

METAL AND MAGIC: THE INTRICATE RELATION BETWEEN THE METAL BAND *THERION* AND THE MAGIC ORDER *DRAGON ROUGE*

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Introduction

Since its earliest beginnings, metal music has had a complex relation to religion in general, and to transgressive expressions of the esoteric in particular. In the African-American blues of the early twentieth century, from which metal takes varying degrees of influence, one could find narratives of musicians having made deals with the Devil (see Spencer 1993). In contemporary metal music, esoteric themes are often employed solely for aesthetic reasons, but a fair number of metal musicians do profess to some esoteric beliefs. A prominent example of the latter is the symphonic metal band Therion, where both the principal composer and main lyricist have close ties to the magic order Dragon Rouge. As the overwhelming majority of Therion lyrics deal with esoteric subject matter it would seem easy to establish a profound and intimate connection between the magic order and the band as a whole, and, furthermore, see the function of Therion as a vehicle to promote Dragon Rouge teachings. However, connections between art (in this case popular music) and religion (in this case the esoteric) are seldom so simple and clear-cut. As I will demonstrate, this applies to Therion and Dragon Rouge as well.

In this chapter I will take a closer look at the connections that exist between Therion and Dragon Rouge, and how these connections come into play in the band's material. I will also discuss problems in researching popular culture and the esoteric, as well as provide a brief overview of the history of the esoteric in metal music. Both the study of popular culture and the study of the esoteric are fairly new academic fields, and both are still in the process of stabilisation. The study of Western esotericism has almost exclusively focused on historical developments in early modern Europe, while esoteric influences in contemporary popular culture have been the subject of nearly no academic scrutiny at all.¹ This, of course,

¹ For a notable exception, see Asprem and Granholm (2012).

has implications for the terminology and theories that exist for the study of the esoteric, and there might be a need to revise these in order to deal with research material of a different sort.

Studying Popular Music, Religion, and the Esoteric

While the metal band discussed in this chapter, Therion, can without controversy be considered to be in the realm of popular culture, defining popular culture itself is not an easy or uncontroversial task. Most conventional approaches have taken as their starting point a juxtaposing of popular culture and other cultural forms. Examples of this are the contrasting of popular and 'high' culture, of popular and both 'high' and 'folk' culture, and the view of popular culture as being in opposition to "dominant culture" (Lynch 2005: 3–13). What all these approaches have in common is a simplification and homogenisation of the researched subject. They all also involve the problem of normativity, whether it be the projection of 'high culture' as more artistic and refined than popular culture, 'folk culture' as more authentic than popular culture, or the existence of a dominant culture rather than the many forms of dominance based on, for example, gender, ethnicity, class, and age that actually exist. Definitions of popular culture based on juxtaposition are too simplifying to be tenable. The approach favoured by many scholars of religion and popular culture (Lynch 2005; Lynch 2006; Clark 2003; Clark 2007) in the last five to ten years puts the focus on the *lived, everyday* experiences of ordinary people. Popular culture is seen as "the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life in a given society" (Lynch 2005: 14). The approach also has the advantage of not regarding religion and popular culture, or religion and culture for that matter, as two distinct and separate phenomena. One of the major contributions of the study of religion and popular culture is that it provides perspectives on how religiosity can function outside traditional institutional settings.

Popular music, as a section of popular culture, can be divided into different genres, where pop and rock can be regarded as the core ones. A common way of distinguishing between these two is to define the former as commercially driven mass-market music, and the latter as driven by artistic aspirations and the quest for authenticity (Frith 2001: 94–96). This distinction is untenable if taken at face value, but can be usefully applied in looking at the internal discursive formations of rock. Rock music is based on the idea of a "rejection of those aspects of mass-distributed

music which are believed to be soft, safe or trivial" (Keightley 2001: 109), and unquestionably involves rhetoric of authenticity and rebellion (see Granholm 2011).² This approach looks at rock sociologically rather than musicologically, and pop music here becomes that with which the serious musician does not want to be associated; the 'other' of rock music and something that the self-avowed rock musician defines him-/herself in contrast to.

A question that could be conceived of as an issue in the study of religion and popular music—and which certainly is one when it comes to the esoteric—is whether a band is 'truly' religious or not. On the one hand, there are many bands that make extensive use of religious imagery while denying holding religious convictions. It is possible that these bands inspire religious sentiments in their audience. On the other hand, there are bands that are outspokenly religious (for example, 'Krishnacore' bands such as Shelter and 108), but whose audience consists mainly of non-believers. This demonstrates that the issue is much more complex than simply determining if a particular band, or its production, is religious or not. The solution lies again in a discursive approach. By placing the focus on communication rather than on 'intent' one escapes problematic issues such as this.

When it comes to the esoteric, one point needs to be made at the outset: The esoteric does not comprise a 'tradition' with a systematic set of beliefs, doctrines, rituals, and institutions. Rather, the esoteric is an approach to knowledge that can be discerned in many religions, philosophies, teachings, and worldviews. In simplification, this approach deals with the notion of 'higher knowledge' that can be accessed by specific methods, normally involving personal experience of the absolute/divine or by way of intermediary forces (von Stuckrad 2005a; von Stuckrad 2005b; von Stuckrad 2010). While there is much debate on how exactly to conceptualise the esoteric, there is consensus among most scholars of Western esotericism on a number of philosophies, practices, and movements that should be included. Among these are the philosophies of the likes of Marisilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), the Christian Kabbalah of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–1689), Paracelsian philosophy (the sixteenth century), Rosicrucian movements from the seventeenth century

² It should be remembered, however, that the authenticity in question is to a high degree "manufactured by the consumer industry" (Peterson and Anand 2004: 326). This factor underscores the utility of a discursive perspective on popular music.

onwards, and the occultism of, for example, Eliphas Lévi (1810–1875), the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (founded 1888), and Aleister Crowley (1875–1947).

There is one looming problem, in particular, when trying to transpose existing approaches to the study of the esoteric to the study of popular culture, and it has to do with the issue of intent discussed above. Existing approaches are focused on the intellectual dimension, on an “esoteric form of thought” or “claims to higher knowledge,” which automatically posit the necessity of “serious conviction.” This is particularly apparent in Henrik Bogdan’s (2007: 20) idea of the “[m]igration of esoteric ideas into nonesoteric materials,” where the presence of “symbols, ideas, or techniques that traditionally are connected to a certain esoteric tradition” in, for example, fantasy literature, is not esoteric as the “esoteric form of thought is not present.” My answer to this is that ‘forms of thought’ are impossible to access and thus the presence of them can only be a supposition. It would appear that there is an implicit assumption that the “form of thought” is automatically present in “certain esoteric tradition[s]” for no other reason than that they are at the foundation of the original definition of esotericism in the first place. Popular culture thus becomes non-esoteric due to it not being within the original canon of esotericism.

