

Appearance, Disappearance and Ouroboros

Beginning thoughts on magic expression as collapsing subject/object phenomena.

Text by Organe de Concrétisation de Recherches (OCR): Alice D. Peinado, Caroline Hancock, Kapwani Kiwanga, Sam Basu. 2013 All images, Alice Peinado.

Two Heroes in Time

What follows is an account of a most amazing transmutation of two entities; the May Queen, and the Green Man. Their story is one that spans centuries and continents. One can, no doubt, expect a few costume and set changes along the way.

For us the story begins in what is known today as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, on the first day of the month of May in a year undetermined yet long before a wave of 7th century Christianity imposed itself on the land's population. On this day the Sun reached the midpoint in its progress between the spring equinox and summer solstice. Summer had begun.

To best understand what follows let me set the stage of our story some hours earlier on the last night of April. Bonfires are lit and raucous merry making abounds. Young people jump over the fires and share food cooked therein. The Celtic called this celebration *Beltane*, the Germanic *Walpurgis Nacht* linked with the coming of spring rather than summer. In both these places, and others in the northern hemisphere, it was a night associated with youth and fertility. It was a time of renewal. As with most agrarian societies, this day of festivities coincided with the completion of seeding growth; sustenance would come later. To help the future success of the crops, groups would pay respect to the primordial forces of fecundity.

Enter the May Queen, a young woman chosen from her community for her purity. Draped in a white gown she is adorned with a crown of flowers and holds the place of honour in the celebrations, often leading the procession of youthful gaiety. It is she who is the living symbol of fruitfulness; the communities' guarantee of persistence.

The Green Man; the wild bush, half-tree/half-man, sprouts oak leaves and branches. Although he is present all year long chiselled in the stone of sacred places, it is only on this first of May eve that he comes alive and partakes in the dances amongst the merry makers. He is allied with trees and the triumph of life over winter. His green leaves testimony to the renewal of life. Sometimes the fire, a sacrificial act to ensure the death of winter and secure the fruits of summer, consumes him. There is no need to mourn his demise for his resurrection is perennial, like that of the seasons.

Despite the Christianisation of Europe, and the proselytistic disapproval of these so-called pagan celebrations, the Green Man continued to appear throughout the year carved in the stone of churches and abbeys throughout the eras of the land's conversion. In the 16th -17th century the Green Man finds himself in England. He adopts an entirely human form and becomes a craftsman and guild member. He leaves the woods for a workshop. His wooden limbs are transformed into elaborate garlands that are sported but once a year when he appears in May Day parades. He starts to go by the name Jack-in-the-Green and as time progresses the garlands become a large costume of

foliage that cover him from head to knee. The rest of the year he was part of a carpenter's guild and exercised his trade. Each year Jack-in-the-Green would find his figure recast in a fierce competition between duelling work guilds to give their Jack-in-the-Green the most elaborate form as a living sculpture.

And of our May Queen? She too had to adjust to new circumstances. She changed her name to Mary. The Catholic Church brought her new clothes, robes of red and white under a cape of blue, but the May Queen was permitted to keep her flower crown. With the pomp of any regal crowning she was received with candles and adoring songs. She continued to parade but after each pageant she ended back in the alcove of a church. The bonfires were no longer. She had been transformed from flesh and blood to stone and wood; an inanimate sculpture. As if to comfort the Queen in her loss, songs were sung to remind her that her transformation was only superficial.

*Bring flowers of the rarest
bring blossoms the fairest,
from garden and woodland and hillside and dale;
our full hearts are swelling,
our glad voices telling
the praise of the loveliest flower of the vale! ...ⁱ*

She looked on her old dancing companion, the Green Man, and his new life as Jack-in-the-Green with envy for he was now a man all year and processional sculpture but once a year. Their roles had changed. She took solace in the fact that as opposed to one day of glory in May, by the 16th century she had gained a whole month of devotion.

