THE WAY OF THE SWORD
Christianity, Fascism, and the Folk Magic of Black metal

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We have discovered our way
—Mayhem

In the article “Remain True to the Earth!”: Remarks on the Politics of Black Metal,” Benjamin Noys criticizes what he refers to as the “embarrassing archaic fascist nostalgia” in some black metal. It is true that the basic symbolism of black metal is suggestive of a spiritual process, sometimes represented as lycanthropy, which takes as its point of departure a rejection of modern society and a yearning for an ancient mythological past. In some instances this romantic mythology manifests as fascism, but a closer look at the “folk magic” of black metal reveals that the psychology of fascism represents a black metal that is incomplete, that mistakes the true meaning of this “archaic” symbolism.

By “folk magic” I mean the spiritual content of black metal as it has developed organically, one might say unconsciously, in the art form. I certainly do not mean to present it as the universal “monomyth” of black metal, but merely as one way of understanding the themes and images involved. Central to the interpretation that follows is one image in particular: the inverted cross. We shall see that the inversion of the cross is in fact its transformation into the sword, and that this initial inversion is the requisite for black metal’s folk magic. Particular attention will be paid to Mayhem's Grand Declaration of War as a case study in this symbolism. But the symbolic properties of black metal are best understood in the context of a symbolic history, the mythopoesis of which comprises the first section of this article.

In the 1970s, the earliest practitioners of Metal refined their substance from the raw rock that was their inheritance. Soon, they had discovered steel, and built lots
of motorcycles out of it. The '80s came, and the Metal-workers knew it was time to go underground, to search for natural forges in the subterranean rivers of fire, to look for rare and precious stones, for hidden things, for danger. But also to hide themselves from the eyes of God, as, it was becoming increasingly apparent, their work was witchcraft, and forbidden.

Here, beneath the earth, the first great blades were forged, and the young practitioners who wielded these blades became legends, for it was they, in their adventures through the depths of the Earth, who discovered the fires of Hell where languished the ghosts of witches and pagan heroes, and the exiled pagan gods. And these spirits initiated the practitioners into the many mysteries of Hell and Satan, teaching them the secret history, and the old ways of the ancestors. In this way, the ghosts of witches and pagan heroes and the exiled pagan gods were freed from their imprisonment in Hell by those first warriors who opened the way. From contact with these ancient spirits, and also the punk movement, the Metal movement flourished and evolved in many directions, one of these being black metal.

There are three sacred images that are essential to black metal and to the telling of this story: the feminine witch, the masculine warrior, and the androgynous goat Baphomet. The witch represents pagan spirituality and contact with the unconscious, doubly forbidden by long centuries of Christian repression and modern capitalist materialism. Baphomet represents the fertility and liberation of wildness. The warrior, or barbarian, is the forbidden spirit of war, what Scott Wilson calls a “figure for the sovereign force of Black Metal.” These are the central profaned and repressed images recovered from Hell by the earliest practitioners, and the process of their assimilation is the creation of the magic sword of black metal. As Venom sings, “Don’t burn the witch / The ways of Hell aren’t wrong.” With the reception of the magic sword, the practitioner begins his adventure as a bard of the darkness, a conduit for the aesthetic-spiritual energy that manifests in what is known as black metal.

The Christianity despised by black metal—the Christianity that, in the mythic history of pagan consciousness, conquered Europe and endeavored to destroy traditional earth-based culture and religion—relies on the repression of these images, through “witch hunts” and “scapegoating,” rituals that sanitize imperial power and society by projecting evil and guilt onto a foreign other. The cross came to symbolize this relationship towards evil—Christ died to cleanse the sins of his followers. To become a Christian, one must accept this blood sacrifice and cast one’s personal demons down into Hell and out onto the other. As for the “witch” within society, so for the “barbarian” enemy on the map.
Of course, these are not new ideas. What is important are the associations that these processes have with traditional black metal images—the witch, the barbarian, and the goat—because the magic sword described earlier, the sword wielded by the black metal practitioner, is the inverted cross, and the inversion of witch hunt psychology. The black metal practitioner accepts and embodies all that is rejected and repressed, holding high and proudly this magic sword of evil as the all-against-one of the witch hunt becomes the one-against-all of the solitary slayer or the sorcerer in his tower.