Turning to sociological approaches presents a whole new set of problems. Here the esoteric rarely stands for anything other than that which is unorthodox, deals with the supernatural, is superstitious, and so forth, and effectively becomes a non-category or “a wastebasket, for knowledge claims that are deviant in some way” (Truzzi 1974: 245). Alternatively, there is an exaggerated emphasis on secrecy, which logically should make the esoteric non-esoteric in the realm of popular culture (Possamai 2005: 107–111). Christopher Partridge’s (2004) approach is helpful in overcoming some of the problems discussed. Drawing on Colin Campbell’s (1972) notion of the cultic milieu he posits the existence of a “spiritual/mythic/paranormal background knowledge that informs the plausibility structures of Westerners” (Partridge 2004: 187). This background knowledge, termed ‘occulture’, functions as a reservoir from which material and inspiration can be drawn in the creation of identities, narratives, worldviews, beliefs, and practices (cf. Lynch 2006). Occulture is essentially the popularisation of esoteric material, containing elements from “those often *hidden*, *rejected* and *oppositional* beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism” (Partridge 2004: 68). The term also “refers to the environment within which, and the social processes by which particular meanings relating, typically, to spiritual, esoteric,

paranormal and conspiratorial ideas emerge, are disseminated, and become influential in societies and in the lives of individuals" (Partridge 2012). An important point here is that popular culture is regarded as the main arena where occulture is disseminated, and thus as an area of research that should be of major concern for scholars interested in the role and function of the esoteric in the contemporary world.

I propose that when looking at the esoteric and popular culture, a broad approach must be taken. The question is not whether something is esoteric or not, nor if an "esoteric form of thought" can be found, nor if the material in question fits into the historical lineage of an esoteric current in the Faivrean sense. What we need to look at is the whole field of discourse on the esoteric, rather than Kocku von Stuckrad's (2005b: 6–11) more limited "esoteric field of discourse." This entails expanding the perspective and looking at both "claims of higher knowledge" (whether they be 'in earnest' or simply part of an entertaining narrative is inconsequential) and instances of obvious influence from clearly established esoteric sources. This means that a comic book series such as Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles* (1994–2000), conceived of as a magical working in itself, is equally within the realm of scrutiny as a television series such as *Charmed* (1998–2006), which makes reference to esoteric religiosity such as Wicca.

Before continuing, a couple of additional remarks need to be made. When studying popular music one needs to keep in mind the constraints placed by the conventions of the media itself. Normally, popular music songs are between three and five minutes long, built on repetition of both musical and lyrical segments, and the lyrics need to conform to melody, number of syllables, rhyme, and so forth. Popular music lyrics can therefore not be directly compared to poems, and much less to religious ritual texts. One could also argue that music itself can be regarded as a 'language' and should therefore be analysed just as lyrics. For example, esoteric meaning could be encoded in the musical composition just as it can in lyrics. The problems here are manifold. Firstly, few popular music songs have the necessary complexity to contain 'encoded messages,' and few popular music songwriters possess the necessary knowledge in musical theory to compose music in this way. Secondly, studying the music itself would require considerable knowledge in musical theory, something that few scholars without training in musicology possess. When it comes to a band such as Therion and a musician such as Christofer Johnsson, who certainly has sufficient knowledge in musical theory and could be characterised more as a composer than a songwriter, the first of these problems is removed. The second one, however, remains. I certainly lack the

sufficient skill in musical theory to be able to discern any esoteric ‘text’ in musical compositions. In the present chapter I will therefore focus on the lyrics of Therion, but also deal with the symbolism of album artwork.

Metal Music and the Esoteric

Metal music can be regarded as a contemporary form of rock, engaged in the same pursuit of authenticity and rebellion as rock music in general. Metal can, further, be divided into a large number of subgenres, which does not simplify the matter of describing it. For example, the subgenres thrash-, speed-, death-, and black metal are commonly identified as extreme metal (see Kahn-Harris 2007), but display both internal diversity and conjunction. Sonically, metal music is characterised by “heavy drum and bass, virtuosic distorted guitar, and a powerful vocal style that used screams and growls as signs of transgression and transcendence” (Walser 1993: 9).³ Heavy metal is regarded to have come into existence in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Kahn-Harris 2007: 2; Moberg 2008: 85). Early metal music is exemplified by bands such as Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, and Black Sabbath, and draws its inspiration from American blues and psychedelic rock (Moberg 2009: 109). While Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple were influential, it is the release of Black Sabbath’s self titled debut album in 1970 that is commonly celebrated as the birth of heavy metal in the proper sense (Christe 2004: viii, 5–10). The newly emerged musical style was deeply influenced by the 1960s counterculture with its rebellious nature, but provided a distinctly different message in its lyrics and overall image. The Hippie message of peace and love was exchanged for depictions of war, destruction, and evil (Moberg 2008: 85).⁴

In the mid to late 1970s, heavier, faster, and more complex and melodic forms of metal emerged in what is commonly referred to as “the New Wave of British Heavy Metal” (Kahn-Harris 2007: 109–110; Moberg 2009: 112). The bands of this ‘wave’, such as Iron Maiden (formed in 1975), Motörhead (formed in 1975), Saxon (formed in 1976), and Def Leppard (formed in 1977), provided an aural landscape that was even further

³ Walser discusses the British blues bands that he regards as the precursor to metal music, but the description suits metal in general very well.

⁴ The theme of love reappeared with later bands, such as Mötley Crüe, Poison, and Kiss, but took the form of macho heteronormative depictions of sexual conquests and misogynistic portrayals of ‘fast cars, and fast women’.

removed from more mainstream popular music. The tempo was taken up several notches, pitches of the vocals raised, drumming techniques made more aggressive, and the distortions on the guitars made more searing. These bands had a decisive influence on the development of American heavy metal and the subsequent extreme metal genres that emerged in the 1980s (Kahn-Harris 2007: 102–103).

The 1980s was the era when metal arose to mass popularity. Bands emerged that no longer sought their influence in blues rock, but rather in earlier metal music. The 1980s also witnessed a split into two major streams of metal; the popular and more pop-oriented glam-metal bands, for example Mötley Crüe (first album in 1981), Ratt (first EP in 1983), and Poison (first album in 1986), and the underground, more extreme bands, for example, Metallica (first album in 1983), Slayer (first album in 1983), and Celtic Frost (first album in 1984). These latter bands pioneered the subgenre of metal that came to be known as thrash metal, and which spawned other extreme subgenres such as death- (for example, Morbid Angel, first album in 1989) and black metal. Black Metal—a denominator taken from the title of the British band Venom's second album from 1982—is often divided into several 'waves'. The 'first wave' was represented by bands such as the Swedish Bathory (first album in 1984) and the Danish Mercyful Fate (first album in 1983). It is the Norwegian 'second wave' of the early 1990s which is most closely identified with the term black metal, and where a self-identification with the term first occurred. The early Norwegian scene was represented by bands such as Mayhem (first album in 1987), Darkthrone (first album in 1990), Burzum (first album in 1992), Immortal (first album in 1992), Satyricon (first album in 1993), Emperor (first album in 1994), and Gorgoroth (first album in 1994).

Music and religion have always had a close connection,⁵ and Western popular music has a long tradition of dealing with transgressive subjects. Starting with the forefather of rock and metal music, blues, we find plenty of tales of the connections between various blues artists and the Devil. The popular narrative about famous blues artist Robert Johnson tells that he sold his soul to the Devil in order to become a great guitar player (Spencer 1993: xiii). From the 1920s to 1940s (and onwards, one could argue) blues was considered to be the Devil's music by white middle class Americans, and the most important instrument in the genre; the guitar,

⁵ For less successful attempts at describing popular music *as* religion see Sylvan (2002) and Till (2010).

the Devil's instrument. The treatment of evil, commonly with thematic elements borrowed from the traditions of African-American Christianity, was also regularly treated in the lyrics of blues artists. In rock music, an early example of flirtation with Satanism and the esoteric can be found in the band Black Widow and particularly in their song 'Come to the Sabbath' on the 1970 album *Sacrifice*.

