

Introduction

Secrets of Immanence

In his eulogy for Gilles Deleuze in 1995, “I’ll Have to Wander All Alone,” Jacques Derrida suggested that there was still something secret in Deleuze’s thought, something not yet understood. Derrida writes, “I will continue to begin again to read Gilles Deleuze in order to learn, and I’ll have to wander all alone in this long conversation that we were supposed to have together. My first question, I think, would have concerned Artaud, his interpretation of the ‘body without organs,’ and the word ‘immanence’ on which he always insisted, in order to make him or let him say something that no doubt still remains secret to us.”¹

In his inspired madness, Antonin Artaud envisioned the organs of the human body as the “judgments of God,” as pinions and philters engineered by a jealous and vindictive divinity to inhibit movement, energy, and lines of new life.² The decadence and debilitation of twentieth-century Western culture were, for Artaud, linked directly to such judgments, and to the technoscientific apparatus—military, industrial, nutritional, and hygienic—continuously marshaled in the name of God and order to stultify the human body. Artaud’s theatre of cruelty was designed to disturb this docile creature, to shock and shatter its organs, and to force the body to react otherwise than in accordance with the habitual limits of sense and sensibility. As he wrote, “when

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you have made him a body without organs, / then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions / and restored to him his true freedom.”³ For Artaud, humanity possessed a “body without organs,” a subtle body accessible at the extremes of experience—in suffering, delirium, synesthesia, and ecstatic states. What do such experiences have to do with philosophy, and with Deleuze’s philosophy of immanence in particular, about which Derrida insisted something has continued to remain secret?

The term “immanence” has several interlinked meanings in Deleuze’s work.⁴ In one sense, immanence functions in his work as a kind of meta-philosophical axiom, an injunction to philosophize from a perspective according to which being is never to be conceived as transcendent, but as immanent to thought. What this prescription assumes is that, at least under certain conditions, thought can adequately express being; that is to say, the conditions of philosophy, for Deleuze, are those under which there is no longer any difference between thought and being. However, this does not mean, for Deleuze, that thought can adequately represent being.⁵ For Deleuze, it is only under certain intense conditions that the real is conceivable; the realization of being in thought occurs within the mind, yet paradoxically beyond its representational capacities. Put laconically, the mark of the real in thought, for Deleuze, is when the unconceivable is conceived, the insensible sensed, and the immemorial remembered. Throughout his work, Deleuze links thought to a traversal of precisely that “Body without Organs” envisioned by Artaud.⁶ Extending Artaud’s vision of a renewed sensibility into his own unique vision of thought, Deleuze argues that immanent thought, at the limit of cognitive capacity, discovers as-yet-unrealized potentials of the mind, and the body. That is to say, what connects Deleuze to Artaud is the conviction that what matters for life, and for thought, is an encounter with imperceptible forces in sensations, affections, and conceptions, and that these forces truly generate the mind, challenging the coordination of the faculties by rending the self from its habits.⁷

It is the argument of this book that the power of thought, for Deleuze, consists in a kind of initiatory ordeal. Such ordeal transpires through an immersion of the self in uncanny moments when a surprising and alluring complicity of nature and psyche is revealed. In this sense, thought, for Deleuze, is a theatre of cruelty, an agon of peculiarly intensities, leading him to speak, in many places, of a kind of direct fusion be-

tween the most literal and most spiritual senses of life (*DR*, 25). But what exactly would a “spirituality” be that could be also the most literal sense of life? And how could the work of such a stridently naturalistic and, at least on some readings, strictly materialist philosopher such as Deleuze entail the necessity of spiritual ordeal?⁸

This issue has been a source of ambivalence for contemporary philosophers in Deleuze’s wake, and increasing effort, of late, has been devoted to comprehending the sense of spiritual striving and esoteric reverie that profoundly animate Deleuze’s thought. It remains unclear precisely how to interpret and evaluate the role of spirituality within Deleuze’s system.⁹ My contention is that references to spirituality in Deleuze are neither incidental nor merely heuristic, and that, when properly appreciated, Deleuze’s unique and vital synthesis of natural and spiritual perspectives stands as a contemporary avatar of Western esoteric or “hermetic” thought, and must be understood as a contemporary, nonidentical repetition of this archaic tradition.