In contrast to Christianity’s universalizing mission and the place of the cross as the world-center, the magic sword, the ancestral masculinity of the practitioner, is radically localizing. The sword guides the practitioner into the night and underground, to uncover the buried wisdom of the earth.

In “Remain True to the Earth!: Remarks on the Politics of Black Metal,” Benjamin Noys uses the philosophy of Sale Famine, of the band Peste Noire, as a starting point to discuss fascism in the genre. He writes:

In Famine’s cultural racism Black Metal is the reflection or expression of a national or territorial essence, a buried or obliterated ‘essence’ that must be recovered or re-articulated. At the same time this essence is always articulated with a Satanic theo-politics that blackens and corrodes what obscures this essence.⁴

Expressed thus, Famine’s theory of black metal is akin to the processes described in this essay, though we will see shortly how the two models diverge. And it is not only that Satanism “blackens and corrodes what obscures [the] essence,” but also that the essence is often contaminated with Satanism, and vice versa, as a result of the prolonged exile in Hell of the pagan gods who are this energy’s manifestation. This aesthetic-spiritual essence of the land is analogous to the buried instinct of the individual consciousness, and in black metal the search for either is bound up with the other.

Noys goes on to analyze Famine’s extreme right political philosophy in depth, describing it as a “peculiar, to say the least, nationalism, although one not quite so strange when one notes the occult strains running through Nazism, fascism, and extreme right cultures.”⁵

I have no doubt Joseph Campbell would include fascist occultism as among what he describes as “Totem, tribal, racial, and aggressively missionizing cults” that
represent only partial solutions of the psychological problem of subduing hate by love; they only partially initiate. Ego is not annihilated in them; rather, it is enlarged; instead of thinking only of himself, the individual becomes dedicated to the whole of his society. The rest of the world meanwhile is left outside the sphere of his sympathy.  

Mainstream Christianity, as Campbell acknowledges, is also within this category. No path will lead anywhere (except perhaps into servitude) without first achieving nigredo and overcoming scapegoat psychology.  

And of course, while expanding one's “sphere of sympathy” has been the traditional goal of many spiritual systems, it is obviously not the aim of black metal’s folk magic. Instead of expanding consciousness upwards and outwards to envelope everything in the Christian magic of love, the ancestral blade of black metal guides the practitioner inwards and downwards. “Clearly,” as Jung puts it, “the left-hand path does not lead upwards to the kingdom of the gods and eternal ideas, but down into natural history, into the bestial instinctive foundations of human existence.” The inverted cross, or upward sword, is rebellion, uprising, activity, manifestation of unconscious force; it is the subterranean, internal elements, fire and water, son and daughter; it is adventure, primal and ecstatic. The aesthetic-spiritual energy of the land is eternal, and so it is not a past era we are nostalgic for, it is simply the connection to this energy, the connection that has been systematically eradicated by Christianity.  

What of “right-hand” metal, exemplified by Bathory’s Twilight of the Gods, invoking the external, the righteous, sky-father and earth-mother? This type of metal is only possible after the initial discovery of the magic sword; the greater functions of Christianity (God and the Holy Mother) have been removed (or revealed as already dead), and the ancient gods have been freed from their imprisonment in Hell, ready to reclaim their ancestral thrones. The magic sword is not lost in this transition, however. It is only un-inverted when the warrior kneels before his gods, driving his blade into the earth in obeisance. While this does signify submission, it is essentially a submission to nature and, importantly, the sword remains a sword. What makes these gods different from those of Christianity is their source—rather than being imposed from above, they have been uncovered by the individual through this gnosis of the sword.  