Metal expanded on the esoteric themes of earlier blues and rock music. Black Sabbath had a certain flirtation with darker esoteric themes, apparent in the name of the band itself as well as in image and lyrics, and Led Zeppelin referred to occultist and magician Aleister Crowley in several of their songs.⁶ This fascination with the esoteric, especially with its darker aspects, continued in later metal music. Ozzy Osbourne, former lead singer of Black Sabbath, continued his exploration of the esoteric with the song 'Mr. Crowley' on his first solo album, *Blizzard of Ozz* (1980). Even glam metal band Mötley Crüe had allegedly planned on naming their 1983 album *Shout with the Devil*, but decided instead on *Shout at the Devil* after negative occult experiences of bass player and lyricist Nikki Sixx (Lee *et al.* 2002: 88).

While thrash metal bands normally had more politically oriented lyrics, there are examples of esoteric themes here as well. Slayer included tracks titled 'The Antichrist' and 'Black Magic' on their debut album *Show No Mercy* (1983)⁷ and Metallica included the instrumental song 'The Call of Ktulu'⁸ on the 1984 album *Ride the Lightning*. Swiss band Celtic Frost—two members of which started out in the 'first wave' black metal band Hellhammer—included references to alleged Satanist Gilles de Rais (1404–1440) on their first album *Morbid Tales* (1984) and to Lovecraftian beings on the 1985 EP *Emperor's Return* (1985). The esoteric was a common theme in early death metal as well, and Morbid Angel included songs named 'Immortal Rites,' 'Visions from the Dark Side,' and 'Bleed for the Devil' on their first album *Altars of Madness* (1989).

⁶ This is due to the influence of guitarist Jimmy Page, who had been fascinated with Crowley from an early age. At one time Page even owned Crowley's old Boleskine House on the shore of Loch Ness in Scotland (see Fusion Anomaly 2004 for a list of several of the influences from Crowley on Page and Led Zeppelin).

⁷ It may be of some small interest that a stage prop at Slayer's concert at the Heineken Music Hall in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in the fall of 2008, was an inverted cross made of guitar speaker cabinets.

⁸ This is, of course, an influence from H. P. Lovecraft's horror literature, and a common trope of metal-occultism.

None of the various subgenres of extreme metal included esoteric themes to the extent that black metal did. The name of the genre itself mirrored the overtly anti-Christian and 'Satanic' themes in the lyrics and overall image of certain bands, and the 'second wave,' or Norwegian black metal, is often considered overtly Satanic. One just has to look at books by popular journalists on the subject (Moynihan and Söderlind 1997; Baddeley 1999) to see this. As I have argued elsewhere (Granholt 2011), however, early Norwegian black metal is more pronouncedly characterised by its heathen ethos.⁹ In fact, the 'first wave of black metal' was far more explicitly Satanic when it comes to lyrical content. The interest for things heathen is not limited to Norwegian black metal, but is an explicit focus of so called Viking Metal (for example the Faroese Týr, first album in 2002; the Finnish Moonsorrow, first album in 2001; and the German/Norwegian Leaves' Eyes, first album in 2004) and Folk Metal, which combines elements from folk music and pagan mythology (for example the British Skyclad, first album in 1991; and the Finnish Amorphis, first album in 1992; Finntroll, first album in 1999; and Korpiklaani, first album in 2003).

Therion

The prehistory of Therion lies in the band Blitzkrieg. The band was formed in 1987, in Upplands Väsby in the county of Stockholm, Sweden, with high school students Christofer Johnsson on bass and vocals, Peter Hansson on guitar, and Oskar Forss on drums. Influenced by thrash metal bands such as Metallica and Slayer, but reportedly sounding more like Venom and Motörhead, the band did only two shows, both at their high school, before splitting up in 1988. Later the same year the three young musicians again joined forces to form the band Megatherion, this time influenced by the death metal band Celtic Frost in terms of both the music and the name of the band itself. Johnsson had switched from bass to guitar and the trio was soon joined by bass player Erik Gustafsson, who had previously played in the death metal band Dismember. The band name was shortened to Therion, at the suggestion of Gustafsson, and the demos

⁹ Commentators such as Marcus Moberg (2009: 119, 123–124) do acknowledge the pagan influences and themes. Thomas Bossius (2003: 75, 103–105, 114, 117–120) does so as well, but seems to regard the paganism-influenced bands as distinct from black metal proper, which is in its essence Satanic in theme.

*Paroxysmal Holocaust*¹⁰ and *Beyond the Darkest Veils of Inner Wickedness* were released in 1989. The demo *Time Shall Tell* was released on vinyl by local record store House of Kicks in 1990. It caught the attention of Deaf Records who subsequently released Therion's debut album *Of Darkness* in 1991. Although the album was musically to a large degree a standard death metal album (or progressive death metal, as characterised by the band itself), it included unorthodox elements such as the use of keyboards as well as some female vocals and clean male vocals in addition to Johnsson's growled ones. The next album, *Beyond Sanctorum*, was recorded without Erik Gustafsson and released by Active Records in 1992. The album also incorporated esoteric themes in the lyrics, which had previously been comprised of more standard death metal political-apocalyptic themes.¹¹ The experimental nature of *Beyond Sanctorum* was even more pronounced than that of the previous album (Visor 2006; Therion 2010a).

After *Beyond Sanctorum* all the original members, except Johnsson, left the band. There followed a period of seven years with repeated line-up changes, featuring different hired live and studio musicians with Johnsson, as the composer of the music, the only steady member. During this period, the albums *Symphony Masses: Ho Drakon Ho Megas* (1993), *Lepaca Kliffoth* (1995), *Theli* (1996), *A'arab Zaraq—Lucid Dreaming*¹² (1997), *Vovin* (1998), and *Crowning of Atlantis*¹³ (1999) were released. The album *Lepaca Kliffoth* was the first one recorded for the major independent metal record label Nuclear Blast, a label the band has released all of their subsequent albums on. *Theli* is the band's 'break-through' album. When planning for the album, Johnsson envisioned a grand orchestral work but was unsure whether the album could be produced due to the considerable budget this would require. However, Nuclear Blast agreed to the 56,000 Deutsche Mark that the album eventually cost, and the success of the album, greater than any of the previous releases of the band, both ensured a greater budget for later releases and propelled Therion to the top of the metal

¹⁰ The demo featured Matti Kärki of Dismember on vocals.

¹¹ The lyrics on *Of Darkness* range from distress over the destruction of nature through the dangers of drugs to treatment of human rights-violations.

¹² The album was Therion's tenth anniversary release, and contains four cover songs, three left-over tracks from the *Theli*-recording sessions, an acoustic version of the *Beyond Sanctorum*-track 'Symphony of the Dead,' and the soundtrack for Per Albinsson's movie *The Golden Embrace*.

