

THE VEXED ICONOSTASIS

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EXCERPT FROM THE
CRITIQUE OF THE IMAGE
IS THE DEFENSE OF THE
IMAGINATION

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Excerpt from the book 'The Critique of the Image... Is the Defense of the Imagination' published by Autonomedia

“If the Moslems knew what the idol is they'd all become idolaters” - Mahmud Shabistari, *Rosegarden of the Secret*

Like Plato, The Prophet Mohammed distrusted poets and painters. In a famous *hadith* he said that on Judgment Day God would challenge such artists to give life to their “creations,” and when they (of course) failed, He'd dump them into Hell. (Could Mohammed have known *The Republic*? It seems unlikely but not impossible).

Monotheism appears antithetical to the Image, starting with the Ten Commandments and culminating in Cromwellian smashing of stained glass and pissing on altars. We moderns have come to feel shocked by such un-PC philistinism; we privilege the Image, we live by it and need it, or so we believe.

The logic of one god precludes any willful proliferation of multiplicity; all immanence must vanish into transcendence. The soul, which yearns for imagery, must be chastened and purified toward a mental (or wholly spiritual) relation with divine unity. Distraction must be subsumed into attentiveness. Purity becomes puritanism, violent idol-smashing in the name of the *unio mystica* – war in the name of peace.

In this light, Catholic/Orthodox Christianity must appear (as in fact it does to Protestantism and Islam) a form of idolatry. Trinitarianism itself implies the secret existence of three gods, despite all the equivocations of the theologians. Iconoclasm of all kinds attempts to restore a Judaic (or perhaps a Gnostic) refusal of the Image, a religion leached of variegated multiplicity, a true anti-paganism.

But within the mono-culture of the Law there always lurks an antinomian or crypto-pagan love of images. Against Sunni orthodoxy, Shiism and Sufism tend to rehabilitate the image or even the idol. Eventually the Prophet himself is depicted in painting; his face alone



armor symbolizes the clear attentiveness that should be brought to bear as resistance to the totalitarian onslaught of false icons in our contemporary hell of too many images, advertising, television, propaganda, computer as Gnostic heaven of disembodied spooks, the whole iconostasis that separates us "rustics" from the sacramental understanding of what's really going on behind the scrim of distraction. (This by the way is the Hermetic message of The Wizard of Oz.)

The supporters or heraldic beasts or Wild Men or mermaids, etc., who stand on either side of the shield, symbolize our allies in the magical sense of the term as used for example by Castañeda or Crowley. The crest (or crown) symbolizes our consciousness, our state of cerebral awakement, our psychic aura or "halo."

Although swords or maces or other traditional weapons sometimes appear in the blazon, they're not essential. Of course, however, the escutcheon must function not only as protection but as projection. The chivalric self is never passive nor merely defensive. As with the Chinese or Japanese martial artist, attack is the best (perhaps the only) defense. (Incidentally, Japan is especially rich in heraldic art-forms.) The real "weapon" consists of the *imagery itself*. One must own and deploy one's own images, not someone else's. In the old days this ownership meant *family*; now it implies that one is an *artist* in the alchemical sense. The arms as a whole stand for the Imagination in Blake's or Bachelard's sense of the word - Corbin's "Creative Imagination" - or perhaps we might say the *Romantic Imagination*.

The "trick" is precisely a trick, a magical technique. We can overcome; that is, we can "suppress and realize" the Image by means of our own Images, our personal art of protection and projection. Or at least... so I like to imagine.

remains veiled - but everything else is fully manifested. Of course "oriental" painting in general avoids perspective and realism, not (as most art historians believe) out of any primitive lack of skill, but from a refusal of illusion. The first atemporal plane of Persian miniatures or Chinese scroll-paintings provides a kind of "Brechtian alienation," a dialectical and critical distance from the tyranny of the Eye. The invisible is included in such art, given its due respect, even love. Nevertheless the proliferation of the image in Shiite Persia or Mughal India appears shocking in contrast with the aniconic fervor of Sunni culture.

It has been said that "arabesque" abstraction and calligraphy remain the central artforms of Islamdom, and that painting is secondary; this dictum is partly true, but fails to explain the sheer exuberance of pictorial art in Iran and India. Finally it must be admitted that there's something heretical in such love of imagery. In poetry this heterodoxy is concretized in "shocking" images of erotic drunkenness such as the (in)famous lines of Hafez: "Stain your prayer-carpet with wine!"

