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THE SWARMING LOGIC OF INVERSION AND THE ELEVATION OF SATAN

Steven Shakespeare and Niall Scott

‘I beseech you the executioners, crucify me thus, with the head downward and not otherwise . . . Learn ye the mystery of all nature, and the beginning of all things, what it was. For the first man, whose race I bear in mine appearance (or, of the race of whom I bear the likeness), fell (was borne) head downwards, and showed forth a manner of birth such as was not heretofore: for it was dead, having no motion. He, then, being pulled down—who also cast his first state down upon the earth—established this whole disposition of all things, being hanged up an image of the creation wherein he made the things of the right hand into left hand and the left hand into right hand, and changed about all the marks of their nature, so that he thought those things that were not fair to be fair, and those that were in truth evil, to be good. Concerning which the Lord saith in a mystery: Unless ye make the things of the right hand as those of the left, and those of the left as those of the right, and those that are above as those below, and those that are behind as those that are before, ye shall not have knowledge of the kingdom.’

—The Acts of Peter

Mazdak’s followers were planted there head down, with their feet in the air, like trees. . . . If you have any sense, you will not follow Mazdak’s way.

—Firdawsi, *Shahnameh*

Nailed at the heart of many a logo, suspended from the neck, held out in Satanic blessing: The inverted cross is one of black metal’s anti-icons. The antithesis of a revelation of light, it signifies an originary blasphemy. The elevation of Satan (in

orthodox or psycho-symbolic terms) as the one worthy of adoration is inevitably cast in terms of a desecration of God and all that is divine, a celebration of impious sacraments. Forsaking ascension and mining a path towards the centre of the earth, black metal finds a satanic stain lodged at the core of being.

However, the significance of this movement is not bound by a simple reversal. The inverted cross hangs above a swarming logic of inversion: the overturning of Christianity, but also a mimesis of Christian self-desecration (embodied in St. Peter's insistence on being crucified upside down as a sign of fallen humanity); the rejection of certain forms of religion, but also of modernity's pallid enlightenment; the invocation of strange gods of the earth, even as the earth is cursed.

When thought becomes poison, it is no longer so easy to determine which way is up and which way is down. To throw down one's head, to push oneself into the cursed earth, to occupy the place of the inverted crucified: Is this to think-by-not-thinking an unconditioned rapture beyond negation and affirmation? Is inversion other than merely turning a hierarchy upside down? A more troubling subversion? And what is the place of inversion itself? Around what point or pivotal no-place is it possible?

I answer that, nothing should be denied the blessed that belongs to the perfection of their beatitude. Now everything is known the more for being compared with its contrary, because when contraries are placed beside one another they become more conspicuous. Wherefore in order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned.¹

There is an economy of inversion. Contraries reinforce one another. For Aquinas, following the logic of salvation to its bitter end, it made perfect sense that the bliss of paradise will be made complete by the view it provides of the torments of souls in hell. The damned, in their own way, exhibit the perfect justice of God. The blessed will not take direct pleasure in the suffering of those being punished, but "will rejoice in the punishment of the wicked, by considering therein the order of divine justice and their own deliverance, which will fill them with joy. And thus the divine justice and their own deliverance will be the direct cause of the joy of the blessed: while the punishment of the damned will cause it indirectly."²

The Christian narrative, the narrative of salvation par excellence, is structured by repeated acts of exclusion or abjection. These are the necessary conditions, the constitutive work, whereby its universalism is established and affirmed. It is the

new covenant displacing the old and setting in train a political and historical process of self-definition. In the process it creates its abjected other as “Jew,” “Gnostic,” “Heretic,” “Savage.” The other is always dark, the dark body of the Satanic, whose expulsion from heaven is intrinsic to heaven’s order. However, this also means that Satan never truly leaves. The demonic haunts the divine.

Such a line of interpretation will no doubt be anathema to the orthodox Christian theologian, for whom God is not defined by any dualism, any co-primordially of evil. God, as pure act, is perfectly realized goodness, depending on nothing. Evil is a privation, a deficiency always secondary to and parasitic upon the good.

