

ECOSOPHIA

Toward an Ecological Spirituality



BOOK CLUB POST

The Doctrine of High Magic: Introduction

🕒 May 12, 2021

👤 John Michael Greer

💬 176 Comments



With this post we begin a monthly chapter-by-chapter discussion of *The Doctrine and Ritual of High Magic* by Eliphas Lévi, the book that launched

the modern magical revival. Here and in the months ahead we're going to be plunging into the white-hot fires of creation where modern magic was born. Grab your tarot decks and hang on tight.

If you can read French, I strongly encourage you to get a copy of Lévi's book in the original and follow along with that; it's readily available for sale in Francophone countries, and can also be downloaded here. If not, the English translation by me and Mark Mikituk is recommended; A.E. Waite's

translation, unhelpfully retitled *Transcendental Magic*, is second-rate at best—riddled with flaws and burdened with Waite’s seething intellectual jealousy of Lévi—though you can use it after a fashion if it’s what you can get. Also recommended is a tarot deck using the French pattern: the Knapp-Hall deck (unfortunately now out of print), the Wirth deck, or any of the Marseilles decks are suitable.

Reading:

“Introduction to the Doctrine of High Magic” (Greer & Mikituk, pp. 5-25).

Commentary:

As we begin our journey through Lévi’s work, four points need to be mentioned right away and kept in mind through the discussions to come. The first three of them may seem obvious, but they have implications that are not necessarily obvious at all, especially for those of my readers who have had an ordinary American public school education and therefore know nothing worth mentioning about what used to be called, charmingly enough, the history of letters.

The first of these points is that Eliphas Lévi was French. Obvious? Sure, but it has implications many of my American readers won’t catch. Every language in the world has its own literary tradition, and what counts as good writing is not the same from one to another. All the way back to its origins in Anglo-Saxon verse, English literature tends toward the direct, the crisp, the spare. “We’ve heard of the

great kings of the Spear-Danes in days gone by, and how their princes did mighty deeds.” Those are the opening words of *Beowulf*, the first great English story. French isn’t like that. To most English readers, French-influenced writers like Edgar Allen Poe and H.P. Lovecraft seem overblown; to French readers, they’re not—and both these authors, by the way, still have big followings in the Francophone world.

When you read Lévi, in other words, you can’t expect Hemingway’s kind of prose. What you can expect is this: “Beyond the veil of all the hieratic and mystic allegories of ancient doctrines, beyond the shadows and strange trials of all initiations, under the seal of all sacred scriptures, in the ruins of Nineveh or Thebes, on the weathered stones of ancient temples and the blackened face of the sphinx of Assyria or Egypt, in the monstrous or marvelous images which express for the Hindu believer the sacred pages of the Vedas, in the strange emblems of our old books of alchemy, in the ceremonies of initiation practiced by all secret societies, one discovers the traces of a doctrine that is always the same and always carefully hidden.” Can you imagine H.P. Lovecraft starting out a story that way? I can. There’s a point to all this ornate language and elaborate sentence structure, but it takes some getting used to if what you’re familiar with is the far less fancy prose of English writing.

The second point is that Lévi published this book in 1853. The world was a very different place in those days; plenty of things people thought they knew then have turned out not to be true, just as many of the things we think we know now

will suffer the same fate in due time. Many of the attitudes that were acceptable then are rejected today, just as many of today's popular notions—and not just the ones you're thinking of—will be rejected by our descendants. It's fashionable these days to judge and condemn the past for the crime of not being aware of today's moral prejudices. If you want to make sure you don't learn anything from the past, that's a great way to go about it, and of course that's the point of today's chronocentric obsessions. Since we're trying to learn from Lévi rather than to erase him, by contrast, the differences in attitude between his time and ours should be opportunities for insight, not for denunciation.

The third point is that Lévi was at the very beginning of the modern magical revival. He wasn't drawing on a rich contemporary tradition of magical practice, the way occultists can do today if they know enough to do it and care enough to try. There were people practicing magic in his time, of course; most of them were country folk who kept doing the rites they had received from their grandparents, who had learned it from theirs and so on back to antiquity; a few of them were eccentric intellectuals who studied and practiced the occultism of the Renaissance as though the sixteenth century had never ended. What made Lévi's work revolutionary is that he didn't try to turn back the clock. He wanted to make magic make sense in terms of the philosophy and science of his own time.