From a Wahhabi or Islamist point of view no one is more to be blamed for this lapse from purity than the great Shaykh Mohiyod-din ibn al-'Arabi (12th-century Spain). His doctrine of the Unity of Being (wahdat al-wujud) is seen as opening the floodgate of heresy that leads to Shiite gnosis and Sufism. But Ibn 'Arabi himself never used this term. His writing actually constructs a subtle balance between transcendence and immanence that avoids identification of spirit and matter - which would constitute the ultimate Islamic sin of hulul, "Incarnationism." Ibn Taymiyya, the doyen of Puritanism, excoriates a certain Sufi who claimed that in kissing his boyfriend he "kissed God" - sheer blasphemy!

An anonymous disciple of Ibn 'Arabi composed a Treatise (risalah) on Wahdat al-wujud that actually hereticizes the Shaykh and orients his teaching toward true antinomianism, in such a way that the Image can be completely rehabilitated, and become essential to Sufi praxis. The idol is in fact the Beloved, the immanent manifested

completely in the human form divine as material world. It is as if Platonic emanationism were to be collapsed or accorded into a single dimension where archetype and manifestation become indistinguishable in the delirium of desire. God is literally love - and vice versa. In the words of the Emerald Tablet, "As above so below, for the completion of the Work" - and as below, so above. The final dualism of spirit and matter is overcome in Soul this is the "secret" of Tantra and erotic alchemy. -

In Islamdom perhaps the ultimate expression of this doctrine appeared in the movement known as the Hurufiyya, literally the "Lettrists." They taught that the letters of the Arabic alphabet are incarnations, so to speak, of divine presences - that the written Names are the Names. These Sufis can be seen as mystical anthropomorphists. Thus they used letters in calligrams or visual puns, where (for instance) Koranic words form a portrait of Mohammed or 'Ali [see Illustration].

The Hurufiyya were persecuted and martyred by Orthodoxy as ultimate heretics. (Their teachings still survive in the heretical branch of the Bektashis of Turkey, who use wine and hashish as sacraments.) An even more extreme underground subsequently appeared, the Nuqtawiyya or "Pointists," obsessed with the points of the Arabic letters, comparable to the dot over our "i." The Moghul Emperor Akbar, who founded an ecumenical heretical (or schismatic) religion, the Divine Faith (Din Ilahi) based on Sufism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Christianity, etc., was an initiate of the Nuqtawiyya.¹

The Fifteenth-century sect of the Hurufiyya ("Lettrists" or "Abecedarians") were apparently wiped out by orthodoxy, but their ideas filtered into a number of still-existing currents and groups, including the Bektashi Order of dervishes in Turkey. Extremist Shi'ism, meditations on gematria and angelic physiognomy, and a heretical tendency toward representational art, all combined and resulted in a school of calligrammatic iconography based on the body of the "Perfect Man" (al-insan al-kamil) and especially the face, which reveals certain letters in its forms.

into alchemy, during the heyday of Rosicrucianism, around 1614. The family's coat-of-arms is blatantly Hermetic. On the shield, a red bull with golden horns is shown on a green meadow, an apt symbol for the red/gold Philosopher's Stone made in part from spagyric herbs. The crest, the ornament on the helmet over the shield, clinches this interpretation. A crow, which usually symbolizes the Nigredo or initial black stage of Putrifactio in alchemy, has become gold and is rising from a burst of flames like a phoenix - a crystal-clear symbol of transmutation by "philosophic - fire." The gift of healing is known to have passed down in the Brink family into the 20th century; clearly it "passes up" as well into a past of esoteric erudition.

It seemed to me that heraldry could be turned (or "detoured") from its exclusive use in genealogy to a modern artform by extending the concept of its emblemology from bloodline to anything at all, anything emotionally or aesthetically significant to the artist. For example, one might construct a coat-of-arms for a love affair, or a landscape, or a moment of realization, or even a single flower - anything that might need magic protection - for an insurrection or resistance movement for an artistic avantgarde - or just for a - single event like a dinner party.

Later I learned that this idea had already been discovered by Alfred Jarry, author of the Ubu plays, queer bicyclist and poet maudit, precursor and hero of Dada and Surrealism. Although most of the books I've read on Jarry fail to mention it, he was obsessed by heraldry and used it in an artistic and experimental way in his own work. In his honor I call the idea mooted here 'pataphysical heraldry.

Perhaps appropriately, the idea remains unrealized by me except as a concept. It occurs to me however that it may constitute the key to the mystery of how to protect yourself from Image Magic. The method would consist of liberating oneself from the Image through the Image, rather than against it.