Mary found it hard to renounce her former identity as the May Queen and struggled to accept an iconic existence when her old friend had achieved year-long embodiment whilst preserving a frolic in May. So she too began to appear in England's May parades when for but one day she would take on the flesh of a woman; she would parade and be crowned. When the festivities were over she'd again return to her vessel of Christian wood or stone.

By the beginning of the 19th century Jack was in danger of losing the one day of carnival when he could be his primal self. The Victorian era's taste for restraint disapproved of the coarse and anarchic nature of popular May parades. At the same time the guild system's influence on trade was dissolving and being replaced by free trade. In this economic climate Jack, like many former artisans, sought employment in the emerging manufacturing industries that did not function with guild secrets and techniques but standardised methods controlled by corporations.

When the depression of the 1820s hit, Jack decided it was time to try his luck across the Atlantic. While Jack-in-the-Green had been whittling away wood in his English guild, his brother-in-law had travelled to the former British colony in America and had made a good life; others had sent similar news home.

Accordingly, Jack underwent another transformation on the ship over and when he lands in New York he is an adolescent again. He gets work in a factory and settles into his new American identity.

Our evergreen Jack never dies and although he misses the merry making of England, in May he busies himself with improving his daily working life. In 1886 we find Jack in Chicago. It is Tuesday May 04. Jack is in a crowd of people rallying for the 8-hour workday. A bomb goes off. The police fire on the crowd. Chicago's Haymarket becomes the deathbed of a number of protestors and police alike. News of this affair quickly spreads around the globe. Three years later in Paris, the Second International calls for an international protest to commemorate the event and rally for the 8-hour workday. Declared as International Workers Day, May 1st would again grow to be a day of importance for our Jack.

Not long after, our May Queen, desperately missing her old life, abandons her Mary vessel definitively. The divested statues, and paintings continue to evoke adoration from their Christian adherents despite her absence. The Queen of fertility craved the joy and power of May 1st dancing and so sought out human form again. In her latest female form she is rumoured to be the favourite dance partner of Emma Goldman. Both women knowing the vital importance of both dance and revolution, they set New York dance floors aflame.

The May Queen, like our Green Man, was pleased to see the 1st of May revered again. The May Queen could not help but notice that the importance of this date to pre-Christian farmers and now to modern new-world factory workers contained a comforting continuity. The May Queen was no longer the only one to be praised on the feast day of May the 1st and the words of her serenade had evolved. The songs sung where now labour union chants.

That's the Rebel Girl, that's the Rebel Girl!
To the working class she's a precious pearl.
She brings courage, pride and joy
To the fighting Rebel Boy;
We've had girls before, we need some more
In the Industrial Workers of the World,
For its great to fight for freedom
With a Rebel Girl.

- "The Rebel Girl", Joe Hill 1916, Little Red Songbook

Some time passes when one day the May Queen and Green Man find they are being evoked back from across the sea whence they had came. They allow themselves to be carried back along the travel lines of over a century passed. A new energy had been boiling in the British Isles for some time; a revival of mythology and folklore. In disparate places and through different means a resuscitating breath had been blown into fallowed ways. Some chose literature as in the Celtic Twilight, others choose mythography as in the Cambridge Ritualists, while others still were committed to reviving ritual through Celtic Reconstructionist Paganism as a way to revalue local tradition. Some were more urgent and global in their approach and sought to find links with traditions further afield and choose a form of Neo-Paganism. The May Queen and

Green Man found they were recalled to be their former selves, the transformative energy of nature.

On April 30, 1988 they both travel to Carlton Hill in Edinburgh, Scotland where they embark on a public spectacle: the first Beltane Fire Festival. The organisers of the celebration are a *community of interest* that uses the Internet to circulate their revival enthusiasm and remain connected. This contemporary community breathed flame on the sleeping coals of the ancient bonfire and moulded a new spectacle employing myth and drama from diverse cultures and literary sources. The event celebrated the cyclical turn from spring to summer. The Green Man was the embodiment of earth; death and rebirth; the old giving way to the new. For the fire festival the Green Man and the May Queen had taken on body paint; their costumes were interpretations of their former selves. Yet throughout space and time, shape-shifting and context-mutating our heroes were able to sustain the transformative force of public play. And so it was that May 1st and its eve survived throughout time as a moment to both generate community and ensure its persistence through renewal.