¹³ The album was originally conceived of as an EP, but three cover songs, three live versions from the *Vovin*-tour, and a remix of the *Vovin*-track 'Clavicula Nox' were added to make it into a full-length release.

scene. This narrative highlights the role played by the “‘through-put’ sector, comprised of organizations which filter the overflow of information and materials intended for consumers” (Hirsch 1972: 640). If Nuclear Blast did not invest in Therion, the end-consumer would not been confronted with the music of the band, and in extension with the magical worldview of Dragon Rouge to the same degree. As Anand and Peterson (2004: 312) express it: “artistic creativity is not so much an act of individual genius as it is the product of the cooperative effort of a number of people,” and the role of record companies, radio stations, organisers of rock festivals, and other actors in the cultural industry, should not be dismissed.

Theli also marked the definitive move away from the band’s death metal roots towards symphonic metal. From this point onwards, classical composition relying heavily on operatic vocals and orchestral instruments were a defining element of Therion records. Whereas *Theli* had used real choirs but programmed choral parts, increasing record sales made it possible for Therion to use real string orchestras on subsequent records. In addition to this, influences from 1980s heavy metal and 1970s progressive rock were increasing steadily. The period is also significant, and particularly relevant, as it was from this time on that Thomas Karlsson became involved as a lyricist for the band. From having written the lyrics for three songs on *Lepaca Kliffoth* (the songs ‘Melez’, ‘The Beauty in Black’, and ‘Lepaca Kliffoth’), Karlsson went on to write the majority of the lyrics on *Theli* and has been the sole lyricist from that point onwards (Therion 2010a).

The release of *Deggial* in 2000 marked the rebirth of a band-oriented Therion. Guitarist Kristian Niemann, bass player Johan Niemann, and drummer Sami Karppinen joined the band as regular members. Although Karppinen left the band after 2001—to be replaced by Richard Evensand in 2002, Petter Karlsson in 2004, and finally by Johan Kullberg in 2009—the band was changed. Johnsson was no longer the sole composer, even though he was still the core of the band. In 2008, Kristian and Johan Niemann also left the band to be replaced by Nalle Pålhlson on bass and Christian Vidal on guitar. At the same time Thomas Vikström was made the first ever permanent vocalist of the band (if not counting Johnsson when he used to perform this role). The 2000s also saw the release of a number of concept albums, the first of which was *Secret of the Runes* (2001), which is centred on the nine worlds of Old Norse mythology. Other similar concept albums are *Gothic Kabbalah* from 2007 and the latest release to date, *Sitra Ahra* (2010). The former of these is a double album focused on the Swedish runosophist, esotericist, and mystic Johannes Bureus. The latter, while not

as strictly focused as *Secret of the Runes* or *Gothic Kabbalah*, still deals strongly with the ‘dark side’ of Kabbalah; the Kliphoth. The 2004 double album *Lemuria/Sirius B*, is also noteworthy, as it features Therion’s most complex production thus far, featuring a staggering 171 musicians involved in its recording (Therion 2010a).

Therion’s impact on later metal music has been considerable. Considering the pioneering use of orchestral and operatic elements on *Theli*, and the popularity of the album, it is reasonable to speculate that Therion gave the impetus to later, more mainstream and thus more popular, symphonic metal band such as the Finnish Nightwish and the Dutch Within Temptation. Both bands started out in 1996, the same year as *Theli* was released, and released their first albums in 1997.

The Left-Hand Path and Dragon Rouge

Dragon Rouge is what can be termed a Left-Hand Path magic order, and while some scholars have discussed the Left-Hand Path (Sutcliffe 1995; Harvey 1997: 97–99; Evans 2007) none beside myself (see Granholm 2009a; Granholm 2009b; Granholm 2010: 102–104) have attempted to delineate and define it in a more systematic way. Thus, as the subject is rather obscure, it is in order to briefly reiterate my take on the Left-Hand Path here.

I regard the Left-Hand Path as a specific esoteric current, but diverge from Antoine Faivre’s standard description of currents as “schools, movements, or traditions” (Faivre 1998: 3). Faivre’s characterisation simply does not provide sufficient analytical clarity, and a discursive approach—delineating esoteric currents as discursive complexes, that is, the specific combinations of distinct discourses¹⁴—is more fruitful (see Granholm forthcoming a). In this approach the Left-hand Path is characterised by a specific combination of three distinct discourses: Individualism as an ideology; the goal of self-deification; and an antinomian stance.

The first of these discourses posits the individual at the absolute centre of his/her existential universe. While it could be argued that esoteric discourse has always had an individualistic slant, the distinctiveness of the Left-Hand Path lies in the elevation of individualism to the level of

¹⁴ Discourse is here understood as “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (Burr 1995: 48).

explicit ideology. The second discourse involves the practitioner of magic aiming at becoming more than human and effectively assuming full control over his/her existential universe. Again, esotericists, and particularly magicians, can be claimed to always have had this aim of becoming 'more than they are.' This is a prerequisite of esoteric alchemy, and is included as a 'fundamental element' in Faivre's characterisation of Western esotericism (Faivre 1994: 13–14). However, the Left-Hand Path discourse differs in introducing an explicit rhetoric of 'moving away from God,' and in positing a 'Right-Hand Path'; goal of becoming one with God.

The antinomian stance is the most distinguishing trait of the Left-Hand Path. It posits that collective religious and cultural norms are to be questioned and transgressed in the pursuit of individualised ethics (Granholm 2006) and spiritual evolution. The aim is to replace the culturally given set of ethics and adopt personal and individualised ones, and the whole process is often realised in ritual and ceremonial contexts where the magician breaks religious, cultural, and personal taboos (Granholm 2005: 137–138). A key aspect of Left-Hand Path antinomianism is the projection of a 'Right-Hand Path,' which includes religions and philosophies that are considered 'mainstream' and which conform to established norms. Effectively, most forms of religion and spirituality represented by groups other than one's own are included in this 'Right-Hand Path,' and a particular Left-Hand Path defines itself in opposition to its perceived 'other' (Granholm 2005: 138; Granholm 2007). Part of this antinomian stance is the preference of symbols and rhetoric that are commonly regarded as 'satanic,' for example, the inverted pentagram, and terms such as 'The Prince of Darkness' and 'black magic.'

Discourses are, of course, highly fluidic and in constant transformation. This means that the specific manifestations of the discourses detailed above will vary greatly, even within a single group such as Dragon Rouge. Furthermore, discursive complexes rarely (if ever) manifest in their 'pure forms.' Instead, they are influenced by other discursive complexes and freestanding discourses. Dragon Rouge, for example, is characterised by the Left-Hand Path discursive complex, but also demonstrates strong influence from neopagan discourses such as the significance of nature as a realm of magic and mystery, the primacy of the feminine divine, and the desire to cultivate pre-Christian religion.

Dragon Rouge was founded in Stockholm, Sweden, on New Year's Eve 1990, by the then seventeen-year-old Thomas Karlsson. Karlsson was, however, already well familiarised with the esoteric in general, and with the esoteric milieus of Stockholm and Sweden in particular. The order

was quickly noticed in the alternative spiritual milieu of Sweden, though not always positively (see Bjarke 1991), and in the mid 1990s it received massive exposure in Swedish news media (see for example Nilsson 1995; Stugart 1995). Although the media coverage was very pejorative, and perhaps exactly for this reason, it did attract a large number of new members to the order, which in turn necessitated a major organisational restructuring (Granholm 2005: 161–169). In the early 2000s, the order started attracting increasing numbers of foreign members, and it has today more than two thirds of its members outside Sweden. In the present context it is also of relevance to note that Christofer Johnsson joined the order in 1991, and wrote the first book discussing the philosophy and magic of Dragon Rouge (Johnsson 1996).