The shield and helm of course make up a form of protection. The

rebus, a crane "in its vigilance" holding in one claw a stone. The badge of the family is a strawberry. The motto, reflecting our old heritage as Border Reivers (i.e., land pirates) reads "Thou shalt want ere I want"!

One of the Cranstons features in Sir W. Scott's great proto-Romantic poem "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" as the victim of witches and his own "goblin butler." Another (non-fictional) Cranston married the daughter of Francis Stewart, Fifth Earl of Bothwell, infamous chief warlock of Scotland, who attempted to assassinate King James VI/I by witchcraft on Halloween 1590, failed, and fled to exile in Naples, where he continued to practice "necromancy." The crane of course is an uncanny bird related to the Egyptian ibis of Thoth/Hermes, and is considered a symbol of alchemical "immortality" in Taoism, as well as highly significant in Celtic shamanism.

The "trick" or written description of a family's arms is composed in a special jargon of Norman French and old English - the colors (tints) for instance are gules (red), sable (black), azur (blue), vert (green), plus argent (silver or white) and or (gold or yellow). The text is totally scientific in the sense that it can be "translated" directly and precisely into the equivalent visual imagery, and vice versa. The text therefore constitutes a kind of objective poetry.

A great deal of heraldic imagery relates to Hermeticism and the Renaissance Emblem Books. (See illustrations.)

Although I've never found this point argued in any book of heraldry, it seems quite obvious to me. For instance, I once researched the life of a locally famous (i.e., in Ulster and Dutchess counties, New York) "witch doctor," Jacob Brink (1754-1843), who fought epic battles with witches and cured sick people by magic, and who met and inspired Washington Irving. I discovered that Brink was no simple folk healer, but was descended from an armigerous (i.e., arms-bearing or noble) Dutch family; one of his ancestors spent time as an ambassador in Constantinople, where Paracelsus was initiated

The accompanying illustrations are from A. J. Dierl's work on the Bektashis. The first two examples are both faces, based on the names of God and the Five Pure Ones, Mohammad, 'Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Hussayn.

The third illustration is of the body as text, or as "revelation." A man raising his hands in prayer constitutes the axis mundi, with the Divine Name ("Allah") as his heart. Nature, or material reality, and the Koran, or scripture - the two canonical sources of "signs for the aware" are here united in human form, which is of course also angelic form. The heretical conclusion is that the human body and the material world are divine.

"...whoever makes an image does so by violence, and makes it by conquering the substance of which it is made." - Picatrix, 1/2

Ioan Couliano's masterpiece Eros and Magic in the Renaissance struck me like a bolt of lightning. At once all the books I'd read by Frances Yates fell into focus. I realized that Giordano Bruno wasn't just a fascinating eccentric but also the greatest Occidental thinker between Plato and Nietzsche.

Couliano (Culianu) should himself be considered a martyr of Hermeticism, like his hero Bruno (burned at the stake by the Inquisition in 1600). Using his knowledge of occult imagery to de-code the phony "Revolution" of 1990 in his homeland of Romania (and abjuring the reactionary politics of his mentor Mircea Eliade), Couliano was assassinated in Chicago by agents of Securitate, the Romanian secret police who were orchestrating the so-called revolution by manipulating mass media. The crime was never "solved." (On this see also Andrei Codrescu's The Hole in the Flag.)

In the single most revelatory paragraph of Eros and Magic, Couliano mentioned in passing that the modern-day equivalent of Renaissance Image Magic can be seen in contemporary media such

as advertising, television, propaganda, public relations, spin-doctoring and education. Understanding media (to lift a phrase from McLuhan, that Catholic mystic/cynic) as magic clarifies the problematique far better than any reference to mere psychologism. Not only sexuality is involved in the efficacy of media, but also (and equally important), so is the Imagination. For a definition of "capital-I" Imagination, I refer the reader to William Blake and Henry Corbin: not merely fantasy and daydreaming but the "Imaginal" deep structure of consciousness itself, the human faculty closest to the "divine" (including the loosest and most untheological sense of that term).

