

Trickster in Between

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1 – *The space between*

"Trickster goes where the action is, and the action is in the borders between things."

Michael Chabon, *Trickster in a Suit of Lights: Thoughts on the modern Short Story*

The problem of course, is that these days it is hard to conceive of anything being 'in' the border. By decree, habit and a couple of centuries of cartographic practice the border has become a nothing, a zero, a linear signifier for a signified that is not really there. Occupying no space itself, the borderline is a punctuating non-space between those domains we take to be real. And yet the boundary *as a space* is hugely important. It is only very recently that boundaries have been reduced to lines on the map. Prior to that, in every recorded human culture, the boundary is the domain of the Trickster; the fecund hermaphrodite menace that torments, mocks and confounds the social norm and, in doing so, enacts and confirms it. For Trickster the boundary is the site of transgression, the locus of mischief - where the action is.

Trickster comes in many guises, but a common feature of them all is to blur the distinction between states of being, rights and wrongs, good and evil, male and female, magic and religious, sacred and profane – dragging aspects of one into the domain of the other. And in this clash of realities, in addition to a great deal of mess and confusion, he creates new combinations, new possibilities, new realities. If ever there were a god of the collaborative act, in other words, it is Trickster.

Trickster has certainly been a god of sorts in the past. He is Hermes whose phallic statuary image (the herma) marked the boundaries of land for the Greeks and Romans. He is the Chinese Monkey King who torments (and charms) his saintly companion Tripitaka with his flatulent, drunken behaviour. He is the Winnebago Coyote, the peripatetic fool who is by turns ridiculous, creative, priapic and monstrous. He is Ananse, the Akan Spider-god whose tales can only be told at night. He is Susa-no-o, the Japanese god of storms who embodies extremes of creativity and destruction.

But we (the sophisticated, knowing, modern, 'we', that is) no longer think we need those kinds of gods. Where we have gods at all, they tend to be of the jealous, absolutist variety that no longer inhabit the boundaries themselves but define them for the rest of us. And where we don't have gods and priests to decree these barren enclosures, we have states, governments and bureaucracies.

That said, Trickster does not disappear with the rise of secularism and the inscription of all those empty lines, but is scattered across the imaginative territory of modernity in a variety of forms. Carl Jung – writing in the 1950s - finds a shadowy Trickster in both the mob, the mass sublimation of the individual to the will of the crowd, and in the dictator, the phantom made real. In literature we still find Trickster in fine form as Mephistopheles, Goethe's poodle-turned-demon who bargains for Faust's eternal soul with words, ink and paper. He is Falstaff, Huckleberry Finn, Batman and the Joker, Uncle Sam (at least in the hands of Robert Coover), and many other (anti-) heroes of stage, page and screen. More recently, Lewis Hyde, who has done more than anyone to search for the remnants of Trickster, finds him in the person of the modern artist, composer and writer – boundary crossers such as Picasso, Duchamp and Cage who made careers out of defying, disrupting (and then defining) aesthetic expectations.

Whilst all these claimed incarnations of tricksterism are compelling, they raise a problem. Despite being in Jung's terms "a 'psychologem', an archetypal psychic structure of extreme antiquity," Trickster is reduced in these incarnations to individuals, and often mortal ones at that. However transgressive these characters may be, they represent a mode of personification that is anathema to the spirit of Trickster. And by the same token it is too easy, and inadequate, to argue that this ubiquitous feature of our existence slopes meekly off back to our individual subconscious to quietly await the next outburst of collective rage or avant-garde experimentalism. This allows Trickster to emerge only as an exception, and he would hardly be satisfied with that. So where is Trickster?

2 – *The Money Devil*

The money complex is the demonic, and the demonic is God's ape; the money complex is therefore the heir to and substitute for the religious complex, an attempt to find God in things.

Norman O Brown, 'Filthy Lucre', *Life Against Death*

The devilish nature of money – capricious, protean, promiscuous, amoral - has long been recognised. During the long and bloody genocide perpetrated by the witch-hunters of 16th and 17th century

Europe, victims were sent to the stake because they *sold* themselves to the devil. Participants in orgiastic witches' 'sabbats' were rewarded with gold for their exertions; an ephemeral, devil's gold that would vanish by the morning. The heinous criminality of these (mainly) women was defined as much by the monetisation of evil as by the witchcraft itself. One might have thought the involvement of 'gold' in these activities was redundant – surely consorting with Satan was bad enough – but it seems it was the acceptance of the devil's money that produced the darker evil.

