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BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM ON *SOVEREIGNTY AND THE SACRED*

SPIRITUAL ECONOMY

Sovereignty and the Sacred: Secularism and the Political Economy of Religion. By Robert A. Yelle. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. Pp. 304. $100.00 (cloth); $32.50 (paper); $32.50 (digital). ISBN: 9780226585451.

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Robert Yelle's *Sovereignty and the Sacred: Secularism and the Political Economy of Religion* is a terrific book. It is also a lot of fun to read. Yelle is a generous and careful reader of texts, inviting the reader to see some old favorites anew and presenting new ones to add to the favorites. Unusually among those who take up these topics, he ranges across a global and historically capacious set of examples. His book is learned but not pedantic. It is also passionate. We who are his readers may not always agree, but we are challenged to take a stand.

Given the erudition behind this volume, some may be inclined to assume that it is merely an academic exercise. They would be mistaken. Yelle ambitiously urges every reader to consider the high stakes of their misguided devotion to scientific rationalism and technocratic progress, arguing that escape from the iron cage and, indeed, the very possibility of ethical action, can only be realized through the sacred—through transcendence. We must recognize that "there is not and never has been any 'fact' of disenchantment, except in the sense in which cultural attitudes become crystallized and taken for realities by virtue of being widely disseminated and believed in by substantial majorities or influential minorities" (71).

Sovereignty is a newly urgent topic today—set, as it is, amidst a global order in disarray—or perhaps the extent of its misconception and its disarray is only newly recognizable. Yelle wants to jog readers out of their legal torpor and prod them to live large—to imagine what the sacred—what sovereignty—could enable if it were freed from the disabling secularist myths of the social sciences. He urges his readers to remember what sovereignty meant when it was sacred. Or perhaps what the sacred was when it was sovereign.

I begin this brief response to Yelle's text with his last paragraph: "The goal of this book has been to reread the historical archive so as to reveal that what we call religion is an *anamorphosis*, a distorted image that can be seen properly only from a particular perspective, from which it reveals its true form, as sovereignty. This shift of perspective at the same time discloses an opening in the system: an exit sign. Once this shift has been achieved, it is impossible to unsee the opening. What lies on the other side is anyone's guess" (187).

This is a remarkably opaque and tantalizing set of claims, one that gestures well beyond what has preceded it. What religion discloses, the reader is told, is an exit sign. In other words, the reader must begin reconstruction with a contemplation of the exit sign.

La mise en abyme, one might say, in literary parlance.

I belong to a small group of scholars from different subfields within religious studies who for the last six or seven years have been together reading the novels of Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard as religious. We have met once a year to discuss passages from his six-volume autobiographical novel, *My Struggle*, his earlier novel, *A Time for Everything*, and other occasional

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writings.[1] Refusing the necessary secularity of contemporary literary fiction and attracted by very specific qualities of Knausgaard's own writing, we have tried to figure out how he does what he does and why each of us—in quite different ways—read it as religious.[2]

For me, one of the clues to the uncanny and possessive quality of Knausgaard's prose is in his reference and recourse to the literary figure of the mise en abyme: the picture within the picture or the play within the play; an image infinitely recursive, as with one's image in two mirrors set at an angle.[3]

The mise en abyme has a very long pedigree in visual and textual arts. In some ways it might seem to be a ubiquitous or even universal quality of language and of human consciousness, reinforcing Yelle's observation. But in literary studies, most accounts begin with André Gide's reflections on the image of the mise en abyme in his diary.

The diary entry for August 1893 begins with a quotation from George Eliot: "'Our deeds act upon us as much as we act on them.'" And the entry ends with this: "An angry man tells a story; there is the subject of a book. A man telling a story is not enough; it must be an angry man and there must be a constant connection between his anger and the story he tells." The constant connection is necessary, Gide says, in order to achieve "reciprocity, not in one's relations with others, but with oneself. The subject that acts is oneself, the object that retroacts is a literary subject arising in the imagination."[4] Being a writer requires attending to this reciprocity between text and writer.