I first became aware of this concept of Image Magic by studying the reception of Egyptian hieroglyphs in Renaissance art and texts such as the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and the amazing books of Athanasius Kircher. Unable to "crack" the hieroglyphs were convinced contained magic power which they the 15th-16th century magi blithely proceeded to invent their own hieroglyphs. This creativity can best be appreciated in the alchemical "Emblem Books" such as Count Michael Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*. The images (and poems and even music) in these books were not reduced to mere allegory, that "melancholy" flattening criticized by Walter Benjamin in his work on Baroque drama. The true magical Emblem books deployed what Schwaller de Lubicz calls the *symbolique*. Paracelsus used the term "Signatures" to describe the ontological/existential essences that link visible and invisible in "Series" (as Charles Fourier used the term), so that for example the dandelion, the lion, the diamond and the Sun are not simply allegories of each other but avatars or manifestations or Signatures of a solar essence that links them in a "chain," as Bruno put it, such that one can evoke and embody the others as real presences. Gérard de Nerval, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud deployed a theory of "Correspondences" (mostly lifted from Swedenborg or Fourier) in an attempt to create magical (or "objective") poetry rather than mere verse. Mallarmé also meant to accomplish this task in his "BOOK," but only managed to finish one part of it, the "Throw of the Dice." Yeats said the spirits of *A Vision* came to him to give him images for poetry.

The neo-Traditionalists can be useful here as well as the radicals. Guénon, Coomaraswamy, Corbin, Eliade and their epigones are not without their cogent arguments against the Empire of the Image- even if they defended the Empire of "Spiritual Authority." Their mistake was to miss the fact that *before Civilization*, humans were (roughly) free of the tyranny of both alienation and the pervasive Image, and that religion itself is the problem, not the solution. Here the marvelous proto-Surrealist Charles Fourier has been my guide; his "utopian socialist" concept of Harmony can be seen as a return of the Paleolithic on a higher gyre of culture, both truly secular and truly Hermetic, a precursor of Benjamin's "Profane Illumination." (Also vital in the critique of Civilization are the writings of anti-authoritarian anthropologists like M. Sahlins, P. Clastres, M. Taussig and J.C. Scott.)

The basic task that confronts us is to wake up and realize how we are being manipulated by Image Magic, as Couliano defined it. Media are insidious. In response we might become clever or *rendi* as the Sufis say, cunning enough to "drink wine and not be caught." We'd need to act as subversives, as "old moles" tunneling beneath the surface of mind control and exploitation by Too-Late Capitalism and its thought-police. If we can no longer escape Space we might hide in Time, in temporal or temporary autonomous zones of refusal and resistance. In the Empire of the Malignant Image, even simple old-fashioned unmediated acts like a dinner party or a love affair become revolutionary gestures. Making art for free, for nothing, for ourselves, could be seen as truly radical, genuinely liberating — and perhaps as the last possible radical form of insurrection and resistance. But in order to fight back (to "take direct action") we must become... magicians.

I've always been attracted to heraldry as an artform. I love the surrealist imagery of the coat-of-arms with its blazon or escutcheon and crest. Of course a certain amount of fascination with my own family enters into this enthusiasm. For instance, my paternal grandmother's "achievement of arms," of the Lowland Scots family the Cranstouns or Cranstons, shows on the shield a punning or "canting"

the Unfitt

You could be an entheogenic lizard
I the lunatic licking your skin you
could be the Swedenborg of the Midwest
and absolve us of textual sin

Waiting for a sign of your coming
waiting for the barque of the Sun
waiting in the airless tomb for silence
or the sound of a gun

VI

Although my critique of the Image owes a great deal to Jewish, Islamic, and Byzantine Iconoclasm (or aniconism), finally, as poet and artist, I cannot simply abandon the economy of iconography. There must exist a means of saving the Image from negative idolatry. This soteriology can only take a way through the Image itself salvation from the Image through the Image in the positive sense of idolatry as expressed in the line from Mahmud Shabistari's *Gulshan-i raz* with which this essay began. We need a new telestics of the Image, a means to enliven our metaphors, a magic poiesis. Even if modern artists have always failed at this task, driving some of them mad, driving Rimbaud to the Abyss(inia) of Silence, still we must persevere, even without attachment to the fruits of action.

First, we need a means by which to protect ourselves from the malignant aspects of Image Magic. Reading Bruno and Paracelsus on the Imagination would be a good start. Reading Ficino and Cornelius Agrippa would certainly help. But these ancestors lived in an era long before the totalitarianization of the Image through modern media-before the crisis of technopathocracy and the final (?) moving away or melting off all that once was real into representation. Second, we need Nietzsche, Benjamin and Bachelard, McLuhan and Debord, in order to synthesize a modern (or postmodern) critique of the Image. Third, we need an Image Magic of our own.