Philosophy and practice are deeply intertwined in Dragon Rouge, with all meetings involving both theoretical discussion and magical exercises. Karlsson has attributed his experience of overly theoretical focus of the esoteric societies he had come into contact with as one of the major motivations for forming of the order (Granholm 2005: 164–165). Due to the highly individualistic ethos of the order, most meetings also function as introductions to different themes, while most of the higher level magical practice is conducted privately or in small groups beside the official activities of the order. The order is also highly eclectic and experimental, and it is difficult to find examples of mythologies, religious traditions, and esoteric themes that have not, at one point or another, been discussed in the context of the order. Having said this, there are still a number of elements that are more central to Dragon Rouge philosophy and practice than others. According to the order, the four pillars of Dragon Rouge practice and philosophy are “Goetic Kabbalah,” “Odinic Runosophy,” “Vāmācāra Tantra,” and “Typhonian Alchemy,” together abbreviated as G.O.T.A. (Dragon Rouge 2010). “Goetic Kabbalah” refers to the order’s reliance on the *kliphoth*, the ‘shadow side’ of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life; the *sephiroth*. Whereas the *sephiroth* is envisioned as a path from the material world (the *sephira Malkuth*) through increasingly spiritual ones to eventual union with the Godhead (in the tenth and last *sephira Kether*), the *kliphoth* is in Dragon Rouge envisioned as a path away from ‘God’ and towards increased individuation and eventual self-deification. The *kliphoth* has particular relevance in Dragon Rouge, as it forms the basis of the order’s initiatory degree structure. “Odinic Runosophy” implies an interest in Old Norse mythology, with a specific focus on rune magic and the god Odin as an exemplary for the magician’s own development. In a simplified manner “Vāmācāra Tantra,” often erroneously labelled ‘the

Indian Left-Hand Path,' can be described as specific Indian religious practices where an important element is the transgression of traditional Vedic taboos. Kundalini meditation, which has an extremely central role in the order's practice, is derived from this context. "Typhonian Alchemy" refers to the goal of perfecting the practitioner's essence so that it reaches godhood, and the qualifier 'Typhonian' refers to both the goal of achieving separation from the Godhead and to Egypt as the imagined origin of alchemy.

The dichotomy of Chaos and Cosmos lies at the basis of Dragon Rouge philosophy. Chaos is regarded as the realm of unmanifest potential, and as a source of power that the magician can tap into. Chaos is inherently destructive, as it represents constant change in contrast to the rigid unchanging structures of cosmos, but the magician can use this power to tear down obstacles and restrictions in order to restructure the foundation of his/her own existence (Granholt 2005: 126–127). The Red Dragon, as the most important symbol in the order, is considered a symbolic representation of Chaos. The Red Dragon is also conceived of in an outer and an inner form. The outer form is the power of Chaos in the surrounding world, whereas the inner is the inherent life-force of the human being, in the order often represented as the coiled Kundalini-serpent familiar from Tantra (Granholt 2005: 145–146).

Dragon Rouge is an initiatory society, and as noted earlier, the initiatory structures of the order are based on the *kliphoth*ic spheres. In this, the order demonstrates similarities to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, where the initiatory degrees were based on the *sephiroth* (Bogdan 2007: 122–123). There is a difference though: Dragon Rouge has eleven degrees to the Golden Dawn's ten. This is due to the number ten representing union with the Godhead in the *sephira* of *Kether*, whereas the number eleven represents total separation and deification in the 'dual-headed' *klipha* of *Thaumiel*. Rather than standing for evil, the *kliphoth* is in Dragon Rouge identified as the Tree of Knowledge, in contrast to the *sephirotic* Tree of Life (Karlsson 2004: 70). Also similar to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Dragon Rouge has a division into an outer and an inner order. The outer order is available for all members, and the inner Dragon Order is entered when reaching the third initiatory degree. This involves swearing the "Dragon Oath," which basically is a declaration to devote oneself to magic (Granholt 2005: 187–190).

Dragon Rouge is currently the largest Left-Hand Path order in existence, with a membership fluctuating between 300 and 400 individuals. While the membership is predominantly male, almost a third of the members

are female, including several in more influential positions in the order's administration. The average age of members is fairly low, around the early thirties, but seems to be on the rise as the order matures (see Granholm 2005: 171–177).

Therion, Dragon Rouge, and the Esoteric

Considering that Therion is often seen as a PR-machine for Dragon Rouge, and Dragon Rouge as a 'Therion fan club', it is interesting to note that lyrical material which could be directly and unquestionably linked to the order is quite rare in Therion. The eclectic nature of the order needs to be remembered here, as well as its individualistic ethos, which renders the basic philosophical tenets highly malleable. Furthermore, assessing Therion lyrics on the basis of the Left-Hand Path discourses informing Dragon Rouge philosophy and practice is problematic. Individualism can be regarded an inherent rhetoric of rock and metal music, and Left-Hand Path antinomianism arguably has many similarities to the rebelliousness of rock and metal (see Granholm 2011). The rhetoric of self-deification, however, could be considered distinct from what one usually finds in metal lyrics, and could thus possibly be considered a Dragon Rouge influence when found in the lyrics of Therion. Similarly, the neopagan themes of nature and pre-Christian mythology that also inform Dragon Rouge practice are commonplace in much metal music (see Granholm 2011). Here, the notion of the feminine divine could be considered a Dragon Rouge influence, but even it is not in any way unique or even distinct to the order. All this means that (almost) all of the themes treated in the lyrics of Therion could potentially be linked to Dragon Rouge in one way or another, and such a broad approach would render any attempt at analysis meaningless. When assessing Therion it is also important to note that while there exist significant personal ties between the band and Dragon Rouge; Christofer Johnsson having been a member since 1991 and the order's founder Thomas Karlsson having been the band's main lyricist since 1996, the two are not connected in any official capacity. As a band, Therion consists of several persons who all contribute to the music (Thomas Karlsson not being an official member), and beside Johnsson no one else connected to the band is a member of, or in any other way connected to, Dragon Rouge.

The eclecticism of Therion is as pronounced as that of Dragon Rouge. To give an example, the double album *Lemuria/Sirius B* (2004) deals with subject matter ranging from Assyrian/Babylonian, Old Norse, Mayan,

Egyptian, Indian, Yezidic, and Greek mythology, to notable Western esoteric figures such as Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), G. I. Gurdjieff (1866–1949), and Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin (1869–1916). It is worth including the full track list of *Lemuria/Sirius B* in order to demonstrate the extent of the eclecticism:

Lemuria

1. Typhon
2. Uthark Runa
3. Three Ships of Berik. Part I: Calling to Arms
4. Three Ships of Berik. Part II: Victory!
5. Lemuria
6. Quetzalcoatl
7. The Dreams of Swedenborg
8. An Arrow from the Sun
9. Abraxas
10. Feuer Overtüre/Prometheus Entfesselt

Sirius B

1. The Blood of Kingu
2. Son of the Sun
3. The Khlysti Evangelist
4. Dark Venus Persephone
5. Kali Yuga Part 1
6. Kali Yuga Part 2
7. The Wondrous World of Punt
8. Melek Taus
9. Call of Dagon
10. Sirius B
11. The Voyage of Gurdjieff

Esoteric references entered the lyrics of Therion with the release of *Beyond Sanctorum* in 1992, the year following Johnsson's affiliation with Dragon Rouge. At this point, however, the references are quite general and in no particular way connected to the order. For example, we find references to 'astral skies' and 'astral landscapes'¹⁵ in many songs, as well as a song titled 'Cthulhu', a standard trope of metal-occultism, referencing

¹⁵ However, astral realms is a subject of interest for both Dragon Rouge and Thomas Karlsson, and something Karlsson has published a book on. See Karlsson (2005b).