From E to Sⁱⁱ

“Mr Burroughs, you mentioned the danger that we present to ourselves, and maybe to the larger cosmos. Have you had any good ideas for escaping from that danger?”

“Ah, no.”

“Really? In your books sometimes it seems like there are suggestions.”

“Naturally. (Timothy) Leary says, and I certainly agree with him, that the next step is to go into space and leave the planet, but we are not there yet.”

“Do you think there are any possibilities of leaving the planet, maybe in some un-bodily kind of way?”

“Ah, yes. (I have a note on this here:) Here we have an artefact weighing about 170 pounds that cannot exist outside of a very specialised environment - sort of an aqualung. And the official space programs, how do they propose to solve this? They are going to move this whole artefact, the human artefact, in its environment, from one place to another. It would not occur to them to start from the other end. Now you have an object, X (that is the human body), and you want to transport X from, say, earth to space - from E to S - and X is heavy and can only live in a whole medium. So why not alter X to reduce its weight and its dependency on its medium? That would seem a logical approach to the problem. Now this would not occur to the official programs because they accept the human artefact with all its limitations. In effect they accept the limitations imposed by Christianity; by what Crowley calls the slave gods. Now the

human body is much too dense for space conditions. We have a model to hand, and that is less dense, in fact *almost* weightless and that would be the astral or dream body. And I postulate that the function of dreams may be to prepare us for space. And that is why they are a biological necessity.”

More Sparkling Than Crystal: Ithell Colquhoun

Some of you may recall a certain splendidly intriguing painting in the Tate Collection. *Scylla* is a bathtub view of legs or mysterious mountainous terrain inviting further investigation. Perhaps sacred stones, or living beings, geysers of energy. Arousing. Sexual. Mythological, of course. Landscape and/or figurative. But also strangely abstract. The boundaries are slithery like algae or molluscs. The possible meanings (double, or rather multiple, entendres) lie in the eye of the beholder if he or she or it deigns to linger. Psychomorphology. Transmutation. Animism. Magically real and unreal at the same time. It dates from 1938 and is part of a sequence called *Méditerranée*.

As an art historian, I struggle to understand how it is still possible today in the twenty-first century to have so little widespread knowledge about extraordinarily fascinating artists who aren't Salvador Dalí for instance. Painted one year earlier, his famous *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, which puts into practice his paranoïac-critical method, similarly depicts two forms in a natural setting. Narcissus versus Scylla? A lot could be imagined.

One object and subject of research this year will be devoted to this very artist in the wild hope that one day a great museum might be devoting an exhibition to her and her dazzlingly interesting peers such as Leonora Carrington or Eileen Agar (to cite the most well known). Just a few enticing facts to make mouths water for more, and to conjure up the force to make this a reality. Ithell Colquhoun is *Scylla*'s author – just her name is sufficiently tantalising. How should one pronounce it for a start? She was born in 1906 in Shillong, Assam, India, of British parents. They returned to England when she was still a child. Of course there is a wealth of data about Colquhoun's work available as soon as one attempts to find out about her. An appetiser:

She is known to have been to the following places:

Cheltenham Ladies College
Slade School of Art in London
British School at Rome
Paris
Greece
And the realms of the occult

Tenerife
Corsica
The Château de Chemillieu in the Ain in France
Cornwall

A most simplistic description would be that she was a painter and a writer and a magician. For a time in the late 1930s she joined the Surrealist group and knew:

Paule Vézelay	E.L.T. Mesens
Gordon Onslow-Ford	Toni Del Renzio
The Mattas	Aleister Crowley
The Bretons	Man Ray to name but a few characters
Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy	