Bruno's treatises, *De magia* and *De vinculis in genere*, now exist in English translations and provide the clearest explanation of how Image Magic actually works. A beautiful modern example of what he meant is provided by the U.S. one-dollar bill, a highly sophisticated Hermetic "text" or Emblem Book, partly designed by 18th century Freemasons and partly by the 20th-century Russian mystic Nicholas Roerich and his disciple, Vice President Henry Wallace. Money itself is proof that magic works - after all, all money is "fiat money," backed only by alchemical metals like gold and silver, or (now) by nothing except imagination or "credit" (belief) — and yet it rules the world and metastasizes itself through "usury" (the sexuality of the Dead) and universal debt into a vast numisphere of make-believe currency anti-biotic penumbra. that surrounds the globe like a miasma

Bruno says that it's easier to ensorcell millions than to make one person fall in love with you. This is how the Yankee dollar succeeds in enslaving global consciousness, while love itself lies bleeding. If love is the principle of the Social, in fact, may actually be moribund, since (as the late Baroness Lady M. Thatcher put it) there is now "no such thing as 'Society'." The Historical Movement of the Social has been replaced by "social networks" of virtual "friends," linked only by that which separates them - i.e., media; or, as Marx put it, everything that once was real has moved away into representation— a "Society of the Spectacle," or the totalitarian Image.

Given the apotheosis of the Image as oppression, perhaps we ought to think again about the Iconoclastic critique of representation. Despite our idolatry of art (and advertising) perhaps we need to do some image-smashing? Let us try such a thought-experiment. Given that there may exist a sense in which every Image "is" an idol, it behooves us to attempt an understanding of how an idol actually functions. The clearest explanation I've ever seen appears in the *Aesculapius*, a text related to the *Corpus Hermeticum* but not included in the version transmitted via Gemistho Plethon to Marsilio Ficino. The

Aesculapius was never "lost" and re-discovered like the rest of the Corpus but was known in a Latin version from Late Antiquity all through the Middle Ages, and thus exercised a big influence on the occult tradition. In many ways it's the most interesting of the Hermetic treatises, and perhaps belongs to a parallel but slightly different tradition, along with the Emerald Tablet, which also seems to fit into this extra-Corpus tradition, and appeared first not in Greek but Arabic.

The Aesculapius says that "the world is good" and that matter and spirit are radically related (if not actually "one thing"). The practical application of this unity of being takes the form of an actual recipe for creating a living idol, a material image imbued and even identified with the deity or spirit it represents. The method is related to the ancient Egyptian ritual of "opening the mouth" of a sacred statue.²

We needn't go into details here. The method for making a deity "into" an image or statue is also fully explained in Indian Tantra, which considers such a procedure necessary for effective puja or worship. Not only the image is thus imbued, but also the yantra or geomantic "body" of the deity, as well as the mantra or sonic body. I suspect that the Greco-Egyptian and Indian traditions are not just structurally but also historically related. (See Thomas McEvilly, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*.)

Finally we should consider the cultic practice around the texts called the Chaldean Oracles. "Theurgy," deriving both from ancient magic and Neoplatonism, is a form of occult ritual in which deities are evoked in person through invocations, incense, music, synesthetic aesthetics and living idols. Charles Stein (see his essay in this volume) alerted me to a fascinating formula for the "telestics" of constructing an efficacious statuette of Hekate, goddess of occultism, in the Oracles. The figure is molded of flour, Syrian rue (*Pergamum harmala*) and the bodies of certain "lizards." Then... one eats the statue.

Now, *harmala* contains *harmaline*, a potent hallucinogen

The secluded child Imams of the Hafezi-Isma'ili Fatimid Caliphate in Cairo wandered the desert alone at night haunting pyramid and sphinx

Thoth the ibis-headed, Thoth the baboon who understands the measurement of time reveals the art of unraveling or raveling image and word

Iamblichus, Horapollo, Chaldean Oracles theurgic fragments, late classical ruins obelisks looted from the land of crocodiles a garden of monsters

Bruno in *De Vinculis* says magical chains are easier to forge for the masses than for any single victim of seduction's snare

Love magic almost never works except in reverse on the magus but any Madison Avenue asshole can ensorcel millions
Hermopolis city of mummified ibises cased in silver ibis-shaped reliquaries frees itself from the image through the image in an instant of jubilation

floating free in time like a flying suitcase seen in the clouds like some dubious Jerusalem the emerald city of Hermes Trismegistus re-appears in Upstate New York

Palm trees pyramids and cut-out Moon Caliph Hakim and a bowl of green jelly Gérard de Nerval and his slave girl Col. Lane and the dancing boys

A Moorish Orthodox extravaganza "What Did These Great Men Have in Common?" Why are those dervishes howling outside the Grand Hotel?