It has always been a problem for such a theology to account for why and how God relates to the world. As pure act, God cannot be passive to anything, cannot receive anything. At the same time, the act of creation must be a wholly free act, not a necessary emanation from God, since the latter would compromise God’s sovereignty and perfection.

Aquinas allows for contingent creatures, including free beings such as humans, to have genuine causal power, whilst insisting that the sovereign purposes of divine providence can never be frustrated. The contingency of the world is therefore affirmed, but its submission to God’s necessary will is also upheld. Creation is a free act of God, but no act of God can be simply contingent. The will of God is eternal, and cannot be separated from God’s nature. The doctrine of divine simplicity maintains that all God is, God is essentially. Therefore, the will to create is co-eternal with God. How then, can it be distinguished from God’s necessary essence?

Two unpalatable (from the point of view of orthodoxy) alternatives present themselves. One is to deny the simplicity or perfection of God, to introduce division, contingency, and temporality into the heart of the divine (a line that may run through various Western traditions, such as those associated with the term “Gnosticism,” the Kabbalah, and the speculative metaphysics of Schelling and Whitehead). The other is to maintain God’s simplicity in pure indifference to the world, much like the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover.

Rejecting these, orthodoxy rests on the horns of its Satanic dilemma: God is almost blissfully ignorant of the devilish logic of creation. No creation without certain potentials realised, and others denied. No creation without a “No” that shadows the “Yes.” No creation without the corruption of divine necessity.

In order to protect the divine essence, and to secure God’s role in the drama of salvation which unfolds in a fallen world, the shadow must be castigated as arbitrary, unreal, and anarchic. The hard of heart, the unbeliever, and the

impenitent play their appointed role. The damned hold a mirror up for the beatific vision to behold its own completion. And behind the mirror? On the obverse? What makes this reflection possible?

Writing on the death drive in Freud's work, Derrida captures the economy of salvation as an economy of abjection and inversion:

We do not like to be reminded, Freud notes, of the undeniable existence of an evil which seems to contradict the sovereign goodness of God. But if this Devil—another proper name for the three-named drive—seems, then, in the eyes of Christians, for “Christian science” (in English in the text), irreconcilable with God, we see now that it can also exculpate God: evil for evil's sake, diabolical evil, the existence of the Devil can serve as an excuse (*Entschuldigung*) for God, because *exterior* to him, *anarchic angel and dissident*, in rebellion against him, just as, and this is the polemical trait of analogy, the Jew can play the analogous role of economic relief or exoneration . . . assigned to him by the world of the Aryan ideal. In other words, the radical destruction can again be *reinvested* in another logic, in the inexhaustible *economistic* resource of an archive which capitalizes everything, even that which ruins it or radically contests its power: radical evil can be of service, infinite destruction can be reinvested in a theodicy, the devil can also serve to *justify*—such is the destination of the Jew in the Aryan ideal.³

In the face of this, black metal plays an ambiguous role. It stands with the dark body of the abjected: Satan, the earth, evil. It scorns Christianity, but also the Western modernity which could be seen as the product of Christian universalism. It directly allies itself with the Satanic, or else with pagan and esoteric traditions suppressed by the church.

At the same time, we have to ask critically about the dimensions of this inversion. Turning the cross upside down is not in itself an escape from the orthodox Christian logic of salvation. The Christian God can empty himself, desecrate himself, and yet remain fundamentally untouched, pure, and sovereign. The gesture of vulnerability, of allowing freedom and evil to conspire on the outside, is a sleight of hand, for the exterior is quickly made to serve and confirm the Origin.