Because he was the first to attempt that, in turn, his efforts didn't always succeed, and his way of thinking about magic

had to be modified by later occultists to fit their own experiences. *The Doctrine and Ritual of High Magic* is like the description written by the first traveler to reach a distant country; its author did his best to describe the landscape of the country and the customs of its people, but his trip there was not long enough to give him a chance to get all the details right. Mind you, he got a great deal correct, and some of the things he learned are things that have been forgotten, if they were ever known at all, by occultists in the Anglophone world since his time. We'll be discussing those as our exploration proceeds.

Then there's the fourth point, the one that doesn't even pretend to be obvious. As you read the book before you, you'll find Lévi talking repeatedly about the way that the doctrine of high magic is hidden in fantastic tales and mythic narratives. Among other things—among many other things—*he's talking about his own book*. If you take Lévi's narratives in a purely literal sense, as too many people have done, you'll miss much more than half of what it has to teach. Furthermore, the more literally Lévi seems to be presenting what he has to say, the more suspicious you should be that that he means what he says in a purely symbolic sense.

This book is not *High Magic for Dummies*, and Lévi would have laughed raucously at the notion that it was, or that such a book is even possible. One of the central points made by the chapters to come, in fact, is that mastery of magic depends on a secret that cannot be revealed except to those who are already prepared to learn it. Lévi calls that

secret the Great Arcanum; he talks about it in various ways, most of them far from obvious. In its simplest form, as we will see, it is expressed by the riddle the Sphinx asked Oedipus—“What is it that goes on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?”—but if you give the sphinx the partial answer Oedipus did, you risk suffering a fate like his. To know the Great Arcanum is to grasp the secret behind all myths and symbols; to be able to apply it is to come as close to omnipotence as human beings can get; but to reveal it is death.

(Does all this seem improbably spooky, melodramatic, and overblown? Good. Now think about why your reaction might be exactly what Lévi wanted.)

With all this in mind—and it has to be kept in mind all through the chapters ahead—let’s turn to the introduction to the first half of the book.

We begin with an impressionistic tour of the history of magic, divided into three rough periods: antiquity, when magic was a pervasive presence in everyday life for good or evil; the Middle Ages, when it was still pervasive, but was condemned as evil by the Christian church; and the modern period, when it has fallen into general neglect. Of course this is a European vision of history, but then Lévi was European; it is also pervaded by the three-stage logic of history that popular culture has relied on for five centuries now, the sequence that Hegel made even more absurd than it already was and Spengler critiqued in mordant tones, but then Lévi wrote when that scheme was still unquestioned,

when Hegel was just one more unreadable German philosopher among others and Spengler would not be born for decades yet.

In terms of the history of magic in the Western world, furthermore, the old scheme has some merit. It was in fact the case that what we now call magic was pervasive in ancient times, and was practiced by many of the ancient priesthoods as a matter of course. People in ancient Egypt, Babylon, and Greece who felt the need of supernatural help could get it from the religious professionals of their societies, or from many other practitioners, without contradicting the teachings of their faiths or falling afoul of the civil laws. Furthermore, at least some ancient priesthoods—the Magi of Persia, the Druids of the Celtic countries, the priests of Egypt—had the robust magical reputations Lévi suggests.

The turn away from magic in the last centuries of the ancient world was also a reality. The Roman government's terror of secret associations fused with Christianity's theological demands to render a vast array of once-common practices anathema. The Christian churches adopted some of those practices in reworked form; ask a well-informed priest sometime why, in Catholic and Orthodox churches, the Mass can only properly be celebrated atop an altar that contains part of a human corpse, and the answer you'll get can be traced back through an inheritance of ideas to customs very far back in antiquity. Yet a great many people in the western world ended up bereft of magical practices that had been an ordinary part of life for their ancestors, and

a significant number of them turned to unsanctioned magical practices to fill the gap.

The complex relationship between Christianity and magic is a central theme of Lévi's work, and he deals with it forthrightly from the opening pages of this introduction. He points out that the Bible contains symbolic narratives—the vision of Ezekiel (the first chapter of the book of that name) and the entire Book of Revelations—that the Catholic church in his time did not even attempt to interpret. Both those narratives, on the other hand, have been interpreted at length and with great clarity by occult writers for many centuries.