HooDoo mail-order Teach Yourself Hieroglyphics theory of silence, hermetic critique Top Secret: Destroy Before Reading widespread literacy eliminates mystique

Egyptomania, neo-pagan delirium Theory finds itself deep in shit You could be a painted Anglo-Catholic idol I could be Wandering Bishop to

depicted and evoked. Bruno believed it, and Pico, and Marsilio. Is it magic? psychology? or metaphysics? Who cares! It works! The penny for the bun.

The Horos makes an exception of course for the book which it calls an "animate icon." Charming phrase. The book allows freedom of imagination and lets us dream our own illustrations. Unlike a picture it unchains imagination or so Iconoclasts say.

I however am not convinced that writing's the body of god. Shamans hearing of the Bible or the Koran like to say that they too once had a Book but the spirits were jealous and took it back because it enabled the shamans to be as gods. I can't guess what it means to write against writing. Original ideology in itself cruel instrumentality of reason.

Man of the Three Letters Hermes the Thief, Eleggua the doorway god language alone is both communication and the end of communication. Writing then exacerbates language's inherent drift toward breakdown of presence, toward death. All writing is hieroglyphic therefore image therefore seduction. Write or be written. The Barbarians are a kind of solution as Ibn Khaldun pointed out whoever burned the Library at Alexandria saved Antiquity from suffocation

Whoever learns to read hieroglyphs could also learn to write them projective semiotics - text as spell sarcophagus of disembodied will

I heard Napoleon was initiated inside the Pyramid of Cheops they say Napoleon wrote a Book of Dreams

Noble Drew Ali, black American prophet circus magician, railway porter initiated in the Pyramid, founded Moorish Science Temple Newark 1913

(identified by my old friends D. Flattery and M. Schwarz as the haoma or Soma of the ancient Zoroastrians); the same chemical appears along with DMT in the South American shamanic brew yagé (ayahuasca). "Lizard" probably means salamander, the alchemical embodiment of the Element Fire, actually not a reptile but an amphibian, although ancient authors made no such distinction. Salamandrine, the active ingredient of this creature's "toxin," is also an entheogen. Possibly it "activates" the harmaline in the rue. In any case eating the statue would doubtlessly precipitate a full-blown psychedelic experience.

The gist of all this can be summed up by the assertion that the idol "is" or "contains" essentially the indwelling spiritus. By extension we can argue that any image is not merely a representation but an ontological presence, or at least that there exists an essential relation between the image and its "original." Like a voodoo doll, the image is magically connected to what it represents — it is not a melancholy allegory but a symbol that both is and represents what it is. Without this existential connexion the image cannot be an object of contemplation or desire. Without the magic chain there would exist no shared existence between seer and seen; with it, there exists an occult identity. This holds true whether we consider a verbal image, as in poetry, or a visual image (or even a musical or aromatic image). A combination of all these would prove most potent — as any alchemist or modern advertiser knows. The beholder is the beheld in some sense otherwise, all we have is empty air.

In Renaissance magic a most striking example of this magic practice can be found in the Renaissance appropriation of ancient Egyptian obelisks as "broadcast towers," so to speak, of imperial potency. The hieroglyphs literally radiated from the solar lighthouse of the obelisk and subconsciously subjected all who came within range to the magical chains of Authority- the power of the ruler. The Byzantine Iconoclasts of the 9th century appear not to have been mere vandals. (And in any case the original Vandals, those gothic

barbarians who ruled North Africa in the 5th century, weren't mere vandals either, but managed to acquire a credible degree of Hellenism and Romanitas before they vanished.) The Iconoclasts had a cogent argument against the Image, a critique which commands respect even (or especially) today.

The Iconophiles and Iconoclasts murdered and slandered each other like all ideologues, but once these historical trappings are stripped away or at least ignored, we can judge the merits of their positions by the quality of their thinking. We moderns tend toward Iconophilia and assume the Iconoclasts were ignorant bigots — in fact we idolize the Image and fail to imagine how anyone could be "against" lovely pictures and poems. But assessed objectively, I have to admit that the Iconoclasts seem to me more logical and consistent than the Iconophiles.

The Commandment against graven images was never abrogated in Christianity - it was simply ignored. At some vague time in the early centuries AD the very arguments used by pagans (such as the Emperor Julian "the Apostate," or the Neoplatonists) in favor of the Image were mysteriously adopted by Christian apologists for the Icons. Previously, the pagan statue-cults were attacked as crypto-demonic idolatry; now the Christian Icons were defined in quasi-platonic terms not as "idols" but as supports for contemplation of the divine essence. But this was exactly Julian's position!

