Christian impulse to deftly oppose monotheism and polytheism against each other, where this distinction is important in the context of Mosaic law: *thou shalt have no other gods before me.* It is of little importance to classical paganism, especially not that of Platonists in late antiquity.

In the history of neopaganism, Christianity has historically determined the boundaries of thought and the basic axioms of religious practice. This is illustrated almost perfectly in the history of traditional witchcraft or Wicca. Appropriating then-current theories of a witch-cult survival throughout Europe, they claimed their movement was a genuine remnant of pre-Christian religion, more or less fabricating a mythology of an underground initiatory society which survived "the burning times." However, the witch-cult hypothesis has been thoroughly debunked — a close reading of those killed during the early modern witch trials were regular Christians caught up in a frenzy of inquisitorial fervor derived from antisemitic pogroms: the *Hammer of the Witches* was wholesale adapted from the *Hammer of the Jews.*

Aleph's vision of "Satanic Paganism" perfectly illustrates this reliance Christianity. It focuses on a soteriology which is defined in reference to Christianity ("pre-Christian practice"), compared to the temptation in the Garden, and is explicitly proposed as in opposition to "God [...and] his Son", even reproducing the reverential capitalization of both. He describes it as opposed to "the self-sacrifice embodied by the crucifixion of Jesus" and instead orients itself towards the self-sacrifice of Odin in Norse myth and the fall of "Satan" in Christian mythology. Most interestingly, he reproduces the Christian *logos* as a timeless, ahistorical *Geist*: it is "prefigured before its time, and later emulated outside its time." Even his affirmation of the "later development" of monotheism is appropriated from Christocentric anthropological theories which posited Christianity as the end of religious history, the result of progressive historical narrative in which animism leads to structured polytheism leads to monotheism. His reading of theurgy is Crowleyan, itself derived ultimately from the Christian esoteric tradition, in which "enact[ing] the will" is obtained through "identifi[cation] with a specific deity" (reflecting an anachronistic Crowleyan understanding of magic as actions which correspond with Will.) In his attempt to identify my Christian underpinnings, Aleph gives a very plain reading of *Acts* — in particular, the Pauline "no longer I" statement — with a sort of "born-again" theology common of evangelical Protestants. Aleph's denial of pagan monotheism fits an approach which "which ultimately derives from the Christian Apologists of late antiquity", emphasizing "the differences between Christianity and paganism in a stark and simplistic way which makes one overlook the very substantial similarities between the two". (Athanasiadē and Frede)

In a short diatribe he elliptically forwards the hypothesis that the "conflation" of the One with the Christian God is rooted in "the perennialist project [of] the Christian humanists." Philosophical problems presented by perennialism aside, the notion of *philosophia perennis et universalis* was lifted directly from ancient, pre-Christian pagan writers who did posit an ancient revelation of original truth in the distant past. Rather than being a "project [c]oncocted during the Renaissance," perennialism represents a pagan atavism: evidence of the germ of Hellenism preserved in Christianity. Ficino and della Mirandola were some of the first translators of pagan texts in the West, and Ficino himself was an heir to none other than the first man to ever attempt a revival of classical paganism: Gemistos Plethon. Thus in his drive for repression he renders himself unable to recognize it when it miraculously re-appears.

Coda

My close friends know I have largely (thought not entirely) retreated from the Western esoteric tradition, finding it largely spiritually, philosophically, and ethically bankrupt. I have instead silently returned to the Buddhism of my youth, quietly studying my lineage and practicing at my temple. Instead I chant esoteric sutras, light ritual fires, and offer tea to the emptiness at the root of all things. However, affinities deepen with time — grooves made by habit are not easily filled. Indeed I still return to Hellenic philosophy and the work of the mendicant mystics. In short, I still believe that the Western esotericism has something to offer anarchism, but not the sort of inverted orthodoxy that Aleph proposes.

Gregory Shopen, in his analysis of the archaeology of Indian Buddhism, critiques the legacy of Protestantism, thoroughly absorbed into the Western intellectural tradition, in the study of world religions. Protestant presuppositions, as he calls them, are uncritically accepted in determining the location of "true religion." Chief among his examples is an over-reliance on textual sources and the neglect of actual lived practices:

> The methodological position frequently taken by modern Buddhist scholars, archaeologists, and historians of religion looks, in fact, uncannily like the position taken by a variety of early Protestant "reformers" who were attempting to define and establish the locus of "true religion" [...] This suggests at least the distinct possibility that historical and archaeological method — if not the history of religions as a whole — represents the direct historical continuation of Reformation theological values... (Schopen pp. 1-22)

Gananath Obeyesekere took this critique a step further in coining the term "Protestant Buddhism" to describe the Buddhist reform movements in South Asia, which internalized the Protestantism of colonial authorities. Olcott, a theosophist who was deeply interested in the spiritual traditions of Asia, was an "antimissionary missionary" who helped to organize Sri Lankan Buddhists against the encroachment of Protestant missionaries. But in doing so, he Christianized many elements of Buddhist practice, writing a Buddhist catechism, encouraging caroling on the birthday of Sakyamuni Buddha, and founding Buddhist schools patterned after those ran by Christian missionaries. (Gombrich and Obeyesekere)

It can be surmised that religious and antireligious anarchism alike suffer from this supposition, an uncritical acceptance of the field of discourse received from centuries of doctrinal de-

velopment and textual criticism by Western European theologians. *More caustic than inversion is ambiguation*: to problematize the idea of monolithic, coherent systems of belief, showing that even the most unified traditions are internally diverse and incommensurable. One must interrogate the borders between orthodoxy and heresy and render them unserviceable — not just in Christianity or Paganism, but anarchism, too. Instead of taking for granted the ideological boundaries constructed by Christian theologians — boundaries between science and religion, between medicine and magic, between true and false doctrines, between the secular and the sacred — one can investigate the ways in which these categories exceed and juxtapose upon each other. This is the radical potential of the esoteric corpus: to identify the Serpent with none other than Jesus Christ, to affirm there to be no evil but only ignorance, to disallow all within the temple except those who have learned geometry, to place a dissident Jewish preacher among Bast and Amun. In what way is anarchism already religious? In what way is anarchism already a mystical tradition unto itself?

To close, I will illustrate a pertinent example: the *Chanson de Roland*, an epic poem written in medieval France. The narrative concerns a conflict between Christian Franks and Muslim Moors, culminating in a battle at Roncevaux Pass where the titular Roland is tragically killed. The Muslims, however, are portrayed quite strangely. They worship an "unholy trinity," a union of Mahound (Muhammad), Appolin (Apollyon), and a mysterious feminine deity Termagant. This portrayal is related to the character of Baphomet, also derived from a Medieval Christian reading of Muhammad (as Mahomet). Rather than engage with the messy truths — that Muslims deeply revere Jesus and consider him the Messiah, that medieval Muslims were rather tolerant of Christians and Jews in Europe, that Muslims accept the validity of the gospels, that Muslims are fervent monotheists for whom the absolute unity of God is paramount — it was much more useful to depict Islam as a reflection of Christianity, even preserving the Trinitarian logic which Muslim apologists are quick to identify as one of the great faults of Christendom. Is there any use in affirming this reflection, especially as an antidote to Christianity? In short, I think not.

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