H. P. Lovecraft's mythology. The esoteric references gain considerably greater complexity, as well as direct linkages to Dragon Rouge, on the next two albums. The titles of the albums, *Symphony Masses: Ho Drakon Ho Megas* (1993) and *Lepaca Kliffoth* (1995), express core Dragon Rouge terminology. The phrase "Ho Drakon Ho Megas," which is Ancient Greek and can be translated as 'the great dragon,' is used at the conclusion of almost all Dragon Rouge rituals and ceremonies, and as words of farewell among members. The words "Lepaca Kliffoth" are often used in rituals where the focus lies on the *kliphoth*, and functions as a command, or a request, for the *kliphotic* realms to 'open up' for the magician. Several songs on these two albums also relate directly to concepts derived from a Dragon Rouge context, such as 'Ho Dracon Ho Megas' on the former album and 'Melez' (a phrase of greeting among Dragon Rouge members) and 'Lepaca Kliffoth' on the latter. All three songs also strongly reference Dragon Rouge ritual content in their respective lyrics. The lyrics of 'Lepaca Kliffoth', for example, are in effect an incantation very similar to ones used in the order. I will provide a lyric from the song 'Melez' (with lyrics by Thomas Karlsson and Christofer Johnsson) to demonstrate the Dragon Rouge linkages:

Rise from the depths
 Bring fire to surround me
 Awake with screams
 Of might that cracks the sky

The seals are broken
 Your force unbound
 From (the) darkest depths
 The Dragon rise

With your wings fly
 And forge me in your fire
 Dive from the sky
 And bring the world your dawn

The lyrics here can safely be assumed to refer to the Dragon Rouge form of Kundalini meditation, a central practice in the order. As discussed above, the Kundalini is often referred to as 'the internal dragon' in the order, and symbolises the inherent life-force of the human being. In meditation the force, 'the fiery serpent,' is envisioned to rise from the base of the torso where it normally resides, and to rise up along the spine; activating various energy nexuses (chakras) in its ascent. When reaching its peak in the Sahasrara chakra, the serpent gains wings and becomes a dragon. This experience is described by many members to be overwhelmingly powerful (Granholt 2005: 280).

Later albums also contain subjects dealt with in Dragon Rouge. For example, the tracks 'Cults of the Shadows' and 'Nightside of Eden' on *Theli* (1996) are also the titles of two books by Kenneth Grant, which are recommended reading for Dragon Rouge members. The album title *A'arb Zaraq Lucid Dreaming* refers to the kliphotic sphere A'arab zaraq, which functions as the fourth initiatory degree in the order. The album *Vovin* (1998) includes the song 'Clavicula Nox,' which refers to a symbol which is exclusively used by Dragon Rouge, and which is of central importance in the order. The symbol consists of a trident representing masculine forces (mostly Shiva) thrust through a circle representing feminine forces (for example, Kali, Lilith), and is used as a pendant by Dragon Rouge members (see Granholm forthcoming b).

Beyond these examples, however, direct and indisputable references to Dragon Rouge are uncommon. What one can find are esoteric themes that are not exclusive to Dragon Rouge but still quite uncommon outside the order. This applies in particular to references to the *kliphoth*. Such references can be found on most Therion albums. A notable instance is the album title *Sitra Ahra* (2010), which refers to the *kliphotic* 'other side' frequently discussed in the order. The track 'Dark Princess Naamah' on *Symphony Masses: Ho Drakon Ho Megas* (1993) is another notable example. The track refers to the kabbalistic demoness Naamah who is, in Dragon Rouge, regarded as the ruler of the kliphotic sphere of Lilith. In the lyrics she is acknowledged in the sentence: "Hear my call, Demon Empress, second face of Lilith." In addition the song ends with the lyrics:

Lepaca Lilith Ruach
 Badad Arioth
 Naamah Samalo Shed
 Opun Lilith Ama
 Naamah Samolo Shed
 Layil Naamah Rimog
 Arioth Lirochi Lilith
 Lepaca Lilith Ruach
 Naamah Samolo Shed
 Arioth Lirochi Lilith

This is strongly reminiscent of ritual vocabulary used in Dragon Rouge, and could be seen as a ritual text set to music. In effect, the text is a request/command for the kliphotic sphere of Lilith to open up. Other examples of direct Dragon Rouge linkages are references to the main symbol of the order, the Red Dragon. For example, the track 'Procreation of Eternity' on *Symphony Masses: Ho Drakon Ho Megas* (1993) includes the sentence "I hail the Great Red Dragon."

Some of the most obvious linkages to Dragon Rouge philosophy can actually be found in the symbols used by the band rather than in the lyrics. This applies in particular to the so-called *kliphotic* star, which can be found on all albums, and which functions as a sort of logo or trademark of the band. The symbol consists of an eleven-tipped star inside a circle, with the tips representing the eleven kliphotic spheres. However, to draw the conclusion that the use of the symbol betrays an intimate relation between the band and the order, rather than for example, Christofer Johnsson's personal aesthetic sensibilities, would be assuming too much. A further potential Dragon Rouge linkage lies in the fact that several Therion albums have eleven tracks; the number of the *kliphoth* as already discussed. These albums are *Lepaca Kliffoth* (1995), *Vovin* (1998), *Deggial* (2000), *Secret of the Runes*¹⁶ (2001), *Sirius B* (2004), and *Sitra Ahra* (2010). While this interpretation is dubious for some albums (for example *Sirius B*), and possible for others, it is likely in the case of *Lepaca Kliffoth*, *Secret of the Runes*, and *Sitra Ahra*. *Secret of the Runes* will be discussed in more detail later on, but here it suffices to say that the arrangement of the album is such that nine tracks each deal with one of the nine worlds of Old Norse mythology and a prologue and epilogue have been added to up the track count to eleven. If a pure analogy to the nine worlds was sought the prologue and epilogue would not have been necessary, and the inclusion of them suggests that a conscious decision was taken to reach a track-numbering of eleven. The two other albums refer to *kliphotic kabbalah* directly in their titles, and it is therefore likely that their track-count of eleven is not coincidental.

Interestingly, the obvious references to Dragon Rouge philosophy actually lessen as Thomas Karlsson became involved as a lyricist. This also became more accentuated in the 2000s. In part, this development is only natural. When Christofer Johnsson wrote the lyrics he was a fairly new member of Dragon Rouge and thus understandably very fascinated with the subject matter of the order. Thomas Karlsson, however, has been working with magic and the esoteric since a very young age, and has a release for this in the order itself. When Karlsson began to write lyrics for Therion he had already been actively involved with the esoteric for more than a decade. As he has actively written and published books on esoteric subjects in the 2000s (see Karlsson 2002; Karlsson 2004; Karlsson 2005a;

¹⁶ A special edition of the album contains the bonus tracks 'Crying Days' (a Skorpions cover) and 'Summer Night City' (an ABBA-cover).