Because god had incarnated (hulul) as Christ, so the Church Fathers proposed, the material world itself was "saved" from the Gnostic accusation that matter was inherently evil, the creation of a mad Demiurge and not of the true incorporeal God.

As a consequence of this soteriology the Fathers made a leap of logic unsupported by monotheist theology, and contended that not only was the body saved ("resurrected") but also the image of the body-primarily Christ's body (or Face, as supposedly first painted by

Iconoclastic bishops abased themselves and recanted. A stooge called Epiphanius the Archdeacon played Beria and condemned each paragraph.

His arguments were circular: icons were not "idols" because the Church had redeemed mankind from idolatry so they couldn't be idols, q.e.d. Moreover no sane person confuses the image with the essence: icons are only supports for contemplation. No one argued the other side so Epiphanius won on every point.

We're taught to consider Iconoclasts as Vandals, art-smashers, window-breakers, pissers on altars. We believe in freedom of art - even for ads using women and children as meat. The Horus however makes some telling points:

The essence of a thing is its life and its presence; the representation of a thing is itself dead.

Not that Matter is dead as the Gnostics falsely claim; the world is alive but what about man's creations? The essence of an image lies in the absence of the object depicted. A picture of a tree is a tree that isn't there: subtle blasphemy. The image fails to support the imagination but deflects it or seduces it from its object. It's not a reminder but a forgetfulness. The critique of the Image is the defense of the Imagination. The only possible icon of Christ for example would not be the portrait of his face but the Eucharist which "is" his body and blood.

For Blakeans "god" is the Imagination so you'd think we'd want to keep it unpolluted.

You don't need Byzantine theology to understand that between the thing and its fateful representation desire intrudes. Every two-bit PR flack and advertising genius knows how vincula are forged by hieroglyphic prestidigitation. According to the Corpus Hermeticum the idol can be created by magic to absorb the essence of the power

the Devil's shit.

Whoever learns to read hieroglyphics could also learn to write them projective semiotics text as spell sarcophagus of disembodied will. Anonymous, Hieroglyphica, Brooklyn 2002 -

"Nevertheless," I thought, "it is certain that these sciences are fraught with human error. The magic alphabet, the mysterious hieroglyph, have come down to us only in incomplete and distorted form, be it through the workings of time or of those who stand to profit from our ignorance; let us rediscover the lost letter or the vanished sign, let us recompose the dissonant scale, and we will gain strength in the world of the spirits." Gérard de Nerval, Aurélia ou Le Rêve et la vie (II)

"Simply standing still changes the names round about me." - G. Bruno, De imaginum, signorum, et idearum compositionae (I.1.9. "Some Ways of Fashioning & Deriving Images that Chaldean Writing Holds in Mnemosyne's Temple")

"Along with those who are from Mercury's bordering court Cupid draws near... And there is an approach into the court of Mercury the Thief, the Cutter, the Circumciser, the Mutilator, the Fleecer, the Cutpurse, the night wandering Harpy, the sneaking Sea-bird, the Man of Three Letters. Also there is a way through the evil gate into the court of the sun who has, who possesses, and who gives." *ibid.*, II.13
When the Empress Irene assumed the Regency she decided to reverse Iconoclastic policies of Leo and Constantine. Her son the crown prince dabbled in Iconoclasm; she had him blinded: an interesting punishment for one who denied the primacy of sight.

She called a Council to attack the Iconoclastic manifesto written by the late emperor Constantine V called the Horus or "limit, boundary" a word that might relate to Hermes who began his career as a pile of stones at the border of a field.
A real show trial.

St. Luke) and also those of Mary, the Saints, etc. even the form of God and the Holy Spirit could be depicted. Of course these pictures were not idols, because "no one" believed that the essence of divinity or sanctity inhered in the physical paint. Rather, the visible representation of sanctity was venerated only as a sign of an invisible essence, an anamnesis as it were, or remembrance.

Moreover, the illiterate masses, the "rustics" as the Iconophile Patriarch Nikephorus called them, needed a visual "text" (so to speak) because they could not apprehend a written one. The Iconoclasts, he implied, were elitists who cared for nothing but their own class interests.

This argument had also been used against the pagans by certain early monks and bishops who appointed themselves champions of "the People" against aristocratic polytheists. Given that Iconoclasm was propounded primarily by Emperors rather than Church hierarchs, there seems to be some validity in this charge.

