Principia Magica,

or

Some Fundamentals of Magic for Ritual Design and Spellcraft

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References to the sources for quotations and terminology have been given in abridged form in the footnotes. There is a bibliography of these sources at the end of the book, which expands the abridged citations in the footnotes.

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Ritual and Language in Magic

1.1. The Universality and Permanance of Magic

Magic is one of the great universals of human life. The earliest records of our past as a species, in Egypt and Mesopotamia and China, are replete with magical rituals and spells, and also with tales of magicians. No anthropologist has ever found any exotic culture that lacks magic. If you try to write magic off as some primitive, superstitious folly, doomed to extinction as science advances, you will write in vain. Magic will outlast you and all your science.

This is because magic is ***not*** primitive, outmoded science.[1] It is far more like engineering than science. It is an ancient tool-kit of ways and means to solve problems or to get things done, not ways and means to understand the world around us. And in the layman's eyes, these ways *actually work* in some cases, and they *seem to work* in many other cases — not always, but reasonably often. For almost every layman, that is good enough, and more than good enough. That layman is not a scientist, and he has no interest in advancing science for its own sake, only in getting things to work well in his own life. This is why he uses magic so readily. He has always done so, and will always do so.

The present booklet is meant to shed light on the some of the most useful tools in this ancient tool-kit of magic.

1.2. Ritual and Language

By its very nature a human is a ***ceremonial animal,*** that is, an animal to whom

[1] Nor is magic primitive religion. Scholars in all of the relevant academic fields — sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, etc. — have wasted much ink trying to trace the evolution of both science and religion from magic, their supposed primitive ancestor. In vain!

ritual and ceremony come as naturally as speaking.[2] Indeed, both ritual and speech have many things in common: each makes heavy use of symbols, each is highly patterned activity, and each is avidly used by very young children as a tool that extends (or seems to them to extend) their power over their surroundings, including their parents, their relatives and other people.

The other side of the same coin is that humankind is also a ***speaking animal,*** a ***talking animal.*** We chatter without ceasing, and we have done so in tens of thousands of different languages all over the globe and down through the ages. Children, especially twins and triplets, are even able to create new, private languages of their own, each of which has its own limited vocabulary and rudimentary grammar.[3]

And as with language, so with ritual: children also often create small private rituals of their own together, often out of sight of their parents or any other adult.

In these facts — I dare say, in these *biological* facts — are found some of the bases of any general theory of magic. Among other tasks, such a theory should set forth the principles on which human beings are naturally prone to design their rituals and ceremonies, or to craft their charms and spells.

1.3. The Numinous and the Mundane

Another biological fact is that people can very strongly experience certain uncommon emotions that powerfully suggest to them the immediate presence of something quite apart from, or outside of, or well beyond the everyday, mundane, natural world. Such emotions are called ***numinous,*** as are the experiences that generate them.[4] A numinous emotion may be produced by some part of the natural or social environment — an awesome or awful place, a strange pattern of light and shadow, a powerful storm, a person or animal of uncommon demeanor or appearance, a vast space or room, an unusual and

[2] The term **ceremonial animal** is Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1967, 239): *zeremonielles Tier.*
[3] Bakker (1987).
[4] The term **numinous** is Rudolf Otto's (1923, chapters 2–6).

delightful scent or taste, or a piece of music, to give just a few examples out of very many. The opposite of something numinous is something ***mundane.***

Other animals than humans certainly experience emotions, and there are a handful of observations which suggest that a few species among our closest evolutionary relatives may even experience numinous emotions.[5]

1.4. Sacral Language

Throughout the world, cultures generally distinguish the language used in *numinous* areas of life, for example, in magic or religion, from ordinary, everyday language. Sometimes a magic spell must only be whispered, or only be chanted, never spoken aloud in an ordinary way with an ordinary voice.

A religious or magical ritual may even employ a distinct sacred language, like Church Latin in the Roman Catholic Mass (before Vatican II), or Sanskrit in Hindu ritual practice.[6] In some cultures, that sacred language is completely different from the everyday spoken language, and thus wholly unintelligible to the people, as for example, Church Latin is to Catholics who speak only Polish or Hungarian. In other cultures, though the sacred language is a dead language, it is closely enough related to the everyday language of the country that a listener can get the general drift of what its sentences mean, as Catholic speakers of Italian or Spanish can from Church Latin. In still other cases the sacred language may merely be a more or less archaic variant of the every-day language of a community, as is the use in rituals of the archaic English of the King James Bible by some English-speaking Protestants. And there are other possibilities as well.

Nor is literacy a requisite for the existence of a sacral language in a culture. Sacral languages are widely used in indigenous traditional cultures as well.[7]

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[5] Smuts (2001), 299–300 [for baboons], Harrod (2014) [for chimpanzees].
[6] Mohrmann (1957) is a very insightfuil treatment of Church Latin as a sacral language.
[7] For three examples from Indigenous North America, see Hrdlička (1903), White (1944) and Newman (1965).

1.5. Malinowski on the Magic of the Trobriand Islanders

The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski examined one such culture in depth during the years he spent among the Austronesian people of the Trobriand Islands, which lie slightly to the east of New Guinea. There he learned the native language, *Kilivila,* and studied the Trobriand way of life. He was fascinated by their very complex system of magic, and he spent many hours recording spells and rituals, and persuading the professional magicians who deployed them to expound to him their meaning and wider significance. Eventually he came up with "an ethnographic theory of the magical word" to account for what he had found there.[8]

Everyday speech in Kilivila was perfectly intelligible to the natives there, and eventually also even to Malinowski, but the variant of that language used in Trobriand magic was far from clear to most native speakers of Kilivila. It differed from everyday speech through "its richness of phonetic, rhythmic, metaphorical and alliterative effects, with its weird cadences and repetitions." It made heavy use of words that were hard or impossible for even the expert native magician to explain or translate. (Think of magic words in English like *abracadabra* or *hocus pocus* or *rentum tormentum.*) In these magic spells "obscurity is a virtue and non-grammatical formations impart a peculiar and characteristic flavor and value." The sentences of these spells do not convey any specific messages from one person to another, as ordinary speech does, but rather they are used to "inject" the power of magic into ordinary things, setting them apart from a mundane to a magical use.

The Trobriand Islanders held that a spell's magical power was inherent in the words of the spell itself, uttered exactly as the first magicians that ever walked the earth were thought to have uttered them in their ancient, primeval Kilivilan language. When a Trobriand magician utters such a spell now, its power is carried forth on the breath that he must exhale in order to speak. As

[8] Malinowski (1935), especially vol. 2, pp. 211–250, building on his earlier studies (1922, 1923, 1925).

he physically directs his exhaled words into or onto some external object or person, he applies the power of the spell to that object or person. No such power is conveyed when he uses everyday, common Kilivilan speech to talk about everyday matters.

So, naturally, a primeval spell of such uncommon power will not be couched in ordinary, common, everyday words. All magical spells of the Trobriand Islanders show "a very considerable coefficient of weirdness, strangeness and unusualness" in their language. This adds to its power. (By contrast, ordinary mundane speech has a high "coefficient of intelligibility." Both coefficients are at work whenever anyone speaks. The important thing is which coefficient predominates.)

Malinowski's happy phrase, ***coefficient of weirdness,*** is well worth remembering by any theorist of magic. It is not just in the Trobriand Islands that magical rituals and spells gain power in part from their heightened coefficient of weirdness.

1.6. Magic as Verbal and Ritual Art

But that is not all. Malinowski saw that these spells of the Trobriand Islanders also had an esthetic side to them. Compared to everyday speech, they are uncommonly rich in rhythm and rhyme and alliteration, in the subtle use of metaphor and metonymy. They are packed with cryptic allusions to ancient Trobriand mythology and to the mighty works of the islanders' ancestral magicians. In short, these spells are works of sophisticated verbal art. When a magician carries out a magic ritual, he performs a work of art which has a verbal component, but also components of posture, movement, place, time, and other such things. Thus the Magical Art is a true art in the esthetic sense of the word.

1.7. Performative Acts in Magic

Yet, unlike present-day poetry in English, these magic spells are meant to get things done. They are what philosophers and linguists have begun to call *performative* speech acts.[9]

We still have a few performative acts of speech in modern American culture — but only a very few, mostly in the realms of law and religion. When two people exchange vows and an authorized agent of the state pronounces them married, the very words have caused a real change, a change that has lasting consequences in the material world. They are no longer just two people in a relationship: they are now also a married couple with all the special rights and privileges thereof, which they were not before that performative act. When a witness in a courtroom swears to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, he brings about a change in his physical reality: any false testimony of his which would formerly have been a mere lie, is now a act of perjury, a crime that merits heavy material punishments.

In traditional cultures that have no writing, many more kinds of speech acts are *performative.* Among them are magical rituals and spells.

1.8. Pattern and Symbol in the Art of Magic

As in any other art, an esthetic response can be called forth in the viewer or hearer by the highly skillful use of meaningful signs and symbols (including words), and also by the highly skillful use of mere patterns devoid of any meaning.[10] In some traditional cultures, baskets are woven from reeds, and the weaver will weave the reeds into extremely subtle and complex patterns, plainly visible on the outside of the finished basket. This is an art of pure pattern, if (as often happens) the woven patterns themselves have no meaning in the weaver's culture. In other cultures, the basket-weaver's art may

[9] The term **performative** is J. L. Austin's (1962). The concept has been applied with great insight to magic by S. J. Tambiah (1979).
[10] The formal disrtinction between **patterns** and **symbols** in art is Franz Boas's (1927)

produce pictures or symbols of mythological beings, or even represent the flow of a myth's narrative, on the surface of a basket. Here we have an art of form and symbol together. And finally, a storyteller may choose to tell a myth in unadorned words only, without rhyme or rhythm, and yet tell it with such skill that his words alone make a strong esthetic impression on his hearers. Since his words and sentences have meaning, his art is one of pure symbol.

Meaningless patterns and meaningful symbols each have their uses in magic, as in art generally. My examples were from basket-weaving and story-telling, but other examples could have been taken from dance or music or song. Patterns and symbols are universals of human culture. They are also universals of magic.