Lévi argued on this basis among others that there was no necessary opposition between magic and Christianity as such. He liked to use the image of the three mages (“wise men” in English Bibles, but the word in the original text is *μαγοι*, *magoi*, that is, mages) kneeling before the Christ Child to represent the original and potential harmony between magic and Christian faith—but he noted that there was an inevitable opposition between magic and the official church, on account of “the social and hierarchical constitution of the Christian priesthood.” The recognition that Christian faith and Christian institutions might have conflicting interests was a tolerably common one in Lévi's time, though he seems to have been the first person to apply that insight to the history of magic.

All this history is by way of introduction to the basic theme of his work, which is a robust affirmation of the reality of

magic. Yet that affirmation needs to be understood in context. Here again, it's crucial to remember that to Lévi, magic always speaks in parables. The lurid claims of superhuman powers, he points out, "are neither mystifications of science nor dreams of madness; they are terms which it is necessary to comprehend in their true sense, and which express all the different uses of the same secret, the different characteristics of the same operation, which can be defined in a more general manner by calling it simply the Great Work."

That Work is the mastery of the force that Lévi calls the great magical agent and the astral light. All the effects of magic are the results of control over this force; all the complicated allegories of myth and legend, not excluding the soaring symbolic narratives of the Bible, can be read as detailed technical discussions of the nature, powers, and uses of the same force. Much of the first half of his book is dedicated to the labor of showing how this is done without showing too much. He has already noted that the first chapter of Ezekiel and the Book of Revelations can be read in this way, and he has hinted already that the book of 22 images that comprises the trumps of the tarot present an even more exact account of the same process.

In the second half of our current section of the text he applies the same art to some of the classic tales of Greek mythology. The most important of these is the tremendous legend of the ancient dynasty of Thebes that centers on Oedipus. Those of my readers who want to figure out what Lévi is saying here could do much worse than to read

Sophocles' plays *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone* and Aeschylus's *The Seven Against Thebes*, the best ancient sources for this legend. Since Lévi grew up in a more literate time than ours, he assumes that you know the details of this legend, along with the stories of the Golden Fleece and of Eros and Psyche, and Homer's description of the shield of Achilles from the *Iliad*. You don't have to know all about these to follow what he has to say, granted, but it helps.

It was quite common during the generations immediately before Lévi's time to draw the same conclusion he did, and see all the world's mythologies and religions as reflections of a single secret doctrine. Most of the people who developed that theme did so in an attempt to prove that all the world's mythologies and religions were false. Lévi cites two famous writers on this theme, Charles-François Dupuis and Constantin de Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney, both of whom argued that all the world's mythologies—including that of Christianity—were nothing more than astronomical metaphors.

What sets Lévi apart from these and most others is that he took the same data and drew the opposite conclusion. If all the world's myths and religions are telling the same story, he inquires, is it wholly impossible that the story might be true? If that story is reflected in the stars, is it wholly impossible that the story is the original source, and the stars turn in obedience to it? He wasn't the only writer of his time to make this proposal—there were certain writers in the British

Druid scene who ventured the same claim—but the whole momentum of nineteenth-century thought was against it.

It was a gutsy thing to do what Lévi did in 1854, and it's still a gutsy thing to do today, when the habit of kneejerk cynicism is just as deeply entrenched as it was in Lévi's time. Lévi was sure, however, that he had uncovered a key that made sense of countless ancient puzzles, a way to bridge the gap between Christianity and philosophy, and the first principles of a science that might revolutionize the world if only he could find people interested in giving it the sustained attention and effort it deserved. He was willing to take risks. Whether or not you agree that he found what he claimed to find—and understanding a thinker is far, far more important than agreeing or disagreeing with him—the adventure he launched with *The Doctrine and Ritual of High Magic* is worth following.

Notes for Study and Practice:

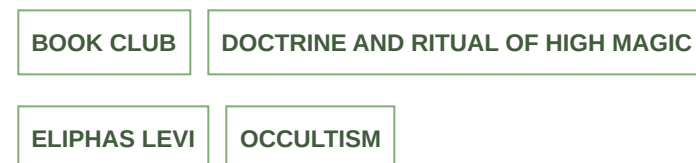
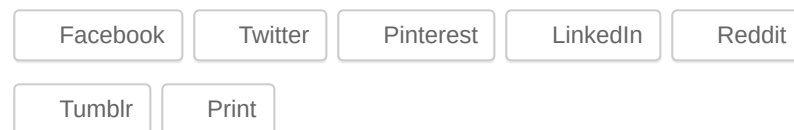
Next month we'll begin work on a specific system of Western meditation using the trumps of the tarot deck—a system for which, as it happens, the chapters to come were designed and crafted. This introduction, however, is simply an overview of the territory ahead and has not been shaped to fit that practice. During the month ahead, read the introduction at least three times—once quickly, to get an overview; the second times slowly, paying attention to each sentence; and the third time just as slowly, watching carefully for possible double meanings, metaphors, and hints. Get familiar with it. You're going to be spending four

years thinking through Lévi's ideas, so the sooner you get some sense of how he thinks and how he frames his ideas, the better.

At least once each week during the month you spend on this section of the book, take out the 22 trumps of your tarot deck and go over them, looking at each one. Pay attention to all the symbols on the cards—not just the figures, but what they are holding and what is around them. Remember that in decks that use the French pattern, *Le Bateleur* (the Juggler or Magician) is the first card, and *Le Fou* (the Madman or Fool) is the next to last card; also, *La Justice* (Justice) is card 8 and *La Force* (Strength) is card 11. (They're the other way around in decks based on the Golden Dawn tradition, such as the Rider-Waite.) Here again, get familiar with the cards. For Lévi, these 22 images are the key that opens the Portal of the Mysteries—and a dozen generations of occultists since his time have found that the key works.

We'll be going on to "Chapter 1: The Initiate" on June 9, 2021. See you then!

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The Legacy of Luxor

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chuaquin says:

#1. May 12, 2021 at 12:47 pm

“If you take Lévi’s narratives in a purely literal sense, as too many people have done, you’ll miss much more than half of what it has to teach. Furthermore, the more literally Lévi seems to be presenting what he has to say, the more suspicious you should be that that he means what he says in a purely symbolic sense.”

A good warning, thank you JMG.

Mollari says:

#2. May 12, 2021 at 12:58 pm

My first thoughts on passing through this book, is that it will benefit from extensive meditations; and I’ve also requested

about a half dozen books from the public library in order to get more context on the references he's making. This is going to be an exciting thing to work through: personally, I'm quite happy to get started now while I'm in the Ovate Grade of the CGD, since I think it will take much more than a year to even scratch the surface of this book.

"The recognition that Christian faith and Christian institutions might have conflicting interests was a tolerably common one in Lévi's time, though he seems to have been the first person to apply that insight to the history of magic."

This is yet another insight of the 19th century I'd like to see revived! Frankly, too much of modern Christianity has replaced their faith with God with faith in Priests.

Travis says:

#3. May 12, 2021 at 1:03 pm

I'm ready!

youngelephant says:

#4. May 12, 2021 at 1:06 pm

I'm glad you called out Levi's prose. When I was reading it I had two recurring thoughts. 1) That he was like a very verbose combat sports hype man and 2) This matches my

preconceptions exactly of what a French book would be like

□

Thanks for the post.

Goldenhawk says:

#5. May 12, 2021 at 2:01 pm

This is going to be a fascinating study!

On the first reading, I had the exact reaction you describe to Levi's writing style: annoyance at its "spooky, melodramatic, and overblown" style. I guess that's a good sign. As I re-read, I'm going to go slowly and think about your suggestion that he intended to evoke such a reaction.

On the numbering of the cards, the Knapp-Hall deck has assigned both 21 and 22 to The World card. This goes against what I think I already know about the Tarot. I've observed that this attitude is an obstacle to learning anything new, so I'm watching out for it. The "thrust block" idea comes to mind: that I might use this attitude to create energy to imagine new meanings.

John Michael Greer says:

#6. May 12, 2021 at 2:22 pm

Chuaquin, you're most welcome.

Mollari, excellent. The more work you put into studying Lévi, the more you'll get out of this.

Travis, glad to hear it.

Youngelephant, Lévi's a good example of standard 19th century French prose. Compared to the Sâr Peladan's first novel, *The Supreme Vice* — which I'm currently translating as spare time permits — it's positively terse!

Goldenhawk, good, and good. Remember also that English prose reads just as oddly when a French reader encounters it...

Prizm says:

#7. May 12, 2021 at 2:37 pm

I started reading the introduction over the weekend (your and Mark's translation arrived just last Friday!), spending about half an hour reading before bed. It has resulted in some of the best sleep I've had in ages! The style has been difficult to parse through. Not only do I benefit from a purely American education, but it was reinforced by a family who had "little room for nonsense." Thankfully a Russian wife and time in China has opened my mind a bit to differing ways to explain things.

Thus far, the numbers four, two, and three have stuck out, and the connection between them. Along with connections between Christianity and the Greek myths. As far as I could

tell prior to going through Levi's book, Christianity was deeply influenced by Greek mythology. I anticipate gaining more understanding and seeing more connections. I'm also sensing that we'll practice a lot of learning to recognize that two seemingly opposite things are connected, and that is a huge part of the astral light.

Thanks for the encouragement to pick this book up and walk through it with all of us. I feel something really beneficial will come of it.

Steve T says:

#8. May 12, 2021 at 2:42 pm

Regarding the difference between the English and French prose traditions, this helps me make sense of something. I've noticed for a while that I find modern English-language fiction almost unreadable. It moves too fast and it feels almost "hot." So I basically stopped reading it altogether. For the last couple of months I've been reading Clark Ashton Smith almost exclusively, with some side helping of Robert E Howard and those few Lovecraft stories I've never read before (mainly his collaborations). Smith in particular breaks every single rule of contemporary fiction— in addition to the purple prose, many of his stories are nearly all "telling," very little "showing." And I find it much, much more readable and enjoyable.

I'm tempted to start a new Dreamwidth site which I might call "Write Old Things," in which I'll try to write stories like Lovecraft and company— florid prose; heavy exposition; and long, slow buildups; with as little "showing" as I can possibly get away with.

brevdravis says:

#9. May 12, 2021 at 3:03 pm

Dear J.M.G,

I find it very interesting that Levi's methods use the Trumps, because I just finished a long period of working with the lesser arcana and found the entire process extremely enlightening and a great deal of creative inspiration.

If you'll forgive me, it strongly reminds me a bit of the TAT (Thematic Apperception Test) test used in psychology in order to assess personality. I'd humbly suggest that the order of the greater arcana/trumps tell us a great deal about how the individual doing the ordering thought. In essence, by creating an order, the creator of the deck is in fact describing how they personally view the journey.

Which suggests that there may be other orders to the cards, just as valid, if not as popular or efficient for individual practitioners. For example, a devout Catholic might find the card of "The Pope/High Priest" to be the supreme authority and the start of all their stories. As such, a person with that

personality trait might find starting their meditations with that card not only satisfies their faith, but adjusts the order and story to their own mindset.

Just tossing it out there. Much like the difference between French and English Literature, it might just be a matter of taste.

Brevdravis

Eric Cole says:

#10. May 12, 2021 at 3:09 pm

Hi JMG,

After reading the Intro a handful of times I find The Doctrine and Ritual of High Magic is a very enjoyable read. For whatever reason I am really getting into his 19th Century French prose. Definitely motivating my French studies.

This sentence is a contender for my email signature. Or blog tag line.

“Yet the multitudes never conspire against the real powers; they do not have the science of what is true, but only the instinct for what is strong.”

The first time reading the Intro some of the passages felt like colorful warnings to people who picked up the book at the shop by mistake.

The only negative I foresee is wearing the book out before we finish with the book club.

–Eric

Katherine Halton says:

#11. May 12, 2021 at 3:15 pm

Hello JMG: I recently changed my email address. Could you update your records so that I can continue to see the posts. Thanks.

adwelly says:

#12. May 12, 2021 at 3:26 pm

Oh dear; I'm not really getting any emotional reaction to the riddle beyond wondering what the larger or more complete answer might be. Thank you for the hints that this is a central theme however.

My cards are on the way, so I was pleased to notice that parts one and two are divided into twenty two chapters each. Another hint.

Justin Patrick Moore says:

#13. May 12, 2021 at 3:27 pm

I guess I'm a fan of French prose & poetry (is the term purple prose by any chance a slam on the French?) of the 19th & early 20th century anyway. Baudelaire, Lautreamont, Rimbaud, Gerard de Nerval, Alfred Jarry and a lot of other fun stuff from around that time period.

So yeah, Levi, is in that mold. Overblown to current American ears & eyes most likely, but I took to it readily in the introduction! The opening line draws you write in to a world of Mystery(s).

[And though I like plenty of American lit, Hemingway and Fitzgerald I always felt they were/are way overrated writers compared to say John Steinbeck. Plenty of others disagree with me though.]

So, anyway, I'm very excited about digging into this and the cards. The introduction also made me want to pick up a copy of Robert Graves "The Greek Myths" which I read some time ago, but would be a good reference and nice to have for the home library. I already have some of the Theban plays. My Jerusalem Bible (my preferred translation) is also ready to go for reference & all of this is going to provide many themes for meditation.

Thank you!

JustMe says:

#14. May 12, 2021 at 3:47 pm

i read your Introduction to the book yesterday and -whoo boy – if I had not been onto this already I would be after that.

I recall some author (can't remember who) who decided his Introductions were the best things he'd ever written and finally convinced his publisher to compile a book that consisted solely of his Introductions to books.

Thank you for doing this.

Adrian says:

#15. May 12, 2021 at 4:12 pm

Looking forward to this JMG. I feel like I'm going back to college again! Cheers

Reloaded15 says:

#16. May 12, 2021 at 4:50 pm

You were right that the French is fairly straightforward to read, and I'm used to the style of endless strings of sub clauses – it's no different today in literary French – but I did find that there's a rhythm and a cadence to the French text that is lost in the English translation. That's not a criticism of the translation, it's not really possible to do.

You're not bothering with the preliminary discourse apparently, does that just not add anything?

My Marseille deck arrived yesterday and flicking through the cards I noticed the Justice/Strength switch (Force could just as easily be used in English instead of Strength as far as I'm concerned), I also saw that it's not The Lovers but The Lover (L'amoureux) i.e. singular, which is interesting. There's also The House [of] God instead of The Tower, and you said that The Fool is Le Fou, but in my deck that card's called Le Mat, but I'm sure you'll get to all that.

I know a bit about Oedipus, less about Eros and Psyche. It's been a long time since I read any Aeschylus, so I think I'll pick that up too.

All in all it's going to be a lot of work!

Sister Crow says:

#17. May 12, 2021 at 5:01 pm

This is likely not relevant to our reading of Levi, but FYI for those who scored a copy of the Knapp-Hall Tarot before it sold out again. The PRS sent a very nice note with my deck, thanking me for my custom and saying: "For key insight into the esoteric cabalistic symbolism used on our cards, refer to expert Dr. Yolanda Robinson, Transformationtarot.net". I haven't looked at it yet myself, but I thought I'd share in case people found it to be useful.



John Michael Greer says:

#18. May 12, 2021 at 5:09 pm

Prizm, that's high praise. Sweet dreams! 😊

Steve, Smith was powerfully influenced by French poetry and prose — have you read his long poem “The Hashish-Eater”? It's one of the few things in English that belongs on the same shelf as *Les Chants de Maldoror*. I'd encourage you to launch that site!

Brevdravis, maybe so, but it's worth considering the possibility that the person who ordered the cards knew something that you might want to learn. The insistence on changing things around before you've understood them is another very common way people defend themselves against the unwelcome experience of learning something new.

Eric, glad to hear it. I find Lévi a pleasure to read in either language. As for the risk of wearing out the book, why, you can make Mark and me a little happier by buying an extra copy. 😊

Katherine, I have no access to that widget. You'll have to resubscribe using your new email address.

Adwelly, did you think having an emotional reaction to the riddle was the thing that matters?



Justin, somehow it doesn't surprise me that you're a Baudelaire fan! Lévi is definitely in that same vein, As for American lit, I like Fitzgerald a great deal but Hemingway always struck me as highly overrated.

JustMe, I've seen several books like that — collected introductions, Famous Prefaces, and so on. My introductions aren't the best things I've written, but I'm glad you enjoyed this one.

Adrian, I hope that doesn't mean you're expecting absurdly high tuition bills and shrieking wokesters. 😊

Reloaded15, rhythm and cadence are among the things that you basically can't translated from one language to another, and we didn't try — it was enough of an effort to get the meanings as clear as possible. You're quite correct, of course, that the Fool is Le Mat, Il Matto in the old Italian tarots. As for the preliminary discourse, we looked it over and decided