The hermetic tradition derives its name, and its legacy, from the figure of Hermes Trismegistus, a legendary Egyptian sage who taught that knowledge of the cosmos could be the engine of profound spiritual transformation, enlightenment, and liberation. The *Corpus Hermeticum*, a third-century collection of Alexandrian Greek texts purported to be a record of Hermes’s teachings, offers a holistic vision in which the cognitive cannot be sundered from the affective any more than can the natural from the spiritual, and where any genuine increase in knowledge is tantamount to a transformation of the self. The most famous document of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Tabula Smaradigna* (Emerald Tablet), teaches that materiality and spirituality are profoundly united, and that life itself is a process of theandric regeneration in which the nature of the divine is both discovered and produced in an unfolding of personal and cosmic, evolutionary and historical time: “As above, so below.” In short, hermetic thought identifies the very process of natural life with a manifestation of encosmic divinity. In this tradition, there is no clear distinction between the rational and the spiritual; philosophical speculation is viewed as an attempt to explicate transcendental structures common to natural and spiritual realms.¹⁰ For these reasons, and for others soon to be explored, Deleuze’s insistence upon the nature of thought as spiritual ordeal, as a transformative encounter with nature, is clearly an avatar of the hermetic tradition.

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The principles of nearly all strands of Western esotericism can be traced back to the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus. As Christianity and Judaism began to coalesce unified sets of doctrines and practices, other currents of thought within the late Roman Empire—not only Jewish or Christian, but also Neoplatonic and pagan—developed syntheses of near-eastern and Egyptian wisdom traditions with classical Greek philosophy. Within this milieu an Alexandrian current produced a set of writings that become known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This collection of texts purports to be an ancient record of the teachings of a certain “Hermes” to his disciples (and of Hermes’s protégés to other students). Although Hermes is presented as an archaic hierophant, Garth Fowden and others have shown that this figure, whom the Renaissance revered as “Thrice-Greatest Hermes,” was a second-century conflation of the Greek Hermes and the Egyptian Thoth, the unique product of a distinctly Alexandrian spiritual imagination.¹¹ The *Corpus Hermeticum* contains parallels to both Jewish and Christian religious ideas, as well as to concepts in Gnostic and Neoplatonic philosophy. This is part of why the texts, when they were recovered from the Medici trove of Byzantine manuscripts and translated by Marsilio Ficino, were considered an exceedingly ancient record of “Aegiptian” wisdom. Hermes himself was seen by Renaissance thinkers as an important precursor to the wisdom of Moses, Plato, and Christianity. In 1614 Isaac Casaubon demonstrated that the vocabulary and style of the texts was too recent to be a product of Pharaonic Egypt, but Fowden and others have argued that there is more continuity in the texts with ancient Egypt than Casaubon realized.¹²

The distinctly Egyptian spirituality maintained in these texts, although they were written in Greek and presented as “reports” of conversations between Hermes and his adepts, indicates that Egyptians, rather than Alexandrian Greeks, wrote the texts. The texts seem to stand, Fowden contends, for a renegade and apocalyptic spirit in Egypt. At one point in the *Corpus*, there is even a bloodstained prophecy hinting that Rome will one day fall, and that Egypt’s ancient religious and political prerogative will then be restored.¹³ This restoration is presented as a renewal of an “enchanted” cosmos, in which humans will once again be able to commune freely and directly with the divine through intimate relations with nature. In the meantime, and in anticipation of this immanent eschaton, Hermes’s own teachings are intended to combat

the nihilism of the late antique age with instructions on how to escape the powers of fate, perform alchemical transformations, and renew the world and the self through theurgic ritual.