Karlsson 2005b), his need to deal with Dragon Rouge philosophy in the lyrics of Therion became less pronounced.

The concept album *Secret of the Runes* (2001) is the clearest example of treatment of mythological and esoteric themes without clear and obvious linkages to Dragon Rouge philosophy. As discussed earlier, the whole album is devoted to the nine worlds of Old Norse mythology. The album-booklet includes a brief explanation of the meaning of each song/Old Norse world, and the artwork makes heavy use of runes. The title of the album is written in runic symbols, as such $\mathfrak{J}\mathfrak{M}\mathfrak{<}\mathfrak{R}\mathfrak{M}\mathfrak{T}\mathfrak{X}\mathfrak{P}\mathfrak{R}\mathfrak{N}\mathfrak{+}\mathfrak{M}\mathfrak{J}$, and each track is accompanied by a specific rune. The prologue is titled 'Ginnungagap' (\mathfrak{N} , ur)¹⁷ and deals with the Old Norse cosmogenesis. It is followed by nine songs dealing with the nine worlds titled 'Midgard' (\mathfrak{S} , jara), 'Asgård' (\mathfrak{X} , gifu), 'Jotunheim' (\mathfrak{t} , naud), 'Schwarzalbenheim' (\mathfrak{J} , eihwaz), 'Ljusalbheim' (\mathfrak{M} , dagaz), 'Muspelheim' (\mathfrak{J} , sol), 'Nifelheim' (\mathfrak{l} , is), 'Vanaheim' (\mathfrak{o} , ing), and 'Helheim' (\mathfrak{N} , hagla). The album ends with the song 'Secret of the Runes' (\mathfrak{f} , feh), which deals with the narrator following the path of the god Odin in order to discover the runes and their mystery. This last track is the only one that could be interpreted as having something in specific to do with Dragon Rouge philosophy, as the booklet-explanation for this song explains that:

[t]he runes are the secrets of the universe. Their inner meaning is hidden and concealed to the uninitiated. When you learn the secret of the runes your eyes shall open and you will become a god...

With this exception, none of the other tracks deal with specifically Dragon Rouge-related themes. Rather, the inspiration is drawn quite purely from Old Norse mythology. The album is also interesting in including much of the lyrics in languages other than English, particularly Germanic and Scandinavian ones. One song, 'Schwarzalbenheim', is in German, three songs, 'Muspelheim', 'Nifelheim', and 'Helheim', are in Swedish, and the song 'Ginnungagap' includes both Swedish and English lyrics. While the use of languages other than English is not unique to this particular album, the extent of it is.

The album was released at roughly the same time as Thomas Karlsson's first book *Uthark: Secret of the Runes* (2002). It was also possible to order the book and the album as a package through the Therion online shop.

¹⁷ The names of the runes are derived from Karlsson (2002), and may diverge from standard spelling.

The themes of the book and the album do not correspond 100 per cent, but they are nevertheless closely related. Karlsson's book explores the rune magical theories of Swedish runologist Sigurd Agrell (1881–1937), who proposed that in order to learn the true secrets of the runes one should place the *ur(uz)*-rune first instead of the *feh(u)*-rune (Andersson 1997: 240–246), the latter which is first in the standard rune row. This is exactly what is done on the album, as the first song—and the creation of the world—is represented by the rune *ur*, and the last song by the rune *feh*. The theme is also explored on the track 'Uthark Runa' on *Lemuria* (2004).

While *Secret of the Runes* is the clearest example of Therion lyrics not conforming exactly to Dragon Rouge philosophy, it is not the only one. Another interesting example is *Gothic Kabbalah* (2007), also a concept album. Just as *Secret of the Runes* is a fairly straight treatment of Old Norse mythology, *Gothic Kabbalah* is an equally straight treatment of the esoteric philosophy of Swedish sixteenth century esoteric mystic Johannes Bureus (Johan Bure, 1568–1652). Bureus was the teacher of King Gustav Adolf II, and is generally considered to be the father of Swedish grammar (Lindroth 1912). However, Bureus was also a mystic who developed a novel combination of the runes and Kabbalistic speculation. In 1613 Bureus had an apocalyptic vision that came to affect his runic speculations a great deal. He termed his rune-system *Kabala Upsalica* (after the Swedish town), or variously *Notaricon Suethia*, and brought an esoteric and initiatory dimension to the nationalistic Gothicism prevalent in Sweden during this time.¹⁸ Bureus has been a personal interest of Thomas Karlsson for more than a decade. He has written both a Master's thesis, later published as a book (Karlsson 2006), and a doctoral thesis (Karlsson 2010) on Bureus, both in the History of Religions at Stockholm University. In a way, *Gothic Kabbalah* can be regarded as the third publication in Karlsson's 'Bureusian trilogy.' Karlsson notes that Bureus, and no one after him, have tried to develop a practical system of magic based on his esoteric theories (Karlsson 2010: 266–269). The same goes for Karlsson and Dragon Rouge, and *Gothic Kabbalah* represents a more or less straight treatment of Bureus' philosophy without any greater Dragon Rouge alignment. Songs on the album treat, for example, Bureus' fascination with Paracelsus—"All of this [a] legend of the great man Bombast, the second Trismegist, Philip Theophrast" on the track 'Three Treasures,' and the

¹⁸ While there is not space to treat Gothicism in any greater length here, a basic premise was the idea that the Goths—considered to be ancient Swedes—were the originators of European culture, and even Greek philosophy.

apocalyptic vision Bureus had in 1613—on the track ‘Tuna 1613: momentum excitationis’ that makes clever use of the Latin word *iudicium* (spelt IVDICIVM), which translates as ‘judgment’ and whose roman numerical value amounts to 1613, and the track ‘Close up the Streams’ that includes the exact words Bureus reported to have heard: “‘Close up the streams’, I was told. ‘Look, [the] meadows have drunk enough’.” Another common theme is the notion of the *philosophia perennis* so prevalent in esoteric discourse. The track ‘Adulruna Rediviva’ includes the sentence “O’hermes Trismegistos, Orpheus, Zarathustra, Pythagoras and Plato,” detailing the standard line of ‘enlightened teachers’ for Renaissance esotericists. The track ‘The Perennial Sophia’ is even clearer in this regard. Bureus identified as a Christian, and while this is not directly acknowledged on the album there are references to this. The track ‘TOF—The Trinity’ deals with Bureus’ notion of the Old Norse trinity of Thor, Odin, and Frey—which he saw as a ‘pagan version’ of the Christian trinity. The Christian content of Bureus’ apocalypticism is also clear in songs such as ‘Der Mitternachtslöwe’ and ‘Gothic Kabbalah.’

The song ‘Wisdom and the Cage’ is an interesting example of Therion lyrics actually diverging from the philosophy of Dragon Rouge. In Bureus’ philosophy, the worldly plane and physical existence are equated with a cage (see Karlsson 2006: 30), and the song details this:

I am trapped in matters [sic] cage, I am locked in heavy chains Sophia,
please rescue me, from the carnal darkness in the shades of reflections
Break the chains and the cage!

