

In Search of the Sublime

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A woman is a mythical creature until she is given her own voice. It is in search of that voice that I have begun reading these diaries. I say begun, because I have only just begun, and it's clear to me that anyone could spend months reading and researching this material. I'm a practitioner, not a scholar. A complete reading is far beyond my horizon. Instead, this is nothing more than a public note to say these diaries exist and have been made available to us. These women wrote, and these women, who were nearly engulfed by their own mythologies, had voices of their own and were, in fact, women. Which is to say, they were human beings, lest we forget.

This also means that Leah Hirsig and Jane Wolfe lived their lives in the same history as all the rest of us. The events that took place in Cefalú took place in the same material reality as all other events of that same period. The remnants of the Abbey of Thelema still linger in the landscape. As far as I can tell, without having visited myself, what is left is nothing more than a small villa, now in ruins. At the time when it was home to these early Thelemites, it was probably not much more. It was a house. One critique that is easy to bring up about the Abbey of Thelema is that it often failed to nurture and care for the human and material needs of its small commune. What Aleister Crowley once described as heaven does not always seem heavenly to me.

I can speak only for myself, and my own readings of these diaries, of course. But in my imagination, I would have liked to visit Jane Wolfe and Leah Hirsig there. I would have liked to know what it was like to live between these perplexing realities. At once, there was the material desperation, the sometimes-fraught

relationships, the loss of a small child, death, and the constant confusion of habitual and experimental drug use.

Then, there was the holy office of Scarlet Woman, and the serious search for a spiritual path through life. A new life, a new meaning of life, and—as the foreword points out—the prospect of being a New Woman, which was a thing a hundred years ago, and maybe, in some ways, is still a thing today. When you are finally free to invent yourself, after having been invented by others for so long, the question insists upon itself. Who will you be? A hundred years later, that question is still relevant. Thelemites might even want to take it a few steps further.

With that said, I want to be very clear that I'm not writing this as a scholar (which I am not), but as a Thelemite (which I am). Scholarly work makes this sort of visit to the past possible, but this is not scholarly work. This is more like a diary about a diary. A female Thelemite reading the words of other female Thelemites. After a century has passed, one might say—at last.

I. The Material

It is through the recent work of Manon Hedenborg White and Henrik Bogdan that the diaries of Leah Hirsig arrive in our own time. Published in the summer of 2025, and made accessible through Oxford University Press, the diaries are new to me, but old to time. Leah Hirsig lived a long life, but her involvement with Thelema, although impactful, was not her whole life. According to the researchers, it seems little is to be found about Hirsig's life after the diaries end, sometime after her relationship with Aleister Crowley was over. Leah Hirsig was, of course, far from unknown before this publication. She was the Scarlet Woman, who at one point stopped being the Scarlet Woman. And as she disappeared into the mists of her own private history, her own life, one was always left to wonder where she went, and who she was. What did she think about all of this herself? What does a person do with a holy office, first given and then taken away? Was it all a romantic fantasy? Or did the Scarlet Woman manifest, for a moment, through the life of Leah Hirsig? Was there some sort of message? Or was it more like an event?

The letters and diary entries collected in *Leah Hirsig's Magical Diaries* are a carefully researched portrait. It begins when Leah falls in love with Aleister and ends on a very different note. Between meeting and parting, Beast and Scarlet Woman travel through many landscapes and seasons. In these landscapes and seasons, for what it's worth, much of the budding foundations of Thelema were formulated. There were visions, plenty of drugs, and not always enough food, sleep, or money. Books were written, and several of Crowley's comments on *The Book of the Law* were produced. In the background of these personal records, the structures of Astrum Argentum, the A A , and *Ordo Templi Orientis*, the O.T.O., were being assembled.

From the start one becomes aware of life as it is, and life as it should be, or as it could be, if only it made any sense. To bridge the gap between vision, and circumstance, Hirsig often bargains with reality. She is a magician after all, and her diaries are full of magical thinking. But she also strikes me as a woman with a light and positive personality. Terrible things happen, but she recovers, without too much bitterness. Aleister Crowley describes her as sweet. Through the work of Manon Hedenborg White, and Henrik Bogdan, we are presented with a life. At times this life was incredibly embarrassing, reckless, and even stupid, but their academic study of it remains nuanced. To touch on topics that would shock many people still today, without losing anything of the scholarly tone is an art in and of itself. But it is also an act of empathy, and respect. Sex Magick, female masturbation, drug use, moral transgressions, and mortifying grief are all difficult topics. Not to mention the most difficult topic, the signs of a failing motherhood, and maybe even domestic abuse, or neglect, that are evident throughout the pages. I come away from my very first reading profoundly grateful because all of it is simply *there*. No judgements, no excuses, and no exaggerated, or premature conclusions. As a reader, I'm left to think for myself, and I'm left to face my own reactions. Which is ultimately the mark of true scholarship.