2
Frazer's Two Laws of Magic

2.1. The Two Laws of Magic

Toward the beginning of the third and last edition of his masterwork, *The Golden Bough* (1911), Sir James George Frazer formulated two principles, or laws, that appear to govern all the Art of Magic, rituals and spells alike:[11]

> *If we analyse the principles of thought on which magic is based, they will probably be found to resolve themselves into two: first, that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause; and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed. The former principle may be called the* ***Law of Similarity,*** *the latter the* ***Law of Contact or Contagion.*** *From the first of these principles, namely the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it: from the second he infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not. Charms based on the Law of Similarity may be called* ***Homoeopathic or Imitative Magic.*** *Charms based on the Law of Contact or Contagion may be called* ***Contagious Magic.*** *... Homoeopathic magic is founded on the association of ideas by* ***similarity:*** *contagious magic is founded on the association of ideas by* ***contiguity.*** *...*
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> *Both branches of magic, the homoeopathic and the contagious, may conveniently be comprehended under the general name of Sympathetic Magic, since both assume that things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy, the impulse being transmitted from one to the other by means of what we may*

[11] Frazer (1911), vol. II, 52–54.

conceive as a kind of invisible ether, not unlike that which is postulated by modern science for a precisely similar purpose, namely, to explain how things can physically affect each other through a space which appears to be empty.

2.2. The Two Laws at Work in a Medieval Ritual of Magic

We may see how these two laws of magic work by looking at an Old English magical ritual which was used a thousand years ago to restore the fertility of fields "if they will not grow well, or if some harmful thing has been done to them by a sorcerer *(dry)* or by a poisoner *(lyblace)."* Scholars have conveniently titled this ritual *Æcerbot,* or *Field Remedy.*[12] (You can find a translation of the full ritual as an Appendix at the end of this book.)

This ritual has come down to our time in just one Medieval copy, though faint echoes of it may still be found here and there in nineteenth-century rural folklore. The only surviving copy was written in Old English by a skillful scribe a thousand years ago. He had copied it from an even older manuscript, which has not survived the ravages of time.[13]

The *Æcerbot* ritual is long and complicated. It probably took two days to complete. To work it fully, more than a half-dozen people had to coöperate: (1) the ritualist; (2) a mass-priest *(mæssepreost)* to sing four masses; (3) the owner of "that land" *(þæt land),* namely, the land on which lie all the many fields *(æceras)* that the ritual is going to protect; (4) several poor "almsmen" *(ælmesmenn);* (5) a plowman; and, somewhere offstage, (6) a baker, who must bake a loaf from special ingredients. It is the land-owner who pays the other participants in the ritual for their parts in the work; but he, too, has his own ritual part to play.

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[12] Grendon (1909), 172–177, 219–220 (spell A.13) edits and translates the text.

[13] The surviving manuscript is now in the British Library (Ms. Cotton Caligula A.vii). Most of it contains a copy of a Christian poem in Old Saxon, the *Heiland,* written sometime in the 10th centuy. The *Æcerbot* charm was added somewhat later on three blank leaves at the end of the manuscript. (Ker 1957, 172.)

The ritualist — the magician, if you like — does most of the work. Since he needs the cooperation of an ordained priest to sing four masses, he will not have been a priest himself. Yet he does know how to read and write in Latin and in Old English, and he also knows how to intone or sing various Christian ritual texts in Latin. He is, therefore, almost certainly a cleric in what were called the minor orders (such as a lector or an exorcist).

Despite the ritualist's clerical standing, the *Æcerbot* ritual is unconventional, and overtly magical. It is not found in any of the standard service books of the Medieval Church. Also, the ritual includes a long versified prayer in Old English, which is framed in an old-fashioned poetic diction that was rooted in bygone Pagan times. Strikingly enough, the prayer is religiously ambiguous. Apart from for one or two words, either a Pagan or a Christian could prad it.

Here is how the ritual goes.

2.2.1. The First Day's Work: Contiguity

The ritualist begins his work in the dark, not long before daybreak. He cuts out four pieces of green turf (four "turfs"), one from each of the four sides of the land-owner's land. Next he takes four liquids: oil, honey, barm (a product of fermentation that contains live yeast), and milk from all cattle that graze on that land. He also takes some of every kind of tree growing on the land, except hard wood; and some of every kind of herb, except *glappan* (a plant that makes burrs, maybe burdock). He adds holy water to this mix of liquids and plant matter. Then he squeezes the fluid out of this mix onto the bottom of each of the four turfs. He says certain Christian texts of ritual power in Latin over each turf. Among them is the Divine command, *Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the Earth* (Genesis 1:28 and, on a second occasion, Genesis 9:1).

Next he takes the four turfs to the local church, and he places them so that the green part (the upper surface) of each turf faces the altar. Then the mass-priest sings four masses — in Latin, of course — over the four turfs. Singing four masses, as they were commonly sung in the early Middle Ages, will take up much of the mass-priest's day.

While the priest sings these masses, the ritualist is otherwise occupied. He makes four wooden crosses from wood of the tree called quick-beam *(cwicbeame),* probably rowan. (The striking red berries of the rowan tree are used even today to protect from malevolent magic.) On each cross he writes the names of the four Evangelists in Latin, probably one name on each of its four arms. He puts one of these crosses in the bottom of each hole, saying in Latin, *Cross Matthew, Cross Mark, Cross Luke* and *Cross St. John.*

These are simply crosses, not crucifixes. Their four arms (according to the Medieval cosmology) correspond not only to the four Evangelists and the four creatures around the Throne of God, but to the four points of the compass, the four major stations of the sun (that is, the solstices and equinoxes), the four seasons of the year, the four parts of the day, the four ages of man, the four elements, and the four humors and temperaments of the human body.

When the mass-priest has finished singing the four masses, late in the day, the ritualist takes the four turfs back to the same holes from which he dug them. He puts each turf back into its proper hole, saying several Christian texts of ritual power in Latin, repeating these texts nine times over each of the four turfs.

Then the ritualist turns to the east, bows low nine times, and says the first thirteen lines of the Old English prayer:

> Eastwards I stand, for favors I ask,
> I ask the glorious Master, I ask the mighty Lord,
> I ask the holy Warden of Heaven's kingdom,
> Earth I ask, and Heaven on high,
> And true holy Mary
> And Heaven's might and high hall,
> That this spell *(galdor)* I might, through the Lord's grace,
> Speak aloud clearly with firm intent,
> To wake up these crops for our worldly use,
> To fulfill this Earth *(folde)* in firm belief,
> To beautify this green turf, as the wise man said,
> That he had riches on Earth who alms

Dealt justly, by the will of the Lord.

Next he turns himself round about three times sunwise, or deosil. Then he prostrates himself at full length on the ground and says more Christian texts of ritual power in Latin. Finally he stands up, stretches out his arms, and sings yet more Christian texts of ritual power in Latin. Among them is the *Benedicite,* a very long text from the Bible in which all the creatures of the natural world — including the earth and "all things that grow on the earth" — are commanded, each in its turn, to bless their Creator. (In Catholic Bibles, this prayer is Daniel 3:57-88. Protestant Bibles relegate it to the Apocrypha, where it is part of The Song of the Three Holy Children, verses 35-66.)

All this is to be done, so the manuscript says, for the praise and glory of Christ and Mary and the Cross — but also for the honor of the land-owner and all who are subject to him.

The ritualist has to make sure that all this complicated ritual work is finished by sunset.

This, however, is just the first half of the ritual. The second half will need to be done on the following day.

Before describing the second day's work, however, let us pause to notice something quite distinctive about the first half of the ritual. The magic that has been done up to this point is *a magic that relies heavily on physical contact.* At every step of the way it requires direct physical contact with the land, or with the four turfs cut from it, or at least close proximity to them. In other words, this magic is all about ***contiguity***. Thus it works almost exclusively with what Frazer called the ***Law of Contact.***

Moreover, the first half of the ritual is heavily tinctured with Christian words in Latin and Christian symbols. One might even call it a piece of *Christian magic.* (The same might be said of many other minor Medieval Christian rituals of blessing, healing and exorcism. These other rituals, like the first half of the *Æcerbot,* also rely far more on ***contiguity*** than on ***similarity*** in their magical actions.)

In very sharp contrast, the work of the second day relies heavily on Frazer's other law, the ***Law of Similarity.*** Also, it has hardly anything in it that is unambiguously Christian, just a small use of holy water by a baker off-site and a few words of power in Latin from the ritualist at the very end of the second day's work.

2.2.2. The Second Day's Work: Similarity

On the next day, probably in the early morning, the ritualist and the land-owner meet at one of the various fields on the land-owner's land. The land-owner has already gotten all his plowing gear and tackle *(sulhgeteogo)* together, and brought it with him to the field.

The "almsmen" are already there at the field, too. Most likely they are not wandering beggars, but local lads who have come to the field expecting to receive alms from the land-owner. They already know their part in the ritual, for they have brought with them something that wandering beggars seem unlikely to carry in their packs, namely, "uncooth seed" *(uncuþ sæd),* whatever that might be precisely. (No one knows for sure.) The land-owner takes this "uncooth seed" from the almsmen, and gives them twice as much in return. (It is not clear exactly how "twice as much" worked in practice, whether the almsmen were given twice as much seed, or — more likely — twice the value of the seed in some other form, such as money or ale.)

The land-owner then puts four things into a hole that has just been bored in the beam of the plow: incense, fennel, hallowed soap and hallowed salt. He then places the "uncooth seed" onto the body of the plow, that is, onto the part that will penetrate the earth and turn the furrow. Then the ritualist speaks the next sixteen lines of the Old English prayer:

> Erce! Erce! Erce! Mother of Earth!
> May the All-Ruler grant you, the eternal Lord,
> Fields growing and flourishing,
> Propagating and strengthening,
> Tall stems, bright crops,

And broad barley crops,
And white wheat crops,
And all the Earth's crops.
May the eternal Lord grant him,
And his Holy Ones, who are in Heaven,
That his produce be guarded against any enemies whatsoever,
And that it be safe against any harm at all,
From poisons sown around the land.
Now I bid the Master, who shaped this world,
That there be no woman of speech nor man of craft
Who can overturn these words thus spoken.

Thereupon the land-owner (or perhaps a plowman acting for him) "drives forth the plow and starts the first furrow." While this is happening, the ritualist speaks three more lines of the Old English prayer:

Wassail, Earth *(folde),* Mother of Mankind!
Be growing in God's embracing arm,
Be filled with food for the needs of Mankind.

Hours before all this was done, probably early at the dawning, a baker had baked an unusual loaf of fresh bread, "as big as will lie in the hand." The peculiar dough used for this special loaf was made from every kind of meal that is grown on the land, kneaded together with milk — and also with holy water. This loaf has already been brought to the field. Now it is put *into* the earth *under* the newly opened first furrow. Then the ritualist says the last six lines of the Old English prayer:

Field full of food for mankind,
Bright-blooming, you are blessed
In the Holy Name of the One who shaped Heaven
And the Earth on which we live;
The God, the one who made the ground, grant us the growing gift,
That for us each grain might be of use.