Take, as an example, the motif of sovereignty itself. The figure of the Emperor, which strides through the lyrical world of the band of the same name, is clearly Satanic, a rejection of the “weakness” of Christian submission and pity:

Thou are the Emperor of Darkness.
Thou are the king of howling wolves.
Thou hath the power to force any light in wane. Sans mercy.
Sans compassion nor will to answer whoever asketh the why.⁴

The Emperor is demonic, but also divine. In a sense, this Satan replicates the unyielding providence of God. It is without pity, much like the saints viewing the torments of the damned. One wonders if the black metallic spite reserved for the Christian church should not be turned into praise. After all, hasn't the church at times exercised this merciless subjugation, its story of salvation intertwining with that of Western colonialism? Why look for Satan to do what God *has already done*?

The economy of inversion repeats itself, in uncanny conformation of Derrida's words about "the destination of the Jew in the Aryan ideal." From the (now erased) notorious epitaph on Darkthrone's *Transilvanian Hunger* ("Norwegian Aryan Black Metal") through the twisted threads of Varg Vikernes' Odinist racism and NSBM, hatred of the Jew has been the most explicit regurgitation of Christianity's own dark side. In this case, inversion has become a continuation of anti-Semitism by other means.

However, this clearly does not tell the whole story. The power of inversion is not merely that of a parodic reversal.⁵ The collapsing of light into darkness opens a new way for thought, one that is not simply in search of a new sovereign. It is a way that points beyond the salvation narrative and towards an identification with the earth in its reality, in its corruption. No longer is a pure core of identity kept safe, whether by conquest or abjection. The black metal soul opens its sound, its scream, and its vision (its *theoria*) to an impurity which is primordial, creative, and self-affirming.

This can take place in different ways. Deathspell Omega's explicit miming of Christian liturgy and scriptural language serves a metaphysical Satanism in which God is entirely displaced by the reality named Satan, but this happens via an audible and theoretical corrosion which disturbs the theological edifice from within, exposing its hidden fault lines. In other words, what we get is not simply a replacement of God / good with Satan / evil, but a more deconstructive cross-contamination of the two.⁶

A very different example would be the "renihilation" championed by Hunter Hunt-Hendrix of the band Liturgy, in which black metal betrays its Nordic roots and "transforms Nihilism into Affirmation."⁷ This specifically American aesthetic is a building from the ground up, a celebration of creative, ecstatic, forward momentum, rather than a nostalgic lament for things lost. We could also examine

the nature-oriented anarchism of Cascadian black metal, which eschews Satanic emblems for a sensuous affirmation of the (often putrid) earth devoid of masters.⁸

None of these examples are beyond critical evaluation, of course. They face problematic issues of appropriating narratives from, variously, Christian liturgy, American exceptionalism, and indigenous traditions. Nevertheless, they perform a different form of inversion to the one which involves exchanging one sovereign, transcendent principle for another. They affirm an immanent movement which is always excessive to that which can be defined by the transcendence-immanence binary. Such a movement is courageous, corrosive, joyful, indifferent, disillusioned, and fecund in decay. It echoes the mystical-heretical coincidence of the self with the absolute, experienced not simply as a pure ascent, but as the darkness, heaviness, and aridity of being itself.

Nicola Masciandaro, discussing the scriptural account of the darkness that fell over the earth during crucifixion and Jesus' cry of dereliction ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"), argues that "Whatever the theological truth of the abandonment signified, in the intensive reality of the question—a reality more real than the real it questions—there is no abandonment whatsoever."⁹ The actuality of the question speaks for itself, with no reference to an answer or a beyond from which an answer could come. The darkness and the question expose the abyss at the heart of everything, and yet

the infinitely ordinary yet equally miraculous capacity of the question not only to indicate this eternal negativity, but, in the non-difference of its own substantial negativity, to speak it, is a superessential positivity, an affirmation beyond affirmation and denial. The actuality of the radical question of divine dereliction, what makes it radical in the first place, lies in its fulfillment of the superessentiality of negation, the apophatic principle that "the negations are not simply the opposites of the affirmations."¹⁰

This is the core of a sorrow that marks being itself in its intertwined abandonment and affirmation. For Masciandaro, "sorrow itself, internally, is a kind of supernatural or magical problem, a problem whose problematicity, if actually understood, abolishes all problems and inverts today into paradise."¹¹

This inversion is a turning on the spot, a drilling down into the immanent ground. It is sorrow as affirmation, despair as a wild courage. The black metal scream and sound—whittling death metal's bombast to its razor sharp edge—is this corroding question without an answer, except its own intensity. From its

hellish stance, head beating downwards, it refuses the teleology of salvation and opens up a new sonic space. The economy of inversion is itself suspended.