Between Gide's two observations on how writing acts upon the writer is his often-quoted passage on the figure of the mise en abyme:

> In a work of art, I rather like to find transposed, on the scale of the characters, the very subject of that work. Nothing throws a clearer light upon it or more surely establishes the proportions of the whole. Thus, in certain paintings of Memling or Quentin Metzys a small convex and dark mirror reflects the interior of the room in which the scene of the painting is taking place. Likewise, in Velazquez's painting of the *Meniñas* (but somewhat differently). Finally, in literature, in the play scene in *Hamlet*, and elsewhere in many other plays. In *Wilhelm Meister* the scenes of the puppets or the celebration castle. In *The Fall of the House of Usher* the story that is read to Roderick, etc. None of these examples is altogether exact. What would be much more so, and would explain much better what I strove for in my *Cahiers*, in my *Narcisse*, and in the *Tentative*, is a comparison with the device of heraldry that consists in setting in the escutcheon a smaller one "en abyme," at the heart-point.[5]

Gide is most often taken to be describing a calculated and entirely self-enclosed recursivity. Yet, as Gide's examples and his own explanation makes clear, the power of the mise en abyme is in its capacity to both establish the internal meaning of a work of art or literature and to open that work onto a larger and ambiguous reality—onto the abyss. What Yelle calls the exit sign. The particular thereby discloses the universal unknowable—that which escapes our knowing—"something wild—something untamed and spontaneous," as Yelle names it (184). Just, perhaps, as writing

1 Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle*, trans. Don Bartlett Farrar, 6 vols. (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2012–2018); Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Time for Everything*, trans. James Anderson (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2009).

2 Our work is now gathered in a collectively authored volume: Courtney Bender et al., *The Abyss or Life is Simple* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

3 See, for example, Knausgaard, *My Struggle*, 1:352.

4 André Gide, *The Journals of André Gide 1889–1949*, vol. 1, *1889–1913*, trans. and ed. Justin O'Brien (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1987), 17–18.

5 Gide, *The Journals of André Gide*, 18.

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demands reciprocity, sovereignty also requires attending to the exchange between sovereignty and the exception?

Yelle insists that religion is a "function" not a thing. What he calls "spiritual economy" has a dynamic internal logic dependent on the exit sign: "Viewed from this perspective, what we have been calling 'religion'—a term for which . . . I would prefer to substitute the phrase 'spiritual economy'—often constitutes a series of exit signs from a condition that is regarded as limited, alienating, unjust, illegitimate, intolerable, or simply boring" (14). Understanding the history of religion is, for him, necessary for human flourishing.

Gide himself recounts that he found in French heraldic practice the most precise analogy to the reciprocity he was trying to achieve in his fiction, that is, the "setting in the escutcheon a smaller one 'en abyme,' at the heart-point."[6] Gide also mentions *Hamlet*'s play within the play and Diego Velázquez's *Las Meniñas*. As Knausgaard notes, the device is also ubiquitous in advertising, where it has its own special name, the Droste effect, after the illustration on the box of Swiss cocoa powder of a young woman holding a box that itself has an image of a girl holding a box, and so on.

Knausgaard is haunted by branding. We see this preoccupation with branding at various moments in his novels. These marketing images draw him into the religious world of advertising, one in which reality is mediated by the product, and the image within the image anchors the viewer to an already always existing magical power.[7]

But the mise en abyme—like all real magic, perhaps—is a dangerous business. While deceptively simple in its replication and multiplication, many who write about it caution about its power. In an article on mise en abyme and metalepsis, for example, Dorrit Cohn discusses the way in which figures of speech can cause vertigo by making the metaphysical claim that the reader and the characters in the story inhabit the same narrative. In an extreme case—she uses the example of Julio Cortázar's story "Continuity of Parks," in which the reader of a story is murdered by a character in the story—the reciprocal intimacy of the setting of the scene, one in which the green velvet chair in which the reader sits also appears in the story, leads to death.[8]

In *A Time for Everything*, Knausgaard invents a fictional renaissance angelologist, Antinous. Toward the end of Antinous's life of searching for and researching angels, he comes upon the archangels Michael and Raphael in a clearing in the forest. He witnesses Michael's death and abandonment by Raphael and then walks over to look at the body. "This was what he'd dreamed of. All his adult life he'd dreamed of this: a dead angel." Antinous picks up Michael and takes the dead angel home with him. "All the way home . . . he thought about the angel in his arms. But not about what it was. Only what it represented. It could get him everything he'd yearned for. Fame, respect, admiration . . . they would worship him." He makes plans to dissect the angel. "The angels had had eternal life, then they'd been trapped here and become mortal. But they hadn't become human . . . he might be holding the very key to life."[9] Sitting in his study that evening, with the dead angel on ice in the cellar, Antinous reflects on what he had seen:

6 Gide, 18.

7 For an extended discussion of the religiousness of advertising, see Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

8 Dorrit Cohn, "Metalepsis and Mise en Abyme," trans. Lewis S. Gleich, *Narrative* 20, no. 1 (2012): 105–14, discussing Julio Cortázar, "Continuity of Parks," *in The End of the Game and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 63–65.