After everything else has been done, the ritualist repeats three times a few of

the Christian words of power in Latin that had already been said on the first day.

With that, the ritual has come to its end, and everyone leaves — except, presumably, the plowman, who will work at plowing the land-owner's fields all the day long.

We probably do not need to specify in every small detail just how the Law of Similarity works in the second half of the *Æcerbot* ritual. The symbolism of the plow and the seed, the newly opened furrow in the field and the fresh loaf put into the earth, is unabashedly sexual. And this same symbolism can be heard even now in old-fashioned speech. A man is sometimes still said to *plow* a woman in sexual intercourse, and a pregnant woman is sometimes still said to have a *loaf* in her oven, or underneath her apron. Moreover, the three lines of the Old English prayer that the ritualist recites just after the plow penetrates the earth are explicit, even blunt:

> Wassail, Earth, Mother of Mankind!
> Be fruitful in God's embracing arm,
> Be filled with food for the needs of Mankind!

In this context, "embracing arm" is not just a warm and fuzzy metaphor for loving kindness. The image is meant to be openly sexual: the Earth who is embraced is called the Mother of Mankind here, and elsewhere in the ritual the God who embraces her is called Father. Here, too, the Old English word for Earth is not the common word (*eorðe*), but a rare and archaic word (*folde*), which seems to be used elsewhere *only* in ritual or magical or poetic speech.

There are also other differences between the two halves of the *Æcerbot* ritual. Apart from the ritualist, the other actors in its second half are all layfolk; but in its first half only a cleric is present to assist the ritualist. The first half is full of Latin texts taken from the Bible and Catholic worship, which amplify the ritual's ***coefficient of weirdness*** on the first day. Apart from a few brief Christian words of power at the very end of the work, the second half of the ritual uses no Latin at all. Rather, its ***coefficient of weirdness*** is provided by the archaic, ritualistic, poetic diction of the Old English prayer.

It seems likely, therefore, that the two halves of the *Æcerbot* ritual arose in different times or places and were artificially joined together by a Christian cleric sometime not too long before our sole surviving manuscript was copied. (The prayer in Old English, however, is a single composition, and thus older than the *Æcerbot* ritual itself.)

There are faint echoes of each half of the *Æcerbot* ritual in modern British folklore, but every one of these folkloric echoes reflects only the first half or only the second half alone, never both halves together.

The first half is echoed by an obscure ritual that used to be carried out in the Parish of Todenham, Gloucestershire. Each year at Rogationtide a procession from the Church traced out the boundary of the Parish, halting at various traditional points on the route. The procession includes four men, each carrying a spade, who were called the "cross-diggers." At each point where the procession halts by tradition, these four men cut a cross-shaped hole into the earth. They make a small mound at the very center of that cross-shaped hole, using the soil they dug up. Then a small green plant is set into the earth at the center of that mound, and the procession moves on to the next traditional halting-place.[14]

And the second half finds a parallel in the sometimes custom of "streeking the plough," and of plowmen dropping a bit of their own noon meal into the first furrow that they cut into a new field.[15]

[14] Williams (1887), Anonymous (1894–5).
[15] Burdick (1905), 42; McPherson (1932), 41; Davidson (1959), 27–29.

3
Magic and the Two Dimensions of Language

3.1. The Laws of Magic, Again

In Chapter 2 we introduced Sir James George Frazer's two Laws of Magic, the ***Law of Similarity*** and the ***Law of Contiguity.***[16]

It ought to be emphasized here that they are not *laws* in the sense that lawyers use when they speak of the "laws of the land," or in the other sense that scientists use when they speak of the "laws of nature." The closest parallels to the two Laws of Magic are provided by the laws on which artists rely as they create works of art in various media, for example, the "laws of perspective" in drawing or painting, or the "laws of harmony" in music. A painter or musician may, and sometimes does, violate these laws to good effect. These laws do not *prescribe,* but only *describe,* how artists can give their art the power to rivet attention, to produce rapture, to enhance its emotional power, to force new insights upon resisting minds. Similarly, the two laws of magic guide the magician as he creates compelling, effective rituals, spells, charms, sigils, and other works of the magic art.

Like the laws of perspective or harmony, the laws of magic derive from the ways in which we humans receive, perceive and conceive the real world about us. As noted in section 1.8, we do this by creating ***symbols*** and ***patterns. Symbols*** and ***patterns*** are some of our oldest and most useful tools for making sense of the world in which we live and for shaping our lives as we live them. Without these tools, we could not even think or speak to much purpose.

3.2. Symbolic Behavior and the Two Dimensions of Language

Semioticians speak of the two *dimensions* of all symbolic behavior, including

[16] Frazer usually called the second law, the Law of Contact or the Law of Contagion

speech and language. By analogy to mathematical graphs, they also call these two dimensions the two *axes* (the plural of *axis*) of symbolic behavior, and they label them the ***axis of similarity*** and the ***axis of contiguity.***[17] These labels happen to match the names of the two Laws of Magic. This is not an accident.

Since this book is about magic, let us illustrate the two *axes* with a very old spell that children still chant — though, alas! often without effect:

Rain! Rain! Go away!
Come again some other day!

Just nine chanted words, but they are enough for our purpose here.

Note, firstly: You can replace some of these words with other similar words. Instead of "Rain! rain! ..." an inventive child might chant "Snow! snow! ..." when snow is falling. Or instead of "some other day!" that child might chant "my next schoolday!" during a rainy school vacation. One word is replaced by another *similar* word, or one phrase by another *similar* phrase. Here the similarity consists in grammar, in meaning, and in the number and position of stressed and unstressed syllables.

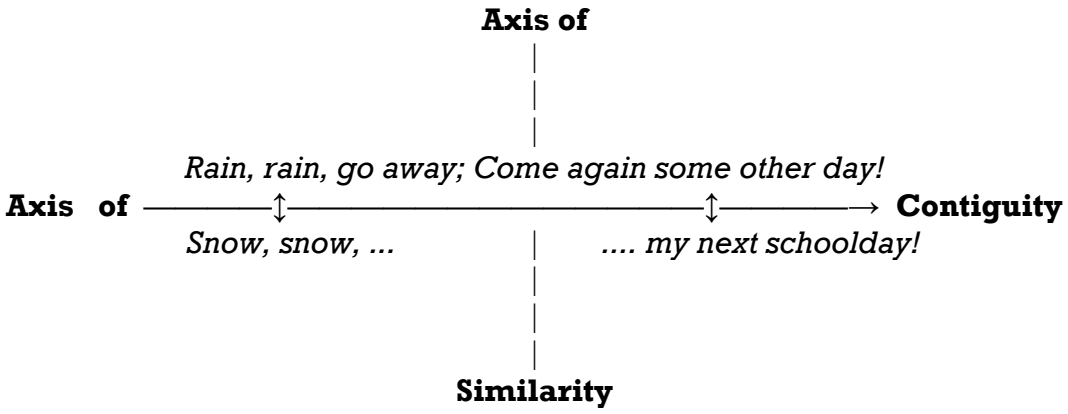
If you replace one word (or any other symbol) by another appropriate word (or symbol) you are working on the ***axis of similarity.***

Note, secondly: The nine words are chanted one after another in time, and in a precise order. It matters hugely which word follows which other word. "Rain! Go away! Rain! Again, some day other, come!" sounds more like a child's foolish, clumsy babbling than a powerful magical command that even the rain must obey.

If you move words (or any other string of symbols) around like this, you are working on the ***axis of contiguity.***

[17] See Barthes (1967), 58–62, for the two *axes* of symbolic behavior.

Here is a diagram that may help to make the two dimensions, or axes, more clear:



The horizontal line, with an arrowhead at its rightmost point, is not only the ***axis of contiguity,*** but also the "arrow of time," which places all our words and actions in their proper order, from the past through the present into the future.

The vertical line is the ***axis of similarity,*** and the two short double-headed vertical arrows mark just two of the many possible places where one word or phrase can be replaced by another similar word or phrase.

3.3. Children's Secret Writing and the Two Dimensions of Language

Children love secrets. Once they have learned to write, they often look for simple ways of secret writing. There are two such ways that children may use when they want to hide their secrets from others' eyes.

One way consists of scrambling the letters or words of a message in some regular fashion, for example, writing the words and letters in reverse order: "Terces a evah I" instead of "I have a secret." This is called *transposition,* and it works along the *axis of contiguity.*

The other consists of replacing the letters of our usual alphabet with letters from some other, little-known alphabet: "I have a secret" may be written 𝔘

[illegible] in the Theban alphabet, or [illegible] in the Enochian alphabet. This is called *substitution,* and it works along the *axis of similarity.*[18]

Of course, the use of secret writing (in either form) also greatly increases the *coefficient of weirdness* of a child's writing, tincturing it with hints of mystery and power.

3.4. Patterned Behavior and the Two Dimensions of Language

In any chanted spell it is not only the meaning and the grammar of the words that matter, but also the patterns that the words make as they are chanted. The two lines of the children's rain-spell *rhyme* with one another (... *away* and ... *day*). Also the two lines have the same *meter* or *rhythm,* that is, the same alternating pattern of accented **(X)** and unaccented **(__)** syllables or pauses:

X	**__**	**X**	**__**	**X**	**__**	**X**
Rain!		*Rain!*		*Go*	*a-*	*way!*
Come	*a-*	*gain*	*some*	*oth-*	*er*	*day!*

Rhyme and rhythm are matters of pattern, not of symbol. Patterns, like symbols, can be formed along the axis of similarity (for example, rhyme) or along the axis of contiguity (for example, rhythm or meter).

There are many other effectual patterns in magic. They are woven into ritual dances and gestures, or into the stations taken by men and women inside a magical lodge or Circle, or traced out by their ceremonial movements therein. They can also be seen in the cycles of heaven and earth, in the seasons and tides, and in the calendars that we follow.

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[18] For the terms **transpositon** and **substitution** in this context see Langie (1922), 26–46, or Gaines (1939), 1.