Perhaps influenced to a certain degree by both Judaism and Islam, the Iconoclasts argued that the Image by definition is always meant to involve real essences, but that it cannot do so - that any attempt to re-present the divine in material form therefore becomes blasphemy. According to the Iconoclast theologians, the only valid "icon" therefore must be the Eucharist, because Christ himself called it "my body... my blood." The Eucharist in fact functions as a magical icon in the sense of the Aesculapius, a material form imbued with divine presence which must not be re-presented on pain of the sin against the Holy Ghost, the misrepresentation of divinity.

Of course the Iconoclasts did not admit that the Eucharist was "magic" - but the Protestants would later make precisely this accusation against the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. As a kind of crypto-Gnostic Dualism, Protestant theology proposed a radical break between the visible and invisible, which the Byzantine Iconoclasts had never contemplated.

It seems to me that the gist of Iconoclasm must be a defense of the Imagination against the "lie" of the Image. Images, to use modern phraseology, colonize the Imagination and limit its creativity by implanting other people's ideas about real form in our (sub)consciousness. Our imagination must be kept free in order to receive direct and spontaneous inspiration (or even revelation) about the relation between seen and unseen reality. The beauty of the Icons is irrelevant in fact, the more beautiful the more insidious.

The iconostasis, the wall or screen of images that separates the Orthodox congregation from the altar and blocks off their view of the Eucharistic mysteries, can thus be seen as analogous to the modern screen of television or the computer it mediates between viewer and reality, it separates rather than unifies consciousness and essence. Here is the crux of vexation. The Horus, the title of the only surviving Iconoclastic text, means "definition," but it could also be taken to signify a border or boundary that alienates the worshipper from the worshipped or the soul from nature. This text could now be secularized and reinterpreted as a profound critique of the screen.

Iconoclasm exempted two kinds of imagery from its ban. The first was the Book, specifically of course scripture, but by extension the written word in general. Writing can be called a slow means of generating images, and therefore a support for the Imagination, whereas pictures by contrast are fast (almost instantaneous) assaults on the Imagination and therefore comparatively dangerous to our autonomy. (We might compare them to Slow Food vs Fast Food!) Writing is obviously not as "good" as "speech acts," and even language itself lacks perfect objectivity - which perhaps could only be achieved by telepathy, quod absurdum est. But modern media and especially Information Technology actually constitute artificial telepathy and hence a diabolic parody of true - communicativity. To some degree this "bad" aspect of screenal culture is prefigured by Icon. Print technology or even writing is still technology, and thus culpable from a strict Luddite or Primitivist perspective - nevertheless

a defense of the Book appears poignantly relevant to us here and now, relative to the tyranny of the totalitarian pictorial Image.

M.-J. Mondzain points out (in Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imagination*, 2005) that the second exemption from Iconoclastic denunciation of the Image privileges the image of the Emperor. She sees the Iconoclastic controversy as a political power struggle between Church and State for control of the "economy," a term that in Byzantine Greek seems to have been hugely polysemous, including the household, the larger economy, the relations of power, and even the relations amongst the three Persons of the Trinity. The image of the Emperor was to be propagated on coins-thus replacing the image of Christ on Icons.³ Here I'm reminded of my visit to Libya in the late 90s. In general the image was totally from public space - with one big exception. Col. Qaddafi's image was ubiquitous, on huge bill-boards, each one showing a different persona: the military dandy in epaulettes and gold frogging; the Shaykh of the Desert in flowing robes; the Italianesque gent in trim suit; etc., etc.

Certainly we can detect a major flaw in the Iconoclastic position: a disastrous inconsistency and hypocrisy. An Arab poet (al-Mutannabi, I think) once said, "Curses on the coin, that two-faced hypocrite!"

The two faces of a coin cannot be seen simultaneously, giving it a suspect air of skullduggery. At first it seems our friend, our wealth, but then it betrays us by leaving us, either as expenditure or debt. Money always stabs us in the back. The first coins sported religious images e.g., the sacred bull (hence the word "pecuniary" from pecus, cattle as commodity currency), or the owl of Athena (which is still hiding on the U.S. one-dollar bill). The illusory sanctity of the coin is then appropriated by the King, who takes over the obverse, leaving the reverse to some god or temple, and thus setting up an implicit subconscious identification of royalty and divinity — as in - the "divine right of kings." And one embittered Iconoclast is supposed to have exclaimed, "Satan doesn't need icons anymore he's got coins!" As the old mother of an Italian anarchist friend of mine used to say, money is