And so what, if anything, actually separates fascist black metal from the rest? I posit that fascist 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. Their weapons will ever only be vehicles of ego, never the
magic sword of the warrior, that “sovereign aspect that will serve no master and that refuses all forms of subordination,” the magic sword that is the key of power, that unlocks the passage between worlds.

In the introduction to *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism*, Mattias Gardell explicates the basic mythology of fascism, which “[projects] the idea of a corporative nation back into legendary or mythological time, often presented as a ‘golden age,’ a time untainted by the ills of the modern world and liberated from whomever is designated the national enemy.” The mythological “past” summoned in black metal is certainly romanticized, but simultaneously, it is depicted as a brutal, cold, and bestial state. This “past” is a metaphor for “primitive” or “bestial” states of consciousness descended to in the course of black metal lycanthropy. Like the land, it is a metaphor for the wilderness of the human spirit.

Take Emperor’s *I Am the Black Wizards*. In order to “gather wisdom now lost” one must visit “eternally ancient caves.” This source of wisdom from beneath the earth has always been and always will be ancient, because its ancientness is a mythological quality rather than a reference to material history, i.e., politics. It is also worth noting that the chthonic destroyer-god (perhaps Satan) who narrates *I Am the Black Wizards* takes care to explain that there is not only no privileged time in his mythic system (“No age will escape my wrath”), but no privileged space either (“My empires has no limits / From the never ending / Mountains black, to the bottomless lakes / I am the ruler and has been for eternity’s long [sic]”).

I will end with a brief examination of Mayhem’s *Grand Declaration of War*. The album is regarded by many purists as a failed experiment, but in my opinion it is not only a beautiful work of art, but, like many great works of Metal, a fascinating occult document as well. Though truly it deserves a more comprehensive analysis than what follows, I think this will suffice as a brief illustration of the points of this essay.

It opens with the song “A Grand Declaration of War,” which establishes the album’s musical atmosphere—spiraling, evocative guitar work that is equally stark and romantic, that pauses and pounces and rends like a lion. Military-style snare rolls emerge to accompany the lyrical declaration itself:

We have discovered our way . . . we know the road
We have found the way out of millennia of labyrinth

Who is this “we” being invoked right at the start? As we shall see, it is of course the “army” of black metal “warriors.” “The warrior is a metaphor, a character,” not any specific person, but in the work the warrior is invoked, and we should
understand the persona of *Grand Declaration* to be such a character, our psycho-pomp for the journey that follows.\textsuperscript{12}

The declaration continues: “There was a thunderstorm in our air / The nature which we are grew dark.”\textsuperscript{13} Lightning is the masculine energy of the cosmos that awakens the internal fire, but the “thunderstorm” is also the chaos and darkness of modernity. The warrior has “found the way out of millennia of labyrinth,” survived throughout history now to be freshly invoked by black metal in this age of darkness. Or is it the opposite, the practitioner who has discovered “the way” of the warrior? But now to the heart of the declaration:

\begin{quote}
We declare not peace but WAR  
We shall be unleashed now  
From darkness we create light  
Beware decaying humans  
For we shall destroy  
We are the way of millenniums to come\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

In the following song, “In the Lies Where Upon You Lay,” the persona continues to define himself and the aspect of the warrior: “We the hunters of the hollow hills . . . We the soul of the earth.”\textsuperscript{15} As we have already discussed, black metal seeks the buried, forgotten, profaned, or forbidden spiritual energy of the land, and it is the warrior (or the “hunter,” an even more primal vision of masculinity) who, not only has access to this energy, but embodies it.

\begin{quote}
Into the night we must go, into the darkest abyss  
To a level of consciousness unknown to Christendom  
We want life, we crush the dream of heaven  
As we bring the blade down, one swift move  
We are the chosen ones, chosen by will to life.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