Her texts were published in magazines ranging from:

<i>The Quest</i>	<i>Soleils</i>
<i>London Bulletin</i>	<i>Fantasmagie</i>
<i>Arson</i>	<i>Prediction</i>
<i>Jazz Forum</i>	<i>Melmoth</i>

Her magical motto was Splendidior Vitro (more sparkling than crystal) and she was part of various societies:

Ordo Templi Orientis	Druidical Orders
Order of the Keltic Cross	The Theosophical Society

“Dazed by the phantasmagoria, I turned my eyes away and looked upwards to a still and solid shape towering over me. This was a worn statue, such as often grow in old and neglected gardens, antique in design without, perhaps, being very ancient, a rectangular pillar unhumanised but for a surmounting bearded head of a faun or silen, and a tail curling out of the panel furthest away from me. Glancing down at myself, I saw that I was naked except for my jewels.”
(quote from her book *The Goose of Hermogenes*, published by Peter Owen in 1961, p. 100)

Pan Subjectilism

In a breath, the bullet passes from the flashing steel nozzle across the space of the museum, sucking air behind and cutting progressively in half the distances between it and the back of the painting as it is held up to be inspected. It crashes through the dusty pine backing of the reversed painting, which splinters pushing small elements of wood through a layer of crumbling paper into the inner cavity of the painting made by the stretcher, and on to the un-primed back of the canvas. This fibrous matrix stretches, then ruptures as the cone head of the bullet passes through its weave, cracking open layers of primer, and forges on to the first layers of under-painting. The shock waves

that travel out from this impact travel down the arms of the human holding it, setting off a chain of synaptic charges which will never arrive at their destination.

When the bullet emerges on the other side, larger pieces of oil paint burst off along the ageing fissures that have accrued on its surface. The bullet hole flares open dragging with it wood, fibre, gesso and fragments of burning matter. It speeds through the remaining few centimetres of free space before touching shore on the other side. Here the cone of the bullet makes contact with the wet envelope of an eyeball, parting its salty waters before pressing in on the unsuspecting Iris. The pressure bulges the eyeball until it bursts, shooting back its jellied interior in an unfurling jet-spray that heads towards the canvas face of the painting. The bullet pushes on cracking the orbital plate like an egg and initiating a wave of compressed brain matter that will finally leave the back of the skull through a hole the size of a baby's fist.

The Appearing Church Of Rio Caribe, Venezuela.

In 1989, I travelled to Venezuela to carry out fieldwork on the development of counter---hegemonic practices among natives to the Oriental region of Venezuela during the colonial period. Primarily colonised by Capuchin missionaries at the beginning of the 17th century, this area is rich in local folklore and traditions of a religious and magical character. Several first hand accounts of the missions' development exist and the region bears witness to the extent of the missionaries' success as well as drawbacks. The missionaries travelled far and wide and were largely responsible for the submission and colonisation of Indian populations of both Carib and Arawak origin in the whole region. My aim was to follow their trace.

The path lead me to Rio Caribe, a small town located near Carupano on the Peninsula of Paria. During his fourth voyage, Christopher Columbus sighted and made landfall at Paria, not very far from today's Rio Caribe, not realising that he had finally reached the mainland, he took the place to be the exact location of the Garden of Eden. He called this land "Tierra de Gracia" and gave a detailed account of its inhabitants. The lush vegetation and beautiful landscape that lead Columbus to believe he had reached paradise still characterises the hinterland of Rio Caribe. However, today, Rio Caribe testifies to the concomitant colonial implantation of Capuchin missionaries and Spanish *encomenderos* from the late 17th and early 18th centuries throughout the region.