Encouraged after reading Leah Hirsig's diaries, I immediately ordered the diaries of Jane Wolfe, titled *Jane Wolfe: The Cefalú Diaries*, published through the Temple of the Silver Star. It turned out to be a very different publication. As I opened it, to my surprise, I found handwritten notes, followed by pages typed out on a typewriter. In the margins, the occasional comments by Aleister Crowley to Jane Wolfe. I knew

immediately I was in for a much more difficult read. In fact, I was going to read a copy of the original without a formal transcript. Left this way, to fend for myself, with no scholarly hand to guide me, I had to take a short break and reset my own expectations. Before I could begin, I had to think.

While *Leah Hirsig's Magical Diaries* are presented from an academic standpoint to the outside world, *The Cefalú Diaries* are presented from the standpoint of the insider, a hand holding out an heirloom to marvel at and ponder. I couldn't help but think that fate itself seemed to continue here beyond the grave. Because while Leah Hirsig broke away, eventually renouncing all her previous oaths, and connections to Thelema, reformulating its meaning for herself, protesting Crowley's interpretations, Jane Wolfe went on to form a sort of Thelemic lineage. A lineage here simply means that Aleister Crowley guided Jane Wolfe, and Jane Wolfe guided Phyllis Seckler, then finally, Phyllis Seckler chose to confide in David Shoemaker, who wrote the foreword to the book in my hand. To believe in a lineage is also to believe in a source, and in some kind of transmission. I don't know what I personally believe, but along that lineage, these diaries were passed on and then handed out for the rest of the world to read.

The Cefalú Diaries benefit from being read alongside *Leah Hirsig's Magical Diaries*, and vice versa.

II. The Past is a Foreign Country

These scattered comments on magick, and life, drift into our hands from a different time, a different *now*. But the funny thing about history is that in that *now*, there was also a different past, and a different future. The way we think about the past today is not the way Leah Hirsig, or Jane Wolfe might have thought about it, nor is it likely that they thought about the future the way we do, or that they thought about our present *now*, their future, the way it really is today.

Women first gained the right to vote in Europe in 1906, in what was then the Grand Duchy of Finland. In France, women did not gain the right to vote until 1944. In Switzerland, the birthplace of Leah Hirsig, women first gained the right to

vote in 1971. Leah Hirsig died in 1975. Who knows if she ever voted? In California, U.S.A., where Jane Wolfe died in 1958, women gained the right to vote in 1911, and in 1920 the same right was won on a national level. Which means Jane Wolfe, born in 1875, belonged to the first generation of female voters in America.

Sex education did not exist in any meaningful way at the time of the Abbey of Thelema. Meanwhile, in a historical parallel, elsewhere in Europe, and in America, a revolution was starting to form. It would nonetheless still be decades before women were liberated from a dangerous lack of reproductive rights, from misinformation, misconception, and general secrecy. The taboo surrounding sexuality was still very strong. It would take even longer for homosexuality to become legal in Europe, and elsewhere across the globe. In many important ways these issues are still far from settled, and sexual liberty remains unevenly distributed across the world, and even between individuals living in the same countries.

In 1950, it is estimated that 25% of all children who were born died during childhood. Before 1950, an estimated 50% died. This was the case for the whole world, and for almost all of human history. Today only 4% of children die. In many places that number is even smaller. Leah Hirsig had three children, Hansi, Poupée, and Alexander. Her sister decided to take Hansi with her, away from Cefalú. Poupée lived only for a few months before she died from an illness. Alexander was born in 1925. The date of his death, and the length of his life remains unknown. Aleister Crowley had five children. Lilith died of typhus when she was less than two years old. Lola Zaza lived to be 83. Poupée died when she was only an infant. Lulu lived to be 85. Randall lived to be 65.