By the 18th century, money was no longer something simply used by the devil to corrupt his victims, it was the devil itself – albeit a rather watered down, metaphoric version. A series of popular *Épinal* prints of the '*diable d'argent*' (the money devil), for example, shows a demon scaled with coins flying over the urban landscape of contemporary France – in the form of a tableau of tradespeople and craftsmen – dropping, sweating, pissing and shitting cash into their greedy outstretched hands. Here the consequences of corruption are different, however. This is not the individuated corruption and persecution of the witch-hunts, but the collective pollution of society at large by the rapidly increasing reach of the false money economy: the devil's excrement, dirty money, filthy lucre. The painter, baker, lawyer, rope-maker, wine-maker and others all neglect their respective crafts, mesmerised by the money devil. Marx later echoed this fear of money's debilitating impersonality in his claim that the bourgeois economy, 'has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment"'.

Although we now rarely encounter direct association between money and the devil, it is not far below the surface. As the credit crisis of 2008 reached its apogee, a home-made banner appeared on Wall Street bearing the exhortation, 'Jump, you fuckers!' Whilst this was clearly an optimistic allusion to the propensity of bankers to fling themselves from high windows when things go bad, it also carried a distant echo of the libidinous money devil. The word 'fucker' originates less in the Anglo-Saxon, than in the name of the Augsburg banking family *Fugger* active, and actively despised from the 16th through to the 18th centuries. The deliberate corruption of the name (which the *Fugger* earned through their devilishly ruthless business practice) invokes the same fear of unbridled lascivious excess that drove the witch-hunts.

But this sexualisation of money also alludes indirectly its tricksterish (pro-)creative power. Our dilemma in having to deal with it on a daily basis is not simply that it is evil and we'd sooner not touch it, but that money carries with it the much older ambiguity of our relationship with Trickster – it is both good and bad at the same time. Money as an abstracted intermediary occupies a boundary zone analogous to that of Trickster through which, in its role as the 'general equivalent,' anything can pass and be transformed. As Jorge Luis Borges put it,

[...] I reflected that there is nothing less material than money, since any coin whatsoever (let us say a coin worth twenty centavos) is, strictly speaking, a repertory of possible futures. Money is abstract, I repeated; money is the future tense. It can be an evening in the suburbs, or music by Brahms; it can be maps, or chess, or coffee; it can be the words of Epictetus teaching us to despise gold; it is a Proteus more versatile than the one on the Isle of Pharos. It is unforeseeable time, Bergsonian time, not the rigid time of Islam or the Porch. The determinists deny that there is such a thing in the world as a single possible act, *id est* and act that could or could not happen; a coin symbolizes man's free will.

For all its devilish nature, money is here cast as creative and collaborative. Indeed Borges echoes Georg Simmel's earlier and even more emphatic statement that money is:

...the adequate expression of the relationship of man to the world, which can only be grasped in single and concrete instances, yet only really conceived when the singular becomes the embodiment of the living mental process which interweaves all singularities and, in this fashion, creates reality.

Trickster has not disappeared from the modern world because he hides in plain sight at its very core. Animated in the course of the 16th century by the Arabic zero, the mathematics of Luca Pacioli and a flood of American silver, Trickster re-emerged in the account-books of Europe even as he was fading from their pantheons. Trickster lives on in 'ghost money', 'imaginary money', bills of credit and exchange, fiduciary, token and electronic money, offshore currencies; all those pecuniary phantoms that form the illusory foundations of capitalism, but which also 'create reality', 'symbolize man's free will'.

Just as Trickster is a plausible god of collaboration, so money is probably mankind's greatest (and most dangerous) collaborative venture. Money only 'works' for all its many faults because we all participate in its creation and reproduction. And once it's there, it's protean in-betweenness offers us creative possibilities and likely catastrophes of which older Tricksters could only dream. Like Trickster himself, money is something we have created as a bridge between what passes for reality and those other spaces we cannot plot on a map. Despite this, we have suppressed the tricksterish nature of our creation because for some reason we fooled ourselves that money is *real* and *neutral*: the stuff of that colourless homunculus, *homo oeconomicus*. We are all paying a high price for our reluctance recognise the libidinal, devilish, procreative side of money – and like its tricksterish

predecessors, it is mocking us. Trickster was a figure of fun, but also a figure of fear: he embodied the huge risks as well as the thrilling possibilities of being in the boundary.

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