Because of the wide circulation of the texts, their anonymous authorship, and the correspondences between their teachings and those of Jewish, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, and early Christian sects, the *Corpus Hermeticum* became part of the fabric of syncretistic late antique thought. The texts were probably widely read by cultured Greeks as well as by the marginalized Alexandrian noncitizens whose spiritual and political desire they more clearly express (as evidenced especially in their valorization of “low” magic and sorcery, and instructions for alchemical operations). One of the most fascinating aspects of the story of hermeticism is that, although the Western esotericism that emerged from its inspiration became largely the prerogative and practice of cultured elites (such as Ficino, the Freemasons, and the Order of the Golden Dawn), the roots of Western esotericism itself lie in a kind of eclectic, bastard, and nomadic spirituality, one without pure origin or urtext, situated at the crossroads of competing civilizations and conflicting orthodoxies. This point will be particularly important in connection with Deleuze’s own affirmation of the spiritual significance of lower, bastard, minor, and nomadic races, and the power they have to articulate the utopian and eschatological contours of immanent thought (*WIP*, 109).

Deleuze’s work constantly recapitulates hermetic themes, and can be placed within a series of post-Kantian romantic thinkers critical of the sterility of Enlightenment reason who found inspiration in the Renaissance revival of hermetic tradition.¹⁴ For both Deleuze and the hermetic tradition generally, certain intense, mantic, initiatory, ascetic, and transformative practices are necessary for thought as much as for meditational or visionary experience. Conversely, for both Deleuze and hermeticism, authentic thought is identified, beyond mere accumulation of cognitions, with an expansion of the mind’s ability to endure the intense modes of perception and communication necessary for psychic reintegration and cosmic renewal. Thought in this way might be defined, for Deleuze as for the tradition, as a regenerative principle of natural and social development.

However, it should be said at the outset that situating Deleuze directly in the hermetic tradition is a somewhat complex affair. Deleuze is a post-Kantian thinker removed by time and cultural circumstance from

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the premodern ethos of hermeticism. Furthermore, Deleuze's interest in hermetic themes appears as a subtle motif whose implications need careful unfolding. Even more challenging is the fact that Deleuze's own contemporary take on hermeticism is a departure from, as much as an extension of, traditional patterns of spiritual ordeal. Perhaps most challenging of all is the general academic-philosophical prejudice against the threatening proximity of intuitive, mystical, or even simply more emotional modes of mind to the cold calculations of pure reason, especially when such calculations appear in principle to be open, democratic, and formally unimpeachable in contrast with the dark and esoteric yearnings expressed in the gnomic pronouncements of initiates. To read Deleuze in relation to the hermetic tradition, therefore, requires several stages of exegesis and argumentation.

I attempt to clarify Deleuze's peculiar take on the history of modern philosophy and his insistence that modern philosophy, despite its extreme sobriety and skepticism, represents a distinctly experimental usage of mind (chapter 1, "Philosophical Modernity and Experimental Imperative"). Once it is clear how and in what sense Deleuze reads modern thought as experimental, I then attempt to demonstrate how Deleuze's own experimental ethos echoes a premodern philosophical tradition that integrated spirituality into the practice of dialectic and critical reflection: Neoplatonism, from Plotinus to the Renaissance (chapter 2, "Dark Precursors: The Hermetic Tradition"). The particular strand of Neoplatonic thought that interests Deleuze is closely tied to the hermetic tradition, and it is out of this hermetic strand of Neoplatonic thought that Deleuze's conception of immanence in philosophy emerges. Once this groundwork is established, it becomes possible to trace the contours of hermeticism within Deleuze's systematic thought.

This tracing begins with Deleuze's lifelong interest in the power of symbols, highlighting the enduring importance, for his overall system, of approaches to knowledge (both theoretical and practical) that attempt to integrate body and mind, scientific research and spiritual insight (chapter 3, "The Force of Symbols: Deleuze and the Esoteric Sign"). From here it becomes possible to see how a hermetic impulse to unite thought with affective, corporeal, and spiritual transformation plays out across Deleuze's mature work. I then argue that Deleuze's systematic project of "overturning Platonism" should be read as a contemporary hermetic effort to resituate philosophical speculation within

an experimental exploration of nature (chapter 4, “The Overturning of Platonism”).