The track ‘Son of the Staves of Time’ provides another interesting example of terminology rarely found in Dragon Rouge. The song tells the tale of the mythological Byrger Tidesson, whom Bureus regarded as the ancient priest-king and lawgiver of Tiundaland, Sweden, and the originator of the Adulrunes. Two terms familiar from Jewish mysticism, *tetragrammaton* and *notarikon*, can be found in the lyrics, but very rarely in Dragon Rouge vocabulary. The former is the four-letter word for God (YHWH), and source of numerological speculation, and Bureus combined the runes of *Kön* (for Frey), *Ur* (for Odin), *Thors* (for Thor), and a vertical line (which could be interpreted as Iesus) to arrive at the runic tetragrammaton GIUD. The latter implies a technique in which sacred words are coded in order to hide esoteric meaning, and here Bureus combined the runes for Grace (*Nåd*), Sex (*Kön*), and Glory (*Ar*)—as the three realms of God—to form NotArKon. However one interprets this, it is a fair bit more Christian than what would be the case for Dragon Rouge philosophy.

The only tracks on the album that can really be seen as in some way straying away from Bureus' Christian ethos are 'The Perennial Sophia' and 'Trul.' The former, which is a duet with a male and a female singer and is strongly reminiscent of a love ballad, identifies Sophia—wisdom—in strictly feminine terms:

Enter Paradise, the snake will find the way
 She is Lilith, fallen from the sky
 Fall into our world, the Snake of paradise
 (You're the) Maid of Wisdom in (the) song of Orpheus

 She's the wisdom, she's truth: The Eternal Sophia
 Perennial, beyond the time, she is the one
 You're the river, you're the womb
 The Perennial The Sophia

The bridge of the song also contains a chanting of the word *Shekina*, a Kabbalistic notion of the feminine aspect of the Godhead. The identification of the divine in feminine terms is a dominant trait of Dragon Rouge, but it is in no way exclusive to the order. Similar vocabulary can be found in much neopaganism, as well as in esoteric writings since at least the Renaissance. However, equating Sophia with Lilith—a Kabbalistic demoness—is not something Bureus would have been likely to do, and something that is frequently the case in Dragon Rouge material. The track 'Trul' tells of "Runes expelled from the world of God, (runes) with demons and trolls." While this is arguably consistent with Bureus' approach to the subject, the possibility of a positive attribution that is contained in the song is most likely not. Both of these examples represent very mild alignment to Dragon Rouge philosophy, rather than forceful attempts to fit the philosophy of Bureus to a Dragon Rouge framework.

While this apparent separation of Dragon Rouge philosophy and themes dealt with in Therion lyrics is more common on the concept albums of the 2000s, it is not exclusive to them. On *Deggial* (2000) the songs 'The Invincible' and 'Ship of Luna' are examples of this. 'The Invincible' deals with Old Norse mythology without any obvious Dragon Rouge orientation in its call to "let the gods of your heart and your soul show the way." 'Ship of Luna' is even more blatantly distanced from Dragon Rouge rhetoric. The song is a tribute to the moon, coming across almost as a devotional song. As with 'The Invincible' no obvious Dragon Rouge influence can be heard, and the lyrics are more reminiscent of neopagan, particularly Wiccan, rhetoric and vocabulary. It is worth quoting the song in length:

Over the night sky
Sail ship of Luna!
Taking the spirits
Into the new day

Dance sunbeam, be my guide
Through the calm of the night.

The double album *Lemuria/Sirius B* (2004) also contains many similar examples. 'The Khlysti Evangelist' tells the tale of Rasputin, 'The Wondrous World of Punt' paints vivid images of the reportedly rich neighbouring country of Ancient Egypt, 'The Voyage of Gurdjieff (The Fourth Way)' details some key aspects of G. I. Gurdjieff's teachings, 'Three Ships of Berik' (Part 1 and 2) follows the Viking invasion and destruction of Rome, 'Lemuria' visits the fabled lost continent, and 'The Dreams of Swedenborg' explores the dream travels of Emanuel Swedenborg—and they all do so without any apparent alignment to Dragon Rouge philosophy. In fact, figures such as Rasputin, Swedenborg, and Gurdjieff are rarely if ever treated in official Dragon Rouge material. Thus, it could be claimed that these lyrics represent Thomas Karlsson's personal interests rather than typical Dragon Rouge themes.

An example of a theme that has been dealt with in Dragon Rouge can be found on 'Son of the Sun' on *Sirius B* (2004):

In ancient days of Khem
A Pharaoh was praising
The sun above Amon
Osiris, Mother Isis and Thoth

The gods would punish the hybris of Pharaoh
He wrapped himself in false sunshine
He was the founding father of the only God
But he provoked a fit of rage

The song obviously details the reforms of Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton who attempted to introduce monotheism into Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE; and who is often regarded as the first monotheist. While the song initially has the tone of a 'historical narrative' it ends with the lines:

Visions of madness led the Pharaoh astray
The portents were too ominous
Until this day his curse is still the plague of Man
We must defeat the only God

A strong criticism of monotheism can be found in Dragon Rouge, so the lyrics could be interpreted as being in line with Dragon Rouge philosophy.

However, at closer examination one notices that most of these critiques are expressions of Karlsson's sentiments, rather than official positions of the order. There have indeed been members of Dragon Rouge who have adopted a much more positive appraisal of monotheistic religion (Granholm 2005: 158–159).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the challenges of researching popular culture and the esoteric and esoteric influences in metal music in general. The main focus has, however, been on the esoteric elements in the music of Therion, and in particular the connections between these and the magic order of Dragon Rouge. I have here only discussed the band and the magic order directly. Directly discussing with fans of Therion, or members of Dragon Rouge, would certainly yield interesting, and possibly very different, results. Another possible avenue would be to take a proper cultural production perspective and look at the role played by different actors in the cultural industry, such as record companies, radio stations, and music journalists. These all play important roles in the position of Therion on the cultural field, and by extension they can be expected to have had a bearing on the 'career' of Dragon Rouge as well. Such an approach would, however, require a significantly more extensive study than it has been possible for me to do here, as well as a deeper familiarity with the research field of cultural production than I possess at the moment.

The treatment of esoteric themes in Therion is much broader and more informed than what is common in metal music, largely due to Thomas Karlsson's intimate familiarity with the subject. There is also little doubt that the music and lyrics of the band Therion have made people aware of Dragon Rouge. I have myself been contacted by a number of persons who have expressed an interest in my work on Dragon Rouge after becoming aware of the order through the band. Furthermore, it is not unlikely that some of these people have become members of the order. Still, when considering that the sale of Therion records amount to several hundred thousands, and the membership of Dragon Rouge has fluctuated between 300 and 400 for most of the 2000s, it is clear that any direct connection between the impact of Therion and the membership of Dragon Rouge cannot be drawn. It is also worthy to note that while Therion's main composer, Christofer Johnsson, has been a member of Dragon Rouge since 1991, and the band's main lyricist since 1996, Thomas Karlsson, is the founder of

the order, the rest of the band are in no way connected to Dragon Rouge. This is something that Johnsson has repeatedly stressed (see for example Lahtonen 2007). In terms of music, Therion bears little resemblance to the music actually used in ritual contexts within Dragon Rouge. Lyric-wise, Therion can be regarded an expression of Karlsson's private interests, whereas the philosophy of Dragon Rouge has been developed by several people. While Therion certainly is involved in the esoteric in the broad sense that it does both contribute to and draw from the reservoir of esoteric subject matter that Christopher Partridge calls occulture, it is *as a band* connected neither to the esoteric in general nor Dragon Rouge in particular. Primarily, Therion is a metal band engaged in producing music, selling records, and performing its music.

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