3.5. An Old Charm Against the Night-Mare

In the 1400s and 1500s several English writers wrote down from memory a traditional charm against the Night-Mare, or (as they said in those days) against being Witch-Ridden by night:

> *St. George, St. George, our Lady's knight,*
> *He walked by day, and so by night*
> *Until he found that foulsome wight.*
> *And when it was that he her found,*
> *He her beat, and he her bound,*
> *Until her troth she to him plight,*
> *She would not come thereat that night*
> *Whereat the saint, our Lady's knight*
> *Was named three times — St. George!*

All the surviving copies of this charm differ somewhat from one another, having been written down from imperfect memory well after it was heard. The version given here is a compilation made from all these copies, showing how the charm probably sounded when it was first composed by some unknown Cunning Man or Woman in the 1200s or 1300s.[19]

When the charm was composed, the words "Night-Mare" did not mean any scary dream, but a very specific and frightening condition of temporary paralysis upon awaking from sleep, of difficulty in breathing, of deep weariness despite long sleep, and of a sense that some malevolent being was controlling the sleeper's movements or had been "riding" the sleeper. This old charm was recited in order to free the sleeper from that horrid being. (Modern medicine recognizes the same affliction, but calls it "sleep-paralysis.")[20]

Note how skillfully this old charm was cast into verse, with careful attention to rhyme and rhythm. Note how the fourth and fifth lines fall powerfully on the

[19] See Simpson (2009) for several versions, and Leland (2011), 128 and 310, for one more.
[20] See Hufford (1982) for the traditional folklore about sleep-paralysis.

ear: thrice three strongly accented syllables follow hard on one after another as the charm is recited: *"he her found, he her beat, ... he her bound."* The force of these nine hammer-blows is only amplified by the way in which the last two verbs *(**b**eat* and ***b**ound)* begin with the same abrupt sound ***b.*** And finally, note the suspense that develops at the end of the charm: so far "St. George" has been named just twice, not thrice, as he must be named if the charm is to work. But then, at the very end of the charm, the charmer speaks the last two words with force, striking them home and sealing the magic with a third "St. George"! ("Third time's the charm" is an old adage.)

The charmer who first crafted this charm seems to have been well aware of how skillfully she had joined all these words together for the maximum impact on her patient, and indeed on anyone else in earshot. Whether consciously or unconsciously, she was deploying the resources of both symbol and pattern with all due attention to the laws of similarity and contiguity. Thereby she greatly enhanced the effectiveness of her charm.

3.6. So What About Our Own Magic?

Just as any spell can gain in power through the skillful arrangement of the various symbols (and words) it uses, so too it can benefit from the skillful use of appropriate patterns.

It is not enough for a magician to formulate her intention with great care and precision. Nor is it enough for her to rivet attention by raising the *coefficient of weirdness* in her spell.

A magician must also skillfully deploy all the resources of symbol and pattern along each axis — the axis of similarity and the axis of contiguity — as she creates her magic spells, or as she designs her magical workings and rituals. These two dimensions are the very warp and woof of the loom, so to speak, on which humankind naturally weaves all its magic, its spells and rituals alike.

Only then will her spell truly be a *performative* act of magic that causes "changes to take place in consciousness in accordance with will."[21]

[21] This definition of magic is Dion Fortune's (1934, 179).

4
Intention, Attention, and Story-Telling

4.1. An Ancient German Spell

A thousand years ago, in the newly christianized northern German lands, a Christian priest wrote down two magic spells on a blank page in a volume of miscellaneous Christian texts. We now call them the *Merseburg spells,* after the city where that manuscript has been kept for centuries. Although the manuscript is mostly in Latin, the priest wrote down those two spells in his every-day spoken language (an ancient form of German).[22]

The Merseburg spells are among the very oldest magic spells that have come down to us from the Middle Ages anywhere in Europe. Not only are they very old, but they are also explicitly Pagan. They mention Woden (Odin) and other powerful Beings from ancient Germanic myth and lore. There is not the least hint of Christianity in them.

The two Merseburg spells were meant to free the limbs of a person or animal from every sort of constraint. The first spell frees them from every bond and fetter, either mundane or magical. The second heals every physical injury to a limb, such as a sprain or a bruise or a break. One insightful scholar noted that the priest who copied them into his book most likely used both of them as a means of healing human lameness (possibly even his own lameness), and was happy to make use of Pagan spells as well as Christian prayers if that was what it took to get the job done.[23]

It is the second of the two Merseburg spells that interests us here. It may be translated as follows, keeping the word order and every ambiguity of the original:

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[22] Grimm (1842).
[23] Murdoch (1988, 1989, 1991).

Phol and Woden rode to the wood
There Balder's foal wrenched his foot.
Then bespelled it Sinthgut, Sunna her sister,
Then bespelled it Friia, Folla her sister,
Then bespelled it Woden, as he well knew how.
As bone-wrench, as blood-wrench, as limb-wrench:
Bone to bone, blood to blood, limb to limbs,
So they are joined!

This spell exemplifies many things that we have already discussed in the first three chapters. It is, first of all, ***performative*** speech. It is employs three-fold parallel constructions ***(patterns*** and ***the law of contiguity).*** It names powerful Deities and Beings ***(symbols*** and ***the law of similarity).*** It has a fairly high ***coefficient of weirdness.***

No one now knows who Phol was, or Sinthgut. We can only guess at the identities of Sunna (Sun?), Friia (Freyja?) and Folla (Full Moon?). We are not even quite sure that Balder is the name of a God, not a title meaning "Lord." Even a thousand years ago, when the spell was first composed, it may have been only rare experts in the myth and magic of their people who knew the full tales of those Beings.

4.2. The Three Parts of a Traditional European Folk Spell

The first five lines of the Merseburg spell tell a little story, a ***historiola,*** about the Pagan God Woden and some companions. (*Historiola* just means a "little story" in Latin.) Very many old traditional folk spells begin with a *historiola* that calls to mind some past act of a powerful Being that is to meant to be done again when the spell is uttered.

The next two lines state the spell's purpose and command its fulfillment; they are called the spell's ***intent.*** Whether it is a bone or a blood-vessel or a limb that has been injured ("wrenched"), the spell restores it to wholeness: *Bone to bone, blood to blood, limb to limbs.*

The final line is the spell's ***ratification,*** that is, a form of words announcing that the work of the spell has now been accomplished: *So they are joined!*

These are the three parts of many a traditional spell in Europe: ***historiola, intent, and ratification.***[24]

Several hundred later variant forms of the Second Merseburg spell have been recorded. They come from almost every country of northern Europe, and every century from the 1300s down to the 1900s. Every one of these later variants has a less elaborate *historiola* than the Merseburg spell, or no *historiola* at all. When there is a *historiola,* it is Jesus or some Christian saint who rides and who heals the mount's injured leg.[25]

4.3. Ceremonial Animals, Talking Animals ... and Story-Telling Animals

So *why* do so many traditional folk spells begin with a *historiola?* Is it more than just a matter of convention and habit? The answer to that question lies in human nature, in the ways in which our biology predisposes us to act.

As noted in Chapter 1, we humans are ***talking animals.*** We talk to pass on information. We talk to get things done. We talk to figure things out.

And quite often we talk — without paying much attention at all to the meaning of our words — simply in order to strengthen the ties that bind us together into communities. By this kind of talking we ***commune*** with one another, though we are not ***communicating*** anything in particular to our fellows. This sort of talking, mere social chatter, Malinowski called ***phatic communion.***[26] (*Phatic* means "talking," so *phatic communion* means communion through talking.)

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[24] For this three-part analysis see Roper (2004 and 2005, ch. 3), whose terminology, however, is **historiola, conjuring** and **ratification.** Tambiah (1968, 190–192) notes that the same three-part structure can be found in traditional spells used by the Trobriand Islanders and studied by Malinowski.
[25] Roper (2005), 96–99.
[26] Malinowski (1923), 477–481.

We humans are also ***ceremonial animals***, as already noted. We have a strong biological instinct to perform ceremonies and rituals, whether as part of a group or alone. We do this for much the same reasons that we talk: rituals pass on information, rituals get things done, rituals help us figure things out. Shared rituals establish *communion* among people, just like shared speech. Like speech, too, rituals can be a means of gaining power over our lives and our world. And finally, humans have a natural hunger for the sacred, for the numinous. Rituals are able to satisfy that hunger. They can strengthen the presence of the sacred in our lives. Whether simple or complex, short or long, rituals are everywhere in human life.

And finally, we humans are ***story-telling animals.*** We weave stories into almost every conversation. Quite often these stories are very simple ones, so short that we do not think of them as stories at all. Yet, for example, when we explain to our boss why we failed to complete some required task, what is our tale of excuses but a very simple story about ourselves and our situation?

Often, too, we tell stories of much greater import than that example, and we tell them in far more detail, with far greater artistry. Such stories, when we tell them about ourselves, can even help us *define* — nay, *create!* — our very identities as individual human beings, either in our own right or as members of some community. By such stories we map out the courses of our own lives from birth to death, and in the process we also give our lives meaning.

The most powerful of these stories can even suggest solutions to the hardest problems of our human lives, or give answers to the deepest riddles of our existence. Stories of this kind are the great ***myths,*** which (as the Neo-Platonist philosopher Sallustius wisely wrote) tell of "things that never happened, but always *are*" (Ταῦτα δὲ ἐγένετο μὲν οὐδέποτε, ἔστι δὲ ἀεί).[27]

And it must be noted, stories of such power as these can also inspire their tellers to create new rituals and ceremonies, in which these myths are enshrined for all time to come. ***Myth*** and ***ritual*** evolve together over the

[27] Nock (1926), 8 [Greek] and 9 [his English translation].

centuries as two parts of the same whole, two sides of the same coin. There is an eternal synergy between them.

4.4. The Story-Teller's Paradox

But herein also lies a paradox. We commonly say that *we tell our stories.* Is it perhaps more true to say that *our stories tell us?* Which comes first, the person or the story?

People do indeed shape the stories they tell. Yet the more powerful a story is, the more it *also* shapes the people who tell it and who hear it told. Powerful stories, too, outlive the people who tell them, as well as those who have been told them. The great myths have been passed down from one generation to the next through all the long ages of history, and will continue to be passed on as long as there are humans to tell and hear them.

The poet Muriel Rukeyser once wrote, with very deep insight, *The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.*[28]

She was speaking, of course, about the universe that we humans experience, about the world in which we live and move and have our being — *not* about that other, quite alien universe studied by the physical sciences, that vast impersonal unstoried world of matter and energy that spans all time and all space, that is fettered and shaped by the iron laws of cause and effect. *These two universes are two quite different things.* No magician worth her salt can ever afford to forget that truth for a single moment!

We have no *unmediated* knowledge of the second of these universes, that quite alien world of matter and energy, time and space, cause and effect. Everything that we do know of it is *mediated,* that is, it gets inside our skins and into our awareness only by passing through the mighty filters of our sense organs and our nervous and endocrine systems. Once it has passed through

[28] Rukeyser (1968).

those filters, it is memory and thought alone that will form it into words, into images and into patterns that we can then use as we live out our lives.