This is the way to “awaken the beast within.” These words, so lucid and powerful, almost require no commentary. But the magic blade does appear here for the first time, and we see it not only as a weapon capable of destroying illusions, but as an embodiment of the warrior’s vitality. “You lifeliars crawl on your bended knees / As you finally die, you will eventually have lost more / By not living by the sword than what you lose in death.” The sword is life—these “lifeliars,” “priests,” the warrior’s spiritual enemies, were already dead. Their blood is “repulsive,” whereas the warrior’s blood beats with the “pulse of omnipotent strength” because it is synchronized with the earth. “The blood of others is of a colder substance and
taste,” says the warrior, “Therefore I must spill and serve / The blood that in me runs vibrant.”

Further into the album, in the song “A View From Nihil (Part I),” the military snare rolls return with this pronouncement:

In the frost of the dying minds
of western society I recreate
It will be the resurrection
Of the brotherhood of holy death
In the year of the Holy Roman Empire
Of night times to come and last
The day of which I shall
Lay my sword upon your throats
Upon the mighty warriors
Of the land of northern regions.

The “brotherhood of holy death,” the same “army of pureness” referenced earlier, placed “behind the burning lake,” is resurrected, as in, brought out from its exile in Hell and back into the “dying minds of western society.” “A View From Nihil (Part I)” ends with a reaffirmation of the spiritual rather than ethnic nature of the warrior’s brotherhood: “And so I greet those who still have eyes to observe and see / And who still have courage to break through into the dying light.” The “chosen ones” of Grand Declaration of War are not a racial elite, they are the initiates of the warrior’s way, those who seek the “dying light,” which has been forgotten and polluted in this late age of the earth. If we were to continue our analysis of the album, however, we would see this light renewed, as the warrior promised at the very beginning, through a process he calls his “reconstruction from deconstruction.”

Noys asks “Can we recuperate the staging of the ‘bare noise and pulse of the modern world’ as the nihilist critique of what Badiou calls ‘capitalo-parliamentarianism’ without the embarrassing archaic fascist nostalgia?” The rather obvious answer is yes: It’s called punk. According to Jung:

The symbolism of the rites of renewal . . . points far beyond the merely archaic and infantile to man’s innate psychic disposition, which is the result and deposit of all ancestral life right down to the animal level—hence the ancestor and animal symbolism. The rites are attempts to abolish the separation between the conscious mind and the unconscious, the real source of
life, and to bring about a reunion of the individual with the native soil of his inherited, instinctive make-up.21

Black metal is the “resurrection of the brotherhood of holy death,” the summoning of the warrior archetype and the ancestral sword, the reconnection with a mythological heritage that is not a “Golden Age” of material history but a living spiritual fact of the here and now. It is no coincidence that fascists use similar or identical images and myths—it is incredibly powerful magic, and its associations with war and masculinity can make it especially useful for convincing young men to kill each other. Black metal, however, is the true meaning of this ancestral magic, where “blood,” “native soil,” and the sword are not mere flags for the superficial mythologies of racism; they are the path through which “we awaken the beast within.”

NOTES
4 Noys, “‘Remain True to the Earth!’,” Hideous Gnosis, 108.
5 Noys, “‘Remain True to the Earth!’,” Hideous Gnosis, 112.
8 Wilson, “BAsoleus philosoPHOrum METaloricum,” 40.
13 Encyclopaedia Metallum, “Mayhem, Grand Declaration of War.”
14 Encyclopaedia Metallum, “Mayhem, Grand Declaration of War.”
15 Encyclopaedia Metallum, “Mayhem, Grand Declaration of War.”
16 Encyclopaedia Metallum, “Mayhem, Grand Declaration of War.”
17 Encyclopaedia Metallum, “Mayhem, Grand Declaration of War.”
18 Encyclopaedia Metallum, “Mayhem, Grand Declaration of War.”
19 Encyclopaedia Metallum, “Mayhem, Grand Declaration of War.”