These are the spiralling questions around which this special issue turns.

In “Through the Looking Glass Darkly: Medievalism, Satanism, and the Dark Illumination of the Self in the Aesthetics of Black Metal,” Brenda Walter faces the intricacy of black metal’s inversions head on: “Often oversimplified as ‘Christianity upside down,’ the inverted aesthetics of Satanic black metal are actually quite complex, operating according to the specific rationality of medieval scholasticism and signifying deep discourses of power in Western culture.” From its roots in Aristotelian cosmology, Walter traces Christian theology’s construction of the Satanic as an “inverted hierarchy.” Norwegian black metal distilled and appropriated the othering power of this construct. Allied to its rejection of Christianity was a “quest for mythical purity,” a return to the land and its pagan associations. Walter follows the ways in which this path has itself become twisted and inverted as black metal has become a globalised aesthetic. She draws attention to the problematic persistence of Satanic motifs in black metal, especially beyond the ambit of the Christian West, asking whether this strategy does not in fact entrap its users into a binary structure not of their own devising. The potential for group conformity and replication of conservative norms is illustrated through some reactions to Gaahl’s sexual orientation. The article poses an alternative: the blackened self, standing alone and autonomous, no longer defined by binary codes of good and evil. Even this proves impossible to sustain, as the self is absorbed into a new enslavement to “nature.” Walter ends by suggesting that liberation is truly achieved when the blackened self “dissolves into the very darkness it attempted to convey,” and finds liberation in unity with the void.

Reuben Dendinger’s article, “The Way of the Sword: Christianity, Fascism, and the Folk Magic of Black Metal,” focuses on the mythological image of the magic sword, which, in black metal, is the inverted cross. The sword is an expression of sovereign force, but also of identification with the key archetypes of black metal: “the feminine witch, the masculine warrior, and the androgynous goat Baphomet.” Black metal’s folk magic does not expand the sympathy of its practitioner, but turns her inward, awakening a gnosis which leads back to the buried nature religions despised by Christianity. Dendinger notes how this can become an occasion for black metal artists to embrace a variety of fascism, but argues that this occurs only when that “Black Metal falls short of a truly courageous *nigredo*, it emphasizes the pernicious and degenerative influence of outsiders rather than allowing Satan completely into the soul. For those fascists, they are still under the cross, even if it is an iron cross.” Black metal’s earth is romanticised, but also

depicted as bestial: It is not an alibi for blood and soil delusions. The article ends with a commentary on Mayhem's *Grand Declaration of War*, claiming that a true reversal of Christian enslavement of the earth comes not through fascism, but through spiritually awakening the beast within.

Bert Stabler begins "A Sterile Hole and a Mask Of Feces" by reflecting upon the Gnaw Their Tongues album title *An Epiphanic Vomiting of Blood*. Turning the practitioner inside out, vomiting is an uncanny reduplication of God's self-emptying in Hegel's version of Christianity. Stabler argues that black metal also charts a path toward rebirth, through the pain of becoming. But what is the nature of the salvation it seeks? Is black metal, by refusing to abject the abjected, seeking some kind of ultimate plenitude (a plenitude that would also be—full of shit)? Stabler suggests that this is not all there is to be said. He draws on Hegel, as interpreted by Žižek, to argue that what is expressed through the dialectic of positivity and negativity is not some latent or yet-to-be-realised harmony, but an empty and self-sundered absolute (signified by the complex but minimal difference of corpsepaint's white-on-white): "To wear one's cultural identity as a mask is not to borrow from a signifying field (the nation, the market, or the body) but to externalize an ontological position (the spirit, a shared history, or the drives)." Both sovereign and enslaved, the black metal subject has a subversive, queering power, for all the residual homophobia in sections of the metal community. Stabler associates the transformation of hell into a kind of bliss with the liberation of the individual from substantive ties. The earth becomes both paradise and wilderness. The complexity of black metal's inversion is underlined once more, as Stabler contests simplistic dreams of purity and the void which would repress the opening of the anal boundary and the release of the captive Other within: "The romance of a hermetically insular, organically unified totality is pierced by Black Metal's jagged, discontinuous soundscape."