This is *how* we are able to tell stories at all, and also *why* we tell them. And as we tell these stories, they shape us and we shape them. Here again there is eternal synergy.[29]

This is why the universe in which our human consciousness moves and lives and has its being is indeed *made of stories, not of atoms.* This is the story-teller's paradox. This, too, is why magicians and story-tellers are closest kin to one another.

4.5. Attention and Intention

Be all this as it may, there are few things that can rivet a person's attention as strongly as a well-told story of great power. If the story goes hand-in-hand with a well-crafted ritual, then attention is riveted even more strongly. (In part, this is why rituals of initiation and rites of passage are essential to the long-term well-being of every society, including our own. But that is large topic, best left for another time.)

It is a commonplace among magicians that any work of magic can be effective only if the magicians begin their work with a clear, well-defined ***intention,*** and if they hold that intention firmly in mind while they see their work through to completion. If they don't, they are thought to have worked in vain.

However, this commonplace is not quite true. A traditional folk spell or ritual may have had a quite precise intention built into its very structure by the magicians who first created it, or who passed it down from one generation to the next, changing its words and actions slightly to meet the new demands of changed times. The second Merseburg spell is such a spell, as is each of its later variants. Its ***intention*** is built into its words and its actions, from its *historiola* through its *intent* to its *ratification.* (A spell's *intention* is its over-all

[29] Pratchett (2000) offers a very profound commentary on the storyteller's paradox.

purpose and aim, whereas a traditional folk spell's *intent* is the second of its three parts. *Intention* and *intent* are related, but they are not at all the same thing.)

Later magicians who use that spell can take *intention* for granted, so long as they work the spell or ritual in its traditional way. (This is true not only of magical rituals, but of any traditional ritual, including religious, civic and social ones.) Such rituals draw their power *ex opere operato,* "from the work that has been worked," much more than from the people who work them.

In addition to a magician's ***intention,*** however, there is also the ***attention*** that magicians pay to each work of magic as they work it.

Distraction is an ancient enemy of effective magic. One challenge that every magician must face is how to rivet attention on the work of magic that is being performed, for it is his and his audience's attention that gives more power to a spell.

In a traditional folk spell, it is the *historiola* at its beginning that captures attention. As already noted, there are few things that can hold a person's attention as fully as a well-told story of great power. Yet if the story is too elaborate, it will distract attention from the magic itself. This is why an old spell often begins with a *historiola* that alludes to some traditional myth, but does not retell it fully. The *historiola* must be long enough to call the myth to mind, but not so long as to distract people from the spell's *intent* and *ratification.*

4.6. Draja's First Lesson

It is no easy thing to *pay attention,* and it is almost as hard to grasp what *paying attention* involves in a person's real life. Perhaps an example may help make it clear.

In a big city on the Atlantic coast there still lives an elderly magician who writes under the pen-name of Draja Mickaharic. He has been giving lessons

in magic for half a century now. One of his last students, writing under the pseudonym Luke Cullen, has published a highly instructive account of the early lessons in magic that he learned from Draja (*Growing Up With Draja Mickaharic*).

Luke tells how his very first lesson with Draja, back around 1987, began when Draja said to him, "I want you to pay attention." At first Luke supposed that a full lesson would follow those words, but he soon was told that "Pay attention!" actually was the entire first lesson. Draja explained that he had just assigned Luke the very difficult task of learning to pay attention to *everything* in his life: to his own posture, to the rhythm of his breathing, to the smell and feel of the air around him, to the quality of the light or darkness in each moment, to all the other people around him, to what they are doing, to the expressions on their faces, and so forth. He was to practice paying attention to all these things and to everything around him for a whole year. After a year of doing this, Luke could come back to Draja for his second lesson.[30]

I do not know of any other story that shows so clearly how important it is in magic to develop the habit of constantly paying attention to everything, and just how very hard it is to master that skill. (It is also a very useful skill to develop for one's mundane life, too.)

[30] Cullen (2009), 26–31, 102–103.

5
A Magician's Only Essential Tool: Their Own Human Body

5.1. The Body Alone Sufficeth

It is a truism among actors that — with sufficient skill — they can make any play come alive for the audience on a bare stage, without scenery, props, or even costuming beyond the plainest of leotards (and those merely for modesty's sake). Their bodies alone suffice them.

Of course, these actors' bodies are not silent and motionless on stage as they perform that play. They move, they speak, they use postures and poses and facial expressions to communicate — and to commune! — with their audience. And, with sufficient skill, they can cause the audience to perceive the characters of the play as complete human beings. While the play is going on, these chararacters have become living people who are every bit as authentic to the audience in the theater as their own theater-going companions will be, back on the street after the play has let out.

As with theater, so with magic.

With sufficient skill, human magicians need no props, no tools, no robes and cords, to work magic. All they need is their own human bodies. Of course, effective scenery, props and costuming make magic easier to work — though sometimes they distract, and then the magic becomes less powerful. But these things are not strictly necessary.

A well-acted play is never just a fantasy, just an escape from reality into some kind of cloud-cuckoo-land. It is a true experience, and sometimes it is even a life-changing experience. If we draw parallels between theater and magic, by no means are we dismissing magic as a fantasy or an escape from reality. Like theater, magic done with sufficient skill can change lives — and not merely the magician's own life.

5.2. Magic, Attention and the Body

In chapter 4 we noted that ***paying attention*** is the key skill required of every successful magician. We also noted that few things can rivet a person's attention as firmly as a well-told story of great power, and especially the sort of story that tells of "things that never happened, but always *are*" (to quote Sallustius again, from section 4.3). These are the kind of stories that are embodied in myths and in their accompanying rituals. (Theater finds its ancient origins precisely in such myths and rituals.)

Now what, exactly, happens when Attention is riveted, while a person is watching a play, or hearing a myth, or participating in a ritual, of such great power? Is it the mind alone that is riveted? Hardly!

On such a occasion the whole body is riveted: one's senses are more tightly focused, one's breathing becomes caught up in patterns of the experience, fidgiting ceases and restlessness abates. Riveted Attention is a whole-body experience. And magic, in its greatest power, is just such an experience of riveted Attention: it seizes the whole body.

Moreover, it is not only the body of the magician that is so powerfully affected. Under certain circumstances, skillfully managed, it can also be the body of a human target of the magic that will be just as powerfully affected. Let us retell a story from William Seabrook's book, *Witchcraft, Its Power in the World Today,* that will make this point clear.[31] The story may be a pure fiction, but even as such it serves our purpose here.)

5.3. Seabrook's Story

Stripped of irrelevant details, the story begins simply. Back in the days of rampant colonialism, when European powers openly exploited the indigenous

[31] Seabrook (1940), 26–40. In 1941, he attempted to work a quite similar spell against Hitler, using a dressmaker's dummy (Seabrook 1941, 1943).

people of other continents, a European trader set up his station in a remote African village, and proceeded to oppress the villagers beyond what they were willing to bear. Yet it was not safe simply to drive the trader away or openly kill him: severe reprisals from the armed forces of the colonial powers would be sure to follow. So the villagers resorted to deadly magic.

First, they prepared a life-size image — a giant doll or *poppet* — of the trader, and set it up in a clearing off the beaten track. With the aid of the trader's housekeepers and servants, they dressed this poppet in some of the trader's old clothes. They also got some of his cut-off hair and some clippings from his nails, and glued them to the proper places on the poppet. Frazer's two laws of magic, the *Law of Similarity* and the *Law of Contact,* are being applied here (see section 2.1).

Then at regular intervals much of the village went to that clearing and performed a ritual over and over, with passionate abandon calling down sickness, decay and death upon the poppet, and so upon the trader himself.

As Seabrook told the story, a fresh human corpse, lawfully obtained according to the customs of the land, served as the body of the poppet, and it slowly decayed during the weeks of the ritual. This would have given the ritual a greatly heightened *Coefficient of* Weirdness (see section 1.5).

Could the trader have remained unaware that magic was being worked for his destruction? In so small a village, hardly! He would have noticed how the villagers' bearing had changed, hinting at new hope in their swift deliverance from his oppression.

But the village magicians also made sure that the trader himself was told about the ritual. It was villagers whom he thought he could trust the most, his own servants and housekeeper, who told him — with much apparent sympathy for the danger he was facing — just what was being worked against him, and just how it was being worked.

They gave him this information in drips and drabs, bit by tiny bit, so that his imagination had to work overtime to pull all the pieces together into a

coherent picture of what was being done to kill him. Of course, the trader didn't believe in magic . . . or at least he thought that he didn't. Wasn't he a European, a rational man? Yet his imagination wasn't all that certain, chiefly at night, in the dark, lonely hours when all the village seemed to sleep.

Almost every day the villagers made sure that something would remind him subtlely of just what was being done to kill him. He had been told the chant used in the ritual, its simple wishes for his slow and nasty death, its words set to a peculiar and compelling tune and rhythm. So was it a mere accident that a boy passing by his house would whistle that same tune? Or that a woman doing her washing nearby would beat the clothes in that same rhythm? Or that a random villager, expressing sympathy for the trader's plight, would suggest encouragingly that, as a European, the trader could not be harmed by native magic, could he? The trader was never able to be quite sure . . .

And so the trader slowly sickened and his body began to decay; and finally he died.

5.4. What Killed the Trader?

He was killed by magic, of course. But how precisely did that gruesome piece of poppet-magic work? There are a number of possibilities, and any of them can serve to make our point.

The trader's position in the village was precarious. He must have known how vulnerable he was, if only unconsciously. And this sort of vulnerability always stimulates a person's imagination. The ability to imagine where danger might be lurking is a survival skill common to all higher animals, not only humans.

The trader knew that the villagers wanted him dead, and were working poppet-magic to that end. But he had, at first, no clear picture of what they were doing to bring about his death, only small disjointed bits of information, fed to him slowly, from which he might construct a full picture of the danger that he faced. And these bits of new information did not fit easily into the European model he already had in his mind of how the world should work.

This lack of easy fit stimulated his imagination further, bringing it to a fever pitch.

Samuel Johnson once remarked, commenting on the unexpected eloquence of criminal's final appeal against his death sentence, "Depend on it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully" — or, in our terms, one's impending doom rivets one's attention most powerfully.[32]

As we noted above, when one's attention has been so powerfully riveted on anything, it is not simply an action of one's mind, but an experience of one's entire body, with all its complex and mysterious physiology. And whole-body experiences are also where certain uncommon features of human physiology can be brought into play. Among them are the twin features known as the ***placebo effect*** and the ***nocebo effect.*** They are, in essence, a single feature of human physiology with two names: it is called the placebo effect when it *heals* the body, but the nocebo effect when it *harms* the body.[33] In each case, the medicine (if any) administered to the patient or victim is physiologically inert, often a mere sugar pill, but nontheless healing or injury ensues.