Deleuze’s clearest model for this project, and for thought as a contemporary hermeticism, derives from the work of art. Chapter 5, “Becoming Cosmic,” outlines how reflection on certain artistic procedures leads Deleuze to develop a unique vision of philosophical practice and its relations to both science and art. Chapter 6, “The Politics of Sorcery,” examines Deleuze and Guattari’s regard for specific ritual practices, in particular sorcery and therapeutic healing rituals. I argue that Deleuze and Guattari take such practices not as archaic vestiges, but as models of contemporary transformative practice. In chapter 7, “The Future of Belief,” I address some of the major objections to Deleuzian and Deleuzo-Guattarian spirituality, and attempt to respond to a series of modern misgivings about the contamination of rationality by affective and perceptual intensities, and by spiritual ordeal. My intent here is to at least challenge presumptive suspicion against anything other than purely rational reflection—a suspicion that, despite the many critiques of pure reason since Kant, continues to block appreciation for affective and putatively spiritual modes of apprehension.

The stakes of this last contention, as I see them, go beyond debates over the corpus of Gilles Deleuze. Despite vast evidence that many Western philosophers—both ancient and modern—have been invested in some sort of spirituality (be it theurgical, thaumaturgical, mystical, alchemical, kabalistic, or theosophical), thinkers explicit about their hermetic or esoteric proclivities have always been positioned as bastard and nomadic outliers of philosophy, heretical outcasts of theology, or as reactionaries interfering with the full realization of reason, enlightenment, and progressive politics.

In making explicit the importance of hermeticism in Deleuze’s thought, I am inviting the charge that Deleuze was embroiled in that morass of obscurantism and irrationalism Freud once called “the black mud tide of occultism.”¹⁵ As a systematic body of work, Deleuze’s thought creatively repeats the interests of previous philosophers in the metaphysical and epistemological valence of phenomena that have been marginalized as uncanny, paranormal, occult, and even supernatural. Nested within esoteric insights, Deleuze’s work trades on a foreign language within the language of modern philosophy, a language of intense, intuitive, and spiritual apprehensions that have, for the most

part, been placed on the outside of reason and beyond the pale of enlightened, progressive, and reasonable discourse. It is perhaps this feature that continues to mark the work of this major twentieth-century thinker as minor.¹⁶

In the face of contemporary ambivalence over the validity and significance of esoteric, let alone “occult,” apprehensions of nature and mind, the political risk of this reading should be immediately apparent. Reading Deleuze as hermetic in any sense may force a departure from received presuppositions—modern, secular, or merely academic—about what rightfully counts as thought. I take that risk in part because I am convinced that the marginalization of hermetic traditions, and the suspicion and contempt in which they are still held by much of contemporary thought, constitutes a symptomatic repression of the complexity of both the history of modern philosophy and the stakes of contemporary culture, which is, from the internet to the cinema, completely obsessed with magic and with the occult.

However, I can of course only speak for my own convictions that this spiritual material can and must be addressed, at least here, through the modest step of taking Deleuze’s spiritual debts to the hermetic tradition seriously. I do this by arguing for three interlinked claims: that Deleuze’s systematic thought is not fully comprehensible without situating it within the hermetic tradition; that Deleuze’s writings make a subtle yet distinctive contribution to contemporary hermetic knowledge and practice; and that the experimental stakes of modern and contemporary philosophy, as Deleuze conceived them, call for a revision and extension of the perennial hermetic project: the proliferation, differentiation, and nonidentical repetition of cosmic processes of regeneration and renewal.

What is at stake for Deleuze in thought—and at stake in this book—is ultimately a political issue. Indicating the contours of a renewed spirituality of thought and a new vision of the mutual intercalation of material and spiritual forces is part of an attempt to fulfill the task of philosophy in late capitalism, a task Deleuze himself characterized as the renewal of “belief in the world” (C2, 188). My particular extension of this task, by pushing Deleuze further in the direction of his own hermeticism, is motivated by the conviction that to challenge the all-pervasive magic of that confluence of desire and power Isabelle Stengers once described as the great “capitalist sorcery,” requires an exceedingly sober attempt to

countenance the aspects of social and natural reality thus far confined to the gnostic dictates of inchoate spiritual gurus on the one hand, and to the black arts of the industrial-entertainment complex on the other. Thinking more stridently through the spiritual dimensions of Deleuze's work may enable us to forge new alternatives to the sinister perversions of belief in capital times, as well as to usher in a more concrete and complex sense of how to engender new relations between knowledge, power, and the spiritual forces of desire.