In "Eccentricities and Disorientations: Experiencing geometrics in Black Metal," a visual art portfolio curated by Elodie Lesourd and Amelia Ishmael, works by six artists—Andrew McLeod, Dimitris Foutris, Stephen Wilson, Sandrine Pelletier, and Gast Bouschet and Nadine Hilbert—stretch black metal's significance beyond language. Structured around a phenomenological approach to geometry and black metal acoustics, this portfolio explores the architectural implications of inversion through describing how visual art suggests a perspective and orientation in space. McLeod's black metal logophilic drawing conjures the sound of the music addressed in these pages. This is followed by Wilson's and Foutris' photographs, which require an inversion of one's head to grasp their transcendence. The geometric shapes build to Pelletier's sculptures, and Gast Bouschet and Nadine

Hilbert's photographs are reminiscent of a space between a charred stove church frame and an allusion to unexpected angular lines of early Neues Sehen Bauhaus photography. The vertigo brought about in this portfolio interjects us with the question of inversion's relationship to a ground.

As is evident from the preceding work, black metal theory is not bound by the music it is named after per se, and has spilled over into realms of art, literature, and beyond. Erik van Ooijen exemplifies the scope of black metal theory in its crashing through the genre barrier like a bolting horse in his study of animal inversion in the deathgrind work of Cattle Decapitation. In "Giving Life Harmoniously: Animal Inversion in Cattle Decapitation" the theme of animal inversion in Cattle Decapitation's lyrics and artwork is traced back to sixteenth-century images inverting hierarchical relationships including animals rising up against man—"de os vilt den slachter," the old Dutch translated as "the ox flays the butcher"—"[depicting] social upheaval in a comic mode" and "[acknowledging human] monstrosity . . . from the subaltern point of view," as van Ooijen puts it. These themes are not only superficially illustrative of an inversion, but, as van Ooijen argues, also challenge and invert violent themes, misogynies, and hierarchies within the grindcore and deathgrind genres. This extends to a queering of the genre that builds on a thoroughly unsympathetic inversion, which van Ooijen writes as not simply entailing "a dismantling of dichotomies resulting in a flat uniformity of non-friction," but by a thoroughly disruptive solution, an anti-anthropocentrism that sees the end of the human—"only the killing of man may end of human tyranny"—the destruction of a kind of life which allows new life to emerge. The aim, though a message communicated as art, is a political one that calls for a critical reflection on the disastrous direction that human dominance leads us. It is further an inversion of sound and meaning where the apparent extreme violence in the images and lyrics draws attention to real violence perpetrated on animals, ultimately bringing about a refusal of violence rather than a production of it.

Bergson's philosophy of memory is blackened by Louis Hartnoll's exploration of three features of memory in "Contempt, Atavism, Eschatology: Black Metal and Bergson's Porous Inversion." Here, Hartnoll lays down a substantial philosophical challenge in understanding black metal's history through the metaphysical inversion of virtual and actual memory and its object. This includes that which is presented in representational memory, a memory that is dead and pays no attention to life. Removing oneself, as Hartnoll puts it, "from corporeal demands and [immersing] oneself into the dead and disinterested past," referring to black metal's distinction between the staged and the unstageable. This is a memory