In each case, the placebo and nocebo effects operate because a person's very mind is not, as it were, something like an alien residing within one's body. Rather, it is just one of the many, many things that human physiology brings into being while the body is alive. And any one part of a person's physiology can powerfully affect the other parts of that same person's physiology. Find a way to truly rivet a person's attention on his body's functions, and you can either heal or harm that person by words and symbols alone. (Obviously, there are limits to this: you can't set a broken bone by such means, or repair other mechanical damage; nor can you affect every part of human physiology. But human physiology does have its very fragile points, which a skillful person

[32] Boswell (1823), III, 171.

[33] The placebo effect in medicine is beginning to be well studied and halfway understood, but not much work has yet been done on the nocebo effect, for obvious ethical reasons. Good studies on the latter include Canon (1924), Lester (1972), Milton (1973), Lex (1974), Hahn & Kleinman (1983), Hahn (1997), Spiegel (1997), Brody (2010), and Tavel (2014, 2022). A professional forensic psychologist, the late Jesse Finley Hurley, has written insightfully about how both placebo and nocebo effects can be (and have been) effectively used for healing and for harm (Hurley 1985, chh. 3–4).

can exploit do real harm, as in Seabrook's story.)

Of course, this is simply one possible explanation of the trader's death. Those readers who take seriously such things as the unseen world of spirits and the power of Deities can also explain the trader's death in other, less materialistic ways. Whatever explanation one might prefer, the trader ended up dead nonetheless, and it was most certainly magic that brought about his death.

5.5. Poppets

And so magic can make powerful use of *poppets,* that is, of human images or dolls used to act magically upon a person for weal or for woe. The use of poppets goes back thousands of years, and they have been found on all the inhabited continents. The life-size poppet that figures in Seabrook's story, whether it had actually been made from a corpse or from less gruesome materials, is just an extreme example. The size of the poppet seems not to matter. Since small ones are much easier to make, small ones are more frequently found by archeologists in their digs, or sometimes even by unsuspecting laypeople, perhaps as they fix up an old house or dig a new garden.

In 1836 some boys in Scotland, searching for rabbit burrows on the mountain called Arthur's Seat, found a hidden niche containing 17 small wooden human figures, each in its own miniature wooden coffin. (Eight of them are now kept in the National Museum of Scotland; the others have been lost.) It is possible that they were made and used as magical poppets, though there is no way to be certain so long after their discovery.[34]

Even if these particular figures were made and hidden for some non-magical purpose, poppets are very often found buried together with other artifacts — for example, spells written on lead plates — that render it obvious they were made and used for magic. By now there are several hundred examples of

[34] Dash (2010, 2013) discusses the original newspaper reports of the discovery and gives photographs of the eight remaining poppets and their miniature coffins.

such poppets in museums all the world over, and surely even more of them still remain in the places where bygone magicians once hid them away.

In 1975 the Louvre Museum (in Paris) acquired a particularly striking example of a magical poppet from an antiquities dealer, who said that it had been dug up in Egypt. It has been dated by the Museum to the third or fourth century of the Christian era. It is a clay pot that contained two things: a folded thin sheet of lead which had been inscribed with a magic spell in Greek; and a small clay figure of the woman whom the spell was meant to affect. A few other examples of almost the same spell have been found; one example is included in a papyrus handbook of magic spells from roughly the same time and place. However, such a find of poppet and spell together is fairly uncommon, and so it is worth mentioning here.[35]

Some of the magical poppets in museums are as much as around two thousand years old; others are younger — sometimes much younger. Still other magical poppets were made in modern times — perhaps one as recently even as last week! Making poppets is still a living tradition of magic today.

And as Seabrook's story shows, poppets can still work, even now … at least if the magician has sufficient knowledge of human nature and skill.

[35] Bourguet (1975, 1980), Kambitsis (1976), Faraone (2002). The spell in question is a very nasty one, designed to override a named woman (Ptolemais)'s disinterest in a particular named man's sexual advances, and to punish her severely as long as she resists him. The clay figure exhibits the woman on her knees, with her hands bound behind her, pierced in thirteen vital places by thirteen bronze needles (crown of the head, eyes, ears, mouth, sternum, hands, feet, genitals, anus). In a word, it is a rape spell.

6
The Imaginal Realm — The Realm of Magic

6.1. The Real, the Imaginary, and the Imaginal

> *Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.*

So wrote Edward Sapir — anthropologist, linguist and poet.[36]

Indeed, each one of us is "very much at the mercy of the particular language" which one has grown up with in one's native culture! The categories of speech in our native languages circumscribe and severely constrain one's unreflective thoughts

In English (and other modern European languages) our habits of speech distinguish sharply between what we call *real* and what we call *imaginary.* We have no word for anything that might be neither the one nor the other.

It is also our habits of speech which lead us to think that whatever is *real* belongs to the material world, and that whatever does not belong to the material world is immaterial and thus *unreal.* In short, *real* and *material* refer to the same realm, the physicist's world of matter and energy, located in time and space, which is also the domain of science and technology. Likewise,

[36] Sapir (1929), 209.

immaterial and *unreal* refer to another realm, an *imaginary* world of mere fantasy and fiction.

As a direct consequence of these habits of our speech, we also commonly suppose that there is a great gulf fixed between these two realms: that whatever happens in the immaterial realm can have no impact on the material realm. Such is the common wisdom of our current age.

From this we also usually conclude that any magic that works in the material world must have an underlying material cause, though it may be hidden from us.

In bygone times and other places, other people spoke and thought otherwise, and their languages, too, reflected (and shaped) their thoughts, just as our languages do ours. From ancient times onward, esoteric philosophers writing in Greek and Latin, in Hebrew and Arabic, have had words for a third realm of existence, a world that is neither material and real, nor immaterial and imaginary. The esoteric philosophers of Medieval Islamic Iran, for example, called this third realm (in Arabic) *'alām al-mithāl,* the "Mithal realm." Unlike the material world, the Mithal realm is not one of matter and energy, nor is it located in time and space. These philosophers say precisely that the Mithal realm exists "nowhere" and "nowhen." To put the matter in other words, the Mithal realm is to be found "at a time which is no time, in a place which is no place." When they say this, they are **not** saying that the Mithal realm does not exist, or that it is purely imaginary. It **does** exist, and it is **not** imaginary, since it is able to cause changes in the material realm.

The scholar Henry Corbin, an expert in medieval Iranian Islamic philosophy and a close friend of the famous psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, ventured to coin a modern European name for this third realm. He called it (in Latin) *Mundus Imaginalis,* literally the "Imaginal World."[37]

We will refer to these three realms of existence as the ***Material*** realm, the ***Imaginal*** realm, and the ***Imaginary*** realm. The first of these realms is real

[37] Corbin (1964 [French original], 1995 [English translation]).

and material, and the third is unreal and immaterial. It is the second of them, the ***Imaginal*** realm, that is both real and immaterial.

Since English does not have a customary name for the Imaginal realm, if we happen to encounter something from it and we dare to talk or think about it, we generally try to classify it as either something Real (that is, material) or something Imaginary (that is, unreal). With enough mental effort we can usually manage to shoehorn that thing, whatever it might be, into one or the other of those two realms, even though it doesn't really fit well in either of them. To subvert this effort of ours, to make this third realm of existence obvious, we need a convincing example of something Imaginal, a thing which has been experienced by most people.

6.2. An Example of Something Imaginal

The best example of something in the Imaginal realm may be the experience of Love — more precisely, the experience of Being Deeply in Love.

Being Deeply in Love is clearly not just a fantasy, not just a product of a lover's private imagination. Though it is an immaterial thing, falling Deeply in Love has quite real, easily observable effects in the material world. It seems to be some sort of *immaterial reality.*

So observable are the effects of Being Deeply in Love that even outsiders can notice when a friend of theirs has fallen deeply in love. (Sometimes they can even notice it before their friend has quite realized it!) The outward clues are many and varied, though they are hard to describe except in impressionistic terms: for instance, glowing eyes, enhanced skin tone, greater vivacity, and so forth. Of course, there are also objective changes in the activity of the lover's nervous, hormonal and pheromonal systems, which no doubt could be measured scientifically — if it were worth the time and effort to do so. But the *experience* of Being Deeply in Love is far more than merely these outward clues and these changes in human physiology!

And of course the ultimate effect can, in fortunate cases, be the quite material bodily union of the two lovers. Once they have been together for enough years, there can also arise a deep meeting of their two minds. If their union continues for decades, they may even find their very selves merging to some degree with one another, so that each of them may be able to finish the other's sentences before they have been fully uttered, and to anticipate the other's thoughts before they have been fully formed.

Thus Being Deeply in Love is not an *imaginary* thing. It is a *real* thing, even though it is an *immaterial* one. (Only a person determined to maintain dogmatically a purely materialist view of reality, no matter what the intellectual cost or the mass of evidence, could regard it as a wholly material thing.) It is the sort of thing that belongs to the *Imaginal* realm.

Once we have admitted the existence of the Imaginal realm and its immaterial realities, other examples are not hard to find. Patriotism offers a good example. Yet another is the holiness, the instinctive awe that one may sense in the presence of something ***numinous,*** such as an unspoiled grove of ancient trees, or even a God or Goddess (see section 1.3).

In the material realm, a country's flag may be just a piece of colored cloth; but for patriots, the flag of their own country is usually far more than just cloth and colors. Likewise, the bread and wine that have been consecrated in the Christian Mass or Eucharist remain bread and wine when chemically analyzed in the laboratory; but for the devout Christian they are *also* the very Body and Blood of Christ, and they can evoke the holy awe one may experience in the presence of a Deity. These are things that pertain to the Imaginal realm. Many other examples can be found, too.

6.3. The Realm of Magic — the Imaginal Realm

Anyone can try to work magic as if it were simply a matter of scientific cause and effect in the *material* realm, much like building a wooden cabinet to hold statues of Deities. Anyone can also attempt to work magic as if it were a sort of costumed theater situated in the *imaginary* realm — as if it were some kind

of cosplay, even. One may sometimes get results in either of these ways, either from subtle material causes and their effects (such as the medicinal properties of various herbs) or from psychological manipulation (using suggestion and auto-suggestion, for example, or activating the placebo or nocebo effect).

But for the strongest and most effective magic, it seems to be necessary to enter the *Imaginal* realm. In this realm your wooden cabinet becomes a shrine and the statues it contains manifest the Deities Themselves; or your wizard's vestments become more than merely a fancy costume, but have been imbued with true wizardly power.