9 Knausgaard, *A Time for Everything*, 443–45.

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> *It looked as if Raphael had done it before.* There was no grief there. Michael, God's general, the foremost amongst the archangels, immortal—shouldn't his death induce a little more than these simple hand gestures? That single glance?
>
> Raphael had looked at him the way a mother looks at a sleeping child. She goes out, and then she comes back in the morning.
>
> But its brow was cold, Antinous wrote. And there was no pulse.
>
> What did he know about an angel's body temperature?
>
> What did he know about an angel's heart rhythms?
>
> He knew nothing about them, he realized, as he sat there writing. He'd always regarded his writing as a sort of friend, a friend who would always listen to him, and this time was no exception, for the very last thing Antinous Bellori wrote in his notebooks, was triflingly enough, that unfortunately he'd have to stop there, he had to check up on something, and it couldn't wait.[10]

This scene, almost gothic in its mood, shows Antinous just before he abruptly vanishes from the story. This scene also recalls the scenes in books 1 and 4 of *My Struggle*, when Karl Ove sees the blood on his dead father's face and realizes that there had been no blood in the house. The narration of the dead angel and of Antinous's last moments likewise suddenly takes on the mood of a crime thriller. Maybe the angel is not dead. It is like his father's missing blood. He realizes he knows nothing. He sees the gaps. And you feel the fear. If Michael is not dead . . .

There is a parallel here with Yelle's work, I think, but also a difference. Knausgaard shows the reader the terror of the exit sign as a necessary condition of being—and of writing. But his work also cautions of real danger. As Yelle says in his last paragraph, "What lies on the other side is anyone's guess" (187). Yelle wants his reader to see the exit sign as offering more, notwithstanding its abyssal emptiness. For him, the historical record of what he calls the exit signs of spiritual economy, including the Jubilee of ancient times, should awaken us to the possibility of justice. While acknowledging that Yelle's anger and frustration at our ignorance and hubris seems right, I am not sure that a return to ancient Israel will accomplish what he hopes. Indeed, I am not sure that it is possible. There is a real threat in the exit sign.

I think that the way to justice is not through a sacrificial economy but through new imaginings of community—beyond the apotheosis of the human created by the early modern world, as Zakiyyah Jackson argues in *Becoming Human*.[11] Vincent Lloyd recommends as an alternative to a political theology founded on sovereignty, a politics of the middle.[12] "Enough with sovereignty," he says: "There are many other political concepts operative today that have concealed but powerful religious histories. We don't talk about them enough. Why? Sovereignty names a claim of primacy, and in that claim mystifies so as to achieve unwarranted primacy, fitting the joints of a secular, modern political imaginary: individual, state, God . . . with the force of sovereignty stilled, the God-like individual and the God-like state are no longer the starting and ending points for political-theological analysis. What comes in between matters just as much, if not more."[13]

"The opposite of sovereignty is not anarchy but rather hope," Lloyd says, "and hope is accessed through the practice of attending to the complex space (or "broken middle" [referencing Gillian

10 Knausgaard, 446–47.

11 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 1–21.

12 Vincent Lloyd, "Complex Space or Broken Middle? Milbank, Rose, and the Sharia Controversy," *Political Theology* 10, no. 2 (2009): 225–45.

13 Vincent Lloyd, "States of Exception: From the Sovereign to the Church," *Political Theology Network*, March 18, 2021, https://politicaltheology.com/from-the-sovereign-to-the-church/.

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Rose]) of social life, the space that is exposed when purported sovereigns are demystified."[14] This is the space Knausgaard describes for us in *My Struggle*. It offers an alternative to the sovereign politics advocated for by Yelle.

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14 Lloyd, "States of Exception."

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