that is unattainable and impossible, describing black metal's egesting of a "commitment to an unrealized and unrealizable history." Hartnoll first seeks to define and explain Bergson's view on memory in the context of black metal—the divisions of habit memory, memory images, representational memory, and pure memory. Pure memory, expressed by Bergson and reflected in Burzum's lyric in the song *Lost Wisdom*, retains its purity in being virtual and not depending on the actual for its subsistence. Black metal, through a Bergsonian reading, relates to the past by inverting and exchanging matter and memory. Black metal's phases and its history in memory, Hartnoll writes, can be understood through "divided but interlinked temporalities": a contempt for the present, the atavistic past, and finally an eschatological perspective on the future. These stages can be traced in the lyrics of Darkthrone and Mayhem, and through to third-wave projections.

These contributions are not of one voice, but they articulate a convergence: Inversion is not a negation, it is a contrary, to borrow William Blake's phrase.¹² In black metal's noise as a form of silence, the unintelligible as obscure is the means of communication. This volume is a contribution to the manufacturing of obscurity; after all, it was in obscurity that Moses received the tablets from YHWH: "The People remained at a distance while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was."¹³ From darkness to light to darkness is a move from the womb to early development to maturity. Growth is growth towards darkness; life is an ascent into the night,¹⁴ a move from meaningfulness and understanding to obscurity and insight, an elevation towards Satan. Black metal embraces the inverted obscure, indeed as Amelia Ishmael has claimed, black metal is a myth.¹⁵ This collection of essays in the second volume of *Helvete* adds to the growing articulation of black metal theory's disruption and inversion of theory itself, extending the critical blackening of theory spiralling ever downwards, for which its deepest abyss is its highest form.

NOTES

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Supplement to the Third Part, Question 94, Article 1: <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/5094.htm>.

² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Supplement to the Third Part, Question 94, Article 3.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 12–13.

⁴ Emperor, "Inno a Satana," *In the Nightside Eclipse* (Candlelight, 1994).

⁵ See Niall Scott, "Black Confessions and Absu-lution" in *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium 1*, ed. Nicola Masciandaro (CreateSpace Open Publishing, 2010), 221–231.

⁶ Cf. Steven Shakespeare, “Into the Vomitorium: Diseased Sacraments” in *P.E.S.T.: Black Metal Theory Symposium 3*, ed. Michael O’Rourke (forthcoming, 2014) and Brice Ezell, “‘Only Utter Darkness Can Be Likened to Light’: A Comparative Analysis of Deathspell Omega’s Metaphysical Satanism and the Cārvāka Darśana” *Zetalambmary*, March 2013: <http://www.zetalambmary.com/only-utter-darkness-can-be-likened-to-light-a-comparative-analysis-of-deathspell-omegas-metaphysical-satanism-and-the-carvaka-darsana>.

⁷ Hunter Hunt Hendrix, “Transcendental Black Metal: A Vision of Apocalyptic Humanism” in *Hideous Gnosis*, ed. Nicola Masciandaro, 53–65: 58.

⁸ See Steven Shakespeare, “Shuddering: Black Metal on the Edge of the Earth” in *Melancology*, ed. Scott Wilson, (London: Zero Books, forthcoming 2014) and “Of Plications: A Short Summa on the Nature of Cascadian Black Metal” in *Glossator: Practice and Theory of the Commentary 6* (2012), 1–31.

⁹ Nicola Masciandaro, “The Sorrow of Being” (extract), *The Whim*, 2013: <http://thewhim.blogspot.co.uk/2013/12/from-sob-why.html>. Accessed 14/2/14.

¹⁰ Masciandaro, “The Sorrow of Being.”

¹¹ Masciandaro, “The Sorrow of Being.”

¹² Mary Lynn Johnson, “Milton and its Contexts” in *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 240–241.

¹³ The Holy Bible: The Book of Exodus, 2:21.

¹⁴ Niall Scott, “A Black Mass: A Reading From the Void” (Black Mass at the Z, The Hague, Gallery exhibition pamphlet, 2011).

¹⁵ Amelia Ishmael, “Black Thorns in the White Cube” (exhibition catalogue), 2012.