And herein lies one of the great secrets of magic. Enter the Imaginal realm — the realm where your country's flag is much more than colored cloth or your sacred meal is much more than mere food — and your magic will be far more powerful than if it were worked only in the Material and Imaginary realms.

6.4. To Enter the Imaginal Realm

How can one enter the Imaginal realm, in order to work one's magic there? This is not always easy, especially if one is still "at the mercy" of one's native language with its sharp opposition between "real" and "imaginary" — an opposition that leaves no room at all for the Imaginal realm.

Fortunately, there is a key that opens wide the gate into the Imaginal realm. That key is well-crafted ritual, designed with an eye to all the various principles and laws of magic that were laid out in the first five of these chapters. This is the **Way of Ritual.**

The most powerful traditional rituals, handed down in books or by word of mouth, were shaped long ago according to these principles. We, too, if we have grasped these same principles, can design brand-new rituals for our own needs that will have nearly as much power as any ritual sanctified by venerable tradition. And their repeated use, over many years, will give these new rituals every bit as much power as any venerable old ritual has.

Rituals are not the only way into the Imaginal realm; there is at least one more way, the Way of Myth. Recall that the Neo-Platonist philosopher Sallustius defined myths as accounts of things "that never happened, but always are" (section 4.3). Though myths are *told* in the form of stories set at real times, in real places, they do not *exist* there. They do not exist in the Real or the Imaginary realm, but in the Imaginal one.

So steep yourself in venerable myths and practice time-honored rituals! Thereby you will become accustomed to the Imaginal realm. Once you are accustomed to that realm, you will find that you can enter it at will, and you can work your magic there.

7
To Marry the Cosmos

7.1. To Work Magic ...

All the scholars on whose work we have drawn in the previous six chapters — philosophers, philologists, linguists, anthropologists, folkorists, historians of magic, and working magicians — have treated magic as a sort of art or craft or technology, as if it were a simple matter of cause and effect: if you understand the causes and principles of magic well enough, you can produce magical effects on demand, in accord with your will alone. And yet ... magic is rarely quite that easy in actual practice.

Something else seems to be needed as well, something that has hardly been discussed by any of the above-mentioned scholars and magicians. There was, however, one person who may have figured out what that something else might be, some five and a half centuries ago.

7.2. . . . is to Marry the Cosmos

In the late 1400s a brash and brilliant young genius flashed forth briefly in the firmament of the brightest stars of the Renaissance in Italy. His name was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. He was murdered when he was just 31 years old, poisoned by men who found his brilliance, his scholarship and his passion for Truth at any cost far too subversive of the established verities of science and religion (such as they were then).

It was late in 1486, when he was only 23 years old, that Pico published a very short book in Latin titled *Nine Hundred Conclusions in Every Kind of Knowledge.* In it he concisely stated 900 theses, ranging over all the branches of knowledge. He also announced that he would defend all these 900 theses in public debates at Rome during the following year. Every one of his 900 theses represented a challenge to one or another point of learning and

doctrine that churchmen and professors had long regarded as settled, and would have prefered to leave unchallenged forever.

Among Pico's 900 theses were very many esoteric ones, including 15 theses on Zoroaster and the Chaldean Oracles, 72 on the Cabala and Christianity, 31 on the Orphic Hymns ... and 26 theses on magic!

Pico, naive and unworldly youth that he was, seems to have expected that his book would be welcomed by all, and that the debate he had announced would be an eagerly anticipated event. What happened instead was that the current Pope forbid Pico to hold his proposed debates and prohibited his small book from being circulated and read by anyone at all — the first book to be universally prohibited by the Church in over a thousand years. (Less than a dozen copies of the first printing of Pico's book are known to have survived this prohibition.)

It is Pico's 26 theses on magic that demand our attention here, and in particular the thirteenth of them:[38]

Magicam operari non est aliud quam maritare mundum.
"To work magic is nothing other than to marry the world."

By *mundum,* "the world," Pico understands the entire world, the cosmos, not just the world of matter and energy, situated in time and space. But the most surprising part of this thesis is Pico's choice of the verb *maritare* "to marry."

7.3. What Does It Mean to Marry the Cosmos?

A marriage is a union of at least two sentient, living beings. Here the beings in question are two in number, the magician and the cosmos (which in Pico's day was presumed to be both sentient and alive). Significantly, too, marriage usually presupposes courtship. If any magician would marry the cosmos, then that magician must first have courted the cosmos and won its consent —

[38] Pico (1998), 498–499.

and, we may presume, the cosmos has also courted the magician in response! — before their marriage can be truly solemnized.

Of course, in the strongest of marriages, each partner will continue to court the other long after the marriage ceremony has been completed, throughout the entire duration of their marriage. And as we already saw in chapter 6, a marriage so strong as that has occult power: it will eventually lead the married partners into the Imaginal realm, the realm where the most powerful magic is worked.

So . . . Pico appears to be claiming here that magic is not merely a kind of technology or craft that a person might hope to master, but that it requires an ongoing *mutual* courtship of the living, sentient cosmos by a magician, and of the magician by the living, sentient cosmos. It can never be enough to have mastered all the tools and techniques of the craft of magic. One must court and win magic herself as one would court and win a desired lover, if one wishes to attain the highest reaches of the art of magic — which is, as already stated (in chapter 1), not just a craft or a low-tech technology, but an actual art.

This, I think, is the overlooked point in all present-day theorizing about magic and how it works. It seems also to be the chief prerequisite for working the very strongest and wisest magic.

All honor to Pico for his profound insight!

8
Apophatic Magic

8.1. Another Kind of Magic

Up to now the reader may easily suppose that the General Theory of Magic I have been formulating here is meant to cover the totality of magic. It is indeed meant to cover all the kinds of magic that are worked by words and deeds, using myths and rituals. These things are enormously powerful.

As Rudyard Kipling remarked in 1923, addressing the Royal College of Surgeons of England, "Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind."[39] By implication, the same is true of symbols and patterns, rituals and myths.

However, there is also another, much rarer sort of magic, worked in a wholly other way than by means of words and other symbols, that is excessively difficult to describe. Despite this difficulty, we ought not to end this small book without saying a few words about it.

8.2. Kataphatic and Apophatic Methods for the Mystic

People who write about mysticism have long distinguished between the *kataphatic* and the *apophatic* methods of achieving mystical experiences.

Kataphatic methods are methods of affirmation. Mystics who use these methods build on the evidence of their senses and the power of their thoughts and feelings, to make their way toward the Divine. They try to grasp the Numinous by starting from the most awesome, glorious and holy experiences that people have in ordinary life. On this foundation, using all the powers of words and reason, of deeds and love, of symbols and patterns, of myths and

[39] Kipling (1938), 209.

rituals, they attempt to draw ever nearer and nearer to their Deities or Numinous Realities.

Apophatic methods, in sharp contrast, assume that all inputs from our bodily senses, all activity of our mind, are mighty barriers to experiencing Numinous Reality, as it is in and of itself. Apophatic mystics proceed on their quest by tearing down each and every one of these barriers, by denying and refusing to give any ultimate validity and utility to any activity of the bodily senses and the embodied mind, to every sort of sensation and mentation. This is a much harder road to travel. Few will venture on it, and very few indeed are those who travel it to its end. It is also a far more dangerous road to travel than the kataphatic road, for it is beset on all sides with powerful forces of delusion and temptation.[40]

Also, as is the way of the cosmos, sometime a person will suddenly find himself placed at the end of this road for a time, though he has made no effort to travel it, or even had any suspicion that such a road might exist and might lead to so such a goal. Sometimes it is the cosmos itself that will start courting a future mystic or magician of its own volition, for reasons of its own that are usually opaque to the human whom it is courting.

8.3. As for the Mystic, so for the Magician

As with mysticism, so there are kataphatic methods and apophatic methods of working magic.

The sort of magic we have been discussing in all the previous chapters is most definitely kataphatic. Likewise, the General Theory of Magic that we have been building here is a theory of *kataphatic magic* only.

Indeed, as far as most practicing magicians ever know, kataphatic magic is the only sort of magic that there is.

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[40] See Lossky (1957), chapter 2, for the clearest account I have yet found of these two different methods.

However, *apophatic magic* also exists, though it is rarely practiced and even more rarely talked about. Like apophatic mysticism, apophatic magic is quite difficult and quite dangerous to work, for much the same reasons. Because of these dangers, I will say only a few words about it here, now that I have come to the end of this book.

We humans are at the mercy not only of our native languages (as pointed out in section 6.1), but also at the mercy of our bodies and minds. Our limited physical senses severely curtail our ability to perceive the cosmos in its wholeness, and our limited physical brain and nervous system further restrict our ability to grasp what little of the cosmos we have perceived. These limits of human sensation and mentation are, so to speak, baked in the cake of being human.

Even so, as far as most people can ever tell, these limited means are the only two means any human has to experience the Cosmos.

Moreover, these limits to what we can perceive, think and talk about are ***not*** a regrettable feature of human life, but a very valuable one. As a very wise woman once remarked, "It's our limitations that keep us sane."[41] Were we not so strictly limited by our material existence, we would be eternally lost in a vast ocean of delusion and temptation.

Apophatic magicians, like apophatic mystics, know that there is a way to transcend these limits and to achieve *direct perception* of the Numinous Cosmos, that is, perception which is entirely unmediated by our physical human body. To achieve direct perception, to transcend every bodily limit of sensation and mentation, would-be apophatic magicians will carefully examine, each in its own turn, each and every activity of their physical senses and of the physical brain and nervous system that seems to give them any idea of the "real" world. By challenging and overcoming each of these sensations and mentations in its turn, one comes to see that it is a mere illusion

[41] Starhawk (1979), 109 , quoting a saying of her mother (Bertha Simos).

created by the natural — severe, yet highly beneficial — limitations of one's human body.

Stripping away one illusion after another, one eventually comes to a sort of blank wall, a dark cloud of unknowing and unsensing. This blank wall, however, is an illusion, too; it is the last illusion of them all. Apply the same process to it and strip it away.

Then, and only then, will one *perceive* — not through one's bodily senses and not by any action of one's bodily mind, but *directly* — the Numinous Cosmos as it truly is. This is the *direct perception* of all things as they truly are, in all their mutual interconnectedness and unity, the living and sentient fiery web of total interconnection that stands wholly outside time and space, and is no sort of matter or energy whatever.