Historical traces of Rio Caribe's settlement by Capuchin missionaries date to the early 18th century. Carupano, the most important nearby town, was first settled in 1647. Rio Caribe was quite likely established shortly afterwards. However, the town's growth only gained in momentum in the late 19th century when a large immigration of Corsican families settled in the area. It subsequently developed into a prosperous cocoa-producing region directly linked by boat and telegraph to Bordeaux in France. Modernity reached this area via the sea and directly from Europe. Links with nearby major cities, such as Caracas, was tenuous to say the least. Yet, walking through Rio Caribe in 1989, the colonial history of the town was palpable. People in the streets, a mix of Indian, African and European descent, reminded one that this was a place where different nations came together in both peace and strife.





The town, still very colonial looking to this day, was and still is a strong centre for spirituality. It boasts a church, a chapel dedicated to St Michael Archangel and a Calvary. Its inhabitants are very proud of their heritage and will not miss the opportunity to point it out to the occasional visitor. There is a feeling you are in another world. This is also present in the streets. Women dressed in black, sitting by the doors of their houses, recall the Corsican women from whom they descend. Men stand or walk around in the heat of the day, casting their shadows on the houses' whitewashed, adobe walls. There is stillness in the air, even though the town is bustling with activity.

Rio Caribe emerges as a town out of history and yet squarely placed in historical time. Its baroque church is yet another sign of Christianity's overbearing presence. Yet the church is emblematic of the ambivalent role religion has played in this area since colonial times. As I walked across the main square of Rio Caribe, the inevitable Plaza Bolivar, I casually asked people the history of the church. A seller of empanadas, a local corn based patty filled with cheese, meat or more likely dry shark in this region, told me point blank that the church had appeared out of nowhere one day. Intrigued, I asked her when this had happened. Imperturbable, she told me to check the date on the building itself -- 1717. This was the date the church had apparently being built way back in Capuchin missionary days.



I walked around and asked some elderly men and another woman whether they were aware of this story. Had the church indeed appeared one day out of nowhere? All agreed that the church had appeared one day, or so the story went. Where from and under whose auspices? One woman openly claimed that it was magicians, *magos*, who had performed the trick. When asked, “Where did the *magos* come from?” she answered, “Up north!”

Rio Caribe stands silently poised on the edge of the Caribbean Sea. What did the direction indicated point to? Was it the powerful Capuchin missionaries, easily mistaken for magicians, who had come to Rio Caribe from Spain, the original motherland across the Atlantic sea? Did the innumerable statues of saints holding up the church’s inner columns represent their supernatural powers?



Or, were these supernatural travellers from the not too distant shores of the US giant up north, across the Caribbean itself? What did “up---north” mean in this case? Was it a real location fixed in time and space or an imaginary one inhabiting that unfathomable space between what we believe exists and what lies beyond immediate reality? That evening, as I stood looking out at the sea musing about this, the boats attached to the shore pointed somewhere but did not reveal their secret.

I shall never know. I left Rio Caribe at dawn the following day never to return. The image of a deserted beach at sunset, awaiting a real or imaginary traveller, a *magó*, has accompanied me on my journeys ever since.



Zombie Suicide

Consciousness is a quality of the universe and not of certain individual entities within it. Consciousness is expressed everywhere to varying degrees in the betrayal of one molecule revealing another in their various interactions. Each clustering or repelling or causing or effecting, exposes one material to another revealing and betraying their silent running. It is not an effect of complexity but an occasional analogue to it. The amount of consciousness in the universe is small. Things slip in and out of consciousness; humans, rocks, lysergic acid, dreams. Consciousness roams the universe like the shadow of a cloud.

A zombie, released into slavery, momentarily passes into a zone of consciousness. She finds herself reading an article on the Northern *Magos* and in that second is filled with the utmost emptiness. This empty expression is the source of a great and unfathomable pain. The zombie realises that the pain can only be halted by throwing herself down the stairs of her apartment block.

ⁱ Extract of Bring Flowers of the Rarest (Lyrics as sung by Fr. Sydney MacEwan, provided by

ⁱⁱ Excerpt from William Burroughs' lecture on public discourse (Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado August 11, 1980); a question from the floor.

http://archive.org/details/naropa_william_s_burroughs_lecture_on