I say these things to safeguard a certain perspective on the historical reality surrounding the events of early Thelema. It matters because these events have been mythologized and scandalized for more than a century, and they were already scandalous in the time when they took place. Some of it was meant to be a scandal, a rebellion, a rattling of societal chains that might otherwise have remained quietly invisible. Some of it seems to have happened somewhere

between bad luck and bad temper. And some of it seems uncommon and upsetting today but might not have seemed that way when it first happened.

I do not want to either redeem or condemn the early Thelemites. They were, at least for the time being, Thelemites. That is, they had already volunteered for their own freedom, and with it the responsibility that follows. They lived, and that is their achievement. Life is riddled with failure and loss for all of us. Personally, I'm not a clean-cut Crowleyite, meanwhile I don't think he is irrelevant, as sometimes people have suggested. I don't want to get rid of Aleister Crowley, but neither do I want to apologize on his behalf. Who am I to do so? I do think he was truly wicked at times, but I don't think he was the wickedest man in the world. There is plenty of competition for that title. History is full of the wickedness of men, but history is also full of humanity. Life is decidedly difficult, but life is also beautiful. These diaries offer the reader moments of beauty and tenderness too.

III. Life at the Abbey

Between diaries, letters, poems, and confessions, it's possible to get a few good glimpses of daily life at the Abbey of Thelema, but most of the time Jane Wolfe's diaries are about magick. Daily practice, followed by reflection. Drugs to induce, or aid, in active visualization. A tarot spread across one whole page. Interpretations followed by the short, handwritten comments from her teacher, Crowley. Food, sleep, exercise, all of it monitored by herself on a daily basis. A dream might mean something. A sensation might lead somewhere. A thought might bring a breakthrough of some kind.

Leah Hirsig's diaries echo with a similar pattern. Drugs followed by visions. Visions followed by interpretations. Interpretations commented on or discussed with Crowley. But Crowley was her lover, not just her teacher. In a poem, he implores her to keep him on track with the daily life he has envisioned for the Abbey.

Leah cares for Aleister and wholeheartedly believes in his visions during their time together. Her diaries are full of concern for his well-being, and for the well-being of Thelema as a whole. She cares for the many correspondences that surround

the project, and she cares for the finances as well. There are shopping lists, and letters to be written, money to be counted, and there is work to be done. Every now and then, she makes a comment on Crowley's health. At times, the comments are anxious or annoyed, and at times, they are simply loving. She calls him Beast, Big Bugger Lion, Big Lion. He calls her Monkey. She calls herself Monkey, Bad Monkey. He calls her Wife, and Whore. She calls herself his prostitute. The attempt to care for one another goes both ways, for a while, it seems. Aleister also writes about Leah's health.

Their relationship is deeply physical. Their magick is deeply physical. Leah's own magick is deeply physical too. Reading about it, one becomes aware of the physical ideals of the Abbey. There is swimming and walking. Daily Asana practice and football games. The drug use seems paradoxical as it appears next to sports, and in the next moment, next to intense spiritual devotion. In the moment after that, children appear, and Leah calls them kiddies. While life at the Abbey seems both extraordinary and confusing, it also seems familiar, and not much different than any other life, in any other commune from the 20th century. Free love, drugs, neglected children, and a weird spiritual leader to top things off. I think most people have met someone who talks about cleansing their aura while asking for a cigarette, or someone who is drunk on wine, but eager to discuss their new healthy diet. I think it would be understandable to assume the Abbey of Thelema was just a very early hippie commune. A place a little bit ahead of its time. If that's all, then that's fair. But for Thelemites, regardless of opinion, this was where Jane Wolfe became Soror Estai, and where Leah Hirsig, for a while, lived as Alostrael.

These diaries, by some coincidence, overlap perfectly. *The Cefalú Diaries* cover the years between 1920 and 1923. *The Magical Diaries* start in 1923 and end in 1925. Between Jane Wolfe and Leah Hirsig, an important part of Thelemic history has been kept alive with notes and letters.

Aleister Crowley wrote his own confessions about his time at the Abbey of Thelema. Somewhere between his poetry of filth, *Leah Sublime*, and his *Confessions*, maybe there is some truth to be found. Leah and Aleister shared an intimacy that pushed and pulled at the bursting seams of societal norms that

were already falling apart. The contrast between vision and circumstance becomes once again evident in “the slime” of the body that speaks in Crowley’s poems to Leah, versus the peaceful forgetting of sexual urges that is expressed in *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*. These themes echo another text, written earlier, a while before the Abbey was established. In *Liber Tzaddi*, we find these words:

Many have arisen, being wise. They have said “Seek out the glittering Image in the place ever golden, and unite yourselves with It.” Many have arisen, being foolish. They have said, “Stoop down unto the darkly splendid world, and be wedded to that Blind Creature of the Slime.” I who am beyond Wisdom and Folly, arise and say unto you: achieve both weddings! (Tza 1:36–38)

While in *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, we find the following:

The battle will rage most fiercely around the question of sex. [...] It seems impossible to make men see what to me is obvious; that the only love worth having or indeed worthy of the name is the spontaneous sympathy of a free soul.

IV. Leah Leaves

So, where did that free soul go when the sympathy was lost?

On Sep. 22, 1924, she stayed at Hotel de Maine in Paris, France. She started a new diary.

“This is the beginning of a Magical Career of one who knows herself as Babalon.”

For six more years, the strange relationship between Leah Hirsig and Aleister Crowley continued, but without the romance. These last parts of *Leah Hirsig’s Magical Diaries* are astonishing to read and deserve a deeper study. Cefalú is in the past, Alexander is born, and Leah tells herself that she is free. After a letter sent to Aleister Crowley in the early fall of 1930, the relationship between the former

lovers finally came to an end. Leah Hirsig officially left Thelema and went on to live a long, and much less famous, life.

V. A Comment from a Thelemite Today

Any historical investigation should hopefully leave us with fewer questions about the past, but with more questions about the present, and about the future.

Thelema holds sexuality sacred, and there can scarcely be any debate about this fundamental fact. What there can be, and should be, is a debate about what that means for us today. Sexuality and sexual morality are central to every culture and subculture. The fact that it is always at the heart and center of every society should tell us how immensely important it is—too important to be left in the shadows of superstition, habitual thinking, and cultural programming. Sexuality is life itself (of course), but I believe it is a lot more than simple reproduction. It always has been. Pretending that human beings are not equipped with physical organs for pleasure is both ignorant and dangerous. One remarkable example of this is that Western medicine first mapped the full anatomy of the clitoris in 1998, and since then, it has taken medicine almost three more decades to map the clitoral nerves. The same level of knowledge about the penis has already existed for thirty years. Pretending that we are not highly social animals ‘hard-wired’ for love and connection is, in my opinion, equally dangerous—*because the danger is us*. What we think we are, we become, and if we remain at war with our own nature, war we shall have. Science is light-years ahead of culture when it comes to knowledge about human sexuality and sexual health. Health must be considered carefully as it weighs heavily on what we might achieve in the department of True Will and human flourishing.

It is a brutal time to be a lover of any gender. To keep a noble spirit in the face of violence and hatred is not an easy task. A deranged sexuality that can hardly be recognized as sexuality at all—since it only deals with keeping others living in fear, and submission—is on display everywhere we look today. Sexual violence is unbearable because it breaks the spirit of its victims, and when it is aimed at defenseless people—sleeping partners who believe they are safe in their own

beds, or, worst of all, innocent children—one must revolt. Precisely because what is broken in the individual, in the whole community, and society at large, is something sacred. But I speak from experience (an experience too many of us have had) when I say only love can heal your heart. To love is important.

Another thought that comes from these diaries, and that I think speaks to our present time, is that daily life is important. The residents of the Abbey of Thelema might not have lived the kind of life I would like to live, but that is not the point. The point is that they lived their magick daily. It wasn't set apart for Sundays, for Fridays, or for special occasions. Life was the occasion, and that is something I can agree with in a broader sense. Whatever our troubling times hold in store for each of us, one thing is certain: what happens will happen on an ordinary day, right in the middle of an ordinary life. To meet the trouble when it comes means to meet it in our daily lives. Most of the time, the trouble never comes, and that's a good time to be alive. To live is important.

How to live, and how to love, remain important questions for any practicing Thelemite, and to some extent, because they are existential questions, they can only truly be answered by living. Without the adventures and misadventures of practicing Thelemites, there is no Thelemic life to reflect upon. There is no substance to study unless the *Prima Materia* of a life lived is first created. Without it, Thelema stays in the past where, once upon a time, a hundred years ago, some Thelemites lived.

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