This final *direct perception* is indeed wholly independent of the body's sense organs; in no way does it resemble any indirect perceptions that come through these sense organs. It is also wholly independent of the body's brain and nervous system, of its words and thoughts; in no way does it resemble any possible thought or any possible speech.[42]

The only way speech can capture even the smallest hint of the taste of the experience of direct perception is by words that defy both logic and common experience.

In direct perception, as one profound mystic wrote some 1500 years ago, you

> *leave behind everything sensed and understood,*
> *everything that can be sensed and understood, all*
> *that is not and all that is.*[43]

When you do that, you discover that

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[42] On ***direct perception*** see my *Microcosmographia Magica* (2023), section 4.1.

[43] Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (1889, col. 997), *Mystical Theology*, chapter I, my own translation from the original Greek: καὶ τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἀπόλειπε καὶ τὰς νοερὰς ἐνεργείας, καὶ πάντα αἰσθητὰ καὶ νοητὰ, καὶ πάντα οὐκ ὄντα καὶ ὄντα.

> *the simple, absolute and unchangeable mysteries … lie hidden in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness, and surcharging our blinded intellects with the utterly impalpable and invisible fairness of glories which exceed all beauty.*[44]

Once you have experienced this direct perception of the entire living sentient Cosmos as a whole, you no longer need any rituals or any myths — much less any "Laws of Magic" — to work what to most people will seem to be genuine miracles. You merely have to return to direct perception — ah, would that this were so easy to do as it is to say! — and than reach out with a part of you that might be called a limb, but is nothing at all like a bodily limb, and tug ever so gently on one strand or another in that net of living fire which contains all things as its knots and joins them into one vast Wholeness. That gentle and slight tug always brings about some small change in the Cosmos.

But then, too, you will perceive the harm that working such powerful magic, even with the best of human intentions, can very often bring to the people for whose supposed benefit you might propose to work it. This is particularly true when the impulse to work a miracle for another's sake arises in yourself, and is not an impulse from the Cosmos itself.

And that is all, I suppose, that can safely be said about apophatic magic, if indeed it can properly still be called magic, and not miracle-working.

8.4. At the End of Our Journey Together

Here I end this small book. I hope, dear reader, that you may have found it worth your time. I have wrought it as well as I knew how. Even so, it should be taken as no more than a launching pad for your own thoughts, work, and further discoveries.

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[44] Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (1920), *Mystical Theology,* chapter I.

As a long-ago alchemist, the author of the *Mutus Liber* ("The Mute Book") wrote in 1677:[45]

Ora, lege, lege, lege, relege, labora, et invenies

"Pray, read, read, read, re-read, labor, and you will discover."

[45] Baulot (1677), plate 13.

Epilogue

This small booklet has been some thirty years in the making.

When I began teaching a course on "Magic in the Middle Ages" at Brown University in 1992 I felt the need to understand how magic could seem to its Medieval users to have been effective – or in some cases, could actually have been effective.

This led me to several anthropological studies of the (real or seeming) effectiveness of magic. My previous exposure to anthropology had been through courses I took in anthropological linguistics and linguistic anthropology while an undergraduate in the University of California at Berkeley (1960–1964). Especially inspiring was Dell H. Hymes' course, "Language and Culture," which he offered in my last undergraduate semester (Spring, 1964). He was just then putting the finishing touches on his great book, *Language in Culture and Society: A Reader* (1965).

So it was natural for me to begin preparing for my own course by revisiting classic works in anthropology and linguistics by such pioneering academics as Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Dorothy Lee and Bronislaw Malinowski. (See the Bibliography.)

The first results of all this reading were several short handouts for my own course, which introduced my students to many of the themes and the terminology that I came to develop in the present booklet. Over the years that I offered my course these handouts became longer and more detailed; and soon I also wrote up some historic examples of magical rituals and spells for my students and I to analyze in terms of those handouts.

More than a decade after I had retired in 2005 I finally distilled much of this material into a series of seven short articles, subtitled "Notes Toward a General Theory of Magic," which appeared in seven successive issues of *The*

Witches' Almanac (issues #36–#42), which were published from 2017 through 2023.[46]

Now I have revised, corrected and expanded these articles, and combined them into a single work, which you have as the present booklet.

[46] See **www.thewitchesalmanac.com** for the publisher's website. The seven articles were, 1: The Coefficient of Weirdness (#36, 86–89); 2: Frazer's Two Laws of Magic (#37, 108–113), 3: Magic and the Two Dimensions of Language (#38, 86–89), 4: Intention, Attention, and Story-Telling (#39, 27–32), 5: A Magician's Only Essential Tool: Their Own Human Body (#40, 132–136), 6: The Imaginal Realm—The Realm of Magic (#41, 99–103), and 7: To Marry the Cosmos (#42, 100–105).

Appendix

The Old English Field Remedy *(Æcerbot)* Ritual

Here is a full translation of the Old English text of the Field Remedy as it is found in the only surviving manuscript, taken from Grendon (1909). I have lightly revised Grendon's translation in view of more recent scholarly work on the ritual, and also with an eye to greater precision in the use of certain key words, such as "field" *(æcer)* or "land" *(land)* or "earth" *(eorðe).* The rare word *folde,* which is used largely in ritual and poetic texts, is also translated here as "earth" (but with *folde* in parentheses after it).

The lines in **bold type** form the four successive parts of a single versified prayer in Old English. This prayer is written in an archaic, poetic diction, using some rare words (such as *folde*) that are generally found only in ritual or magical contexts. It is unambiguously Christian in only a very few small details; almost all of the prayer could equally have been said by a Christian or a Pagan. It probably is a lightly reworked version of a prayer that had been used before the Anglo-Saxons were introduced to Christianity. The line-numbers [in square brackets] are not in the original; I have added them.

Words in ***bold italic type*** are Latin. ***Crescite et multiplicamini et replete terram,*** *Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the Earth,* is from the Latin Bible (Genesis 1:26 and 9:1).

<u>Underscored</u> words are the names or titles of standard texts in Latin that were regularly used in the rituals and services of the Medieval Roman Catholic church. Where they occur, they mean that the ritualist is to recite or sing the complete standard text in Latin. They are:

1. ***Pater Noster*** (Our Father, the Lord's Prayer)
2. The Litanies (probably the Litany of the Saints)
3. ***Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus*** (Holy, Holy, Holy)
4. ***Benedicite***

5. ***Magnificat.***

Wikipedia will give you the complete texts in Latin, various English translations, and also the places in the Latin Bible from which they were taken.

HERE IS THE REMEDY WITH WHICH YOU CAN AMEND YOUR FIELDS, IF THEY WILL NOT GROW WELL, OR IF SOME HARMFUL THING HAS BEEN DONE TO THEM BY A SORCERER OR A POISONER.

At night, before daybreak, take four turfs from four sides of the land, and note how they previously stood. Then take oil and honey and barm and milk of all cattle on the land, and part of every kind of tree growing on the land (except hardwood trees), and part of every known herb (except only burr); and put holy water thereon, and then squeeze it out thrice onto the bottom of the turfs. And say then these words:

> ***Crescite,*** grow, ***et multiplicamini,*** and multiply, ***et replete,*** and replenish, ***terram,*** the Earth.
>
> ***In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti sitis benedicti****. [In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit be ye blessèd.]*

And [say] the ***Pater Noster*** [*Our Father,* that is, the Lord's Prayer] as often as the other [words].

And then take the turfs to church, and have a mass-priest sing four masses over the turfs, and have the green part turned towards the altar. And then, before sunset, take the turfs where they were at first. And let him [the land-owner] have made for him four crosses of quick-beam, and write on each arm, *Mattheus* and *Marcus, Lukas* and *Johannes.* Lay a cross on the bottom of the hole. Say then:

> ***Crux Mattheus, crux Marcus, crux Lucas, crux sanctus Johannes.***
> *[Cross Matthew, cross Mark, cross Luke, cross St. John.]*

Next take the turfs and put them down upon [the crosses], and say then these words nine times:

> ***Crescite [et multiplicamini et replete terram.]*** *[Grow, and multiply, and replenish the Earth.]*

and [say] as often the ***Pater Noster.***

and thereupon turn to the east and bow reverently nine times. Say then these words:

Eastwards I stand, for favors I ask,
I ask the glorious Master, I ask the mighty Lord,
I ask the holy Warden of Heaven's kingdom,
Earth I ask, and Heaven on high,
And true holy Mary
And Heaven's might and high hall,
That this spell *(galdor)* I might, through the Lord's grace,
Speak aloud clearly with firm intent,
To wake up these crops for our worldly use,
To fulfill this Earth *(folde)* in firm belief,
To beautify this green turf, as the wise man said,
That he had riches on Earth who alms
Dealt justly, by the will of the Lord.

Then turn thrice with the course of the sun, prostrate yourself completely, and say then the Litanies; and thereafter say, ***Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus,*** to the end.

With arms outstretched then sing the ***Benedicite*** and the ***Magnificat*** and the ***Pater Noster*** thrice, and commend it [the ritual work] to the praise and glory of Christ and Saint Mary and the Holy Cross, and to the honor of him who owns the land, and of all those who are under him.

When all this is done, let uncooth seed be taken from almsmen, and let twice as much be given to these as was taken from them. And let him [the land-

owner] gather all his plowing-implements together, then bore a hole in the beam, [and place therein] incense and fennel and hallowed soap and hallowed salt. Next take the seed and put it on the body of the plough. Say then:

Erce! Erce! Erce! Mother of Earth!
May the All-Ruler grant you, the eternal Lord,
Fields growing and flourishing,
Propagating and strengthening,
Tall stems, bright crops,
And broad barley crops,
And white wheat crops,
And all the Earth's crops.
May the eternal Lord grant him,
And his Holy Ones, who are in Heaven,
That his produce be guarded against any enemies whatsoever,
And that it be safe against any harm at all,
From poisons sown around the land.
Now I bid the Master, who shaped this world,
That there be no woman of speech nor man of craft
Who can overturn these words thus spoken.

Then drive forth the plow and make the first furrow. Say then:

Wassail, Earth *(folde),* Mother of Mankind!
Be growing in God's embracing arm,
Be filled with food for the needs of Mankind.

Then take meal of every kind, and have a loaf baked as big as will lie in the hand, and knead it with milk and with holy water, and lay it under the first furrow. Say then:

Field full of food for mankind,
Bright-blooming, you are blessed
In the Holy Name of the One who shaped Heaven
And the Earth on which we live;

The God, the one who made the ground, grant us the growing gift,
[38] **That for us each grain might be of use.**

Say then three times:

Crescite [et multiplicamini et replete terram],

In nomine patris [et Filii et Spiritus Sancti] sitis benedicti. Amen,

and ***Pater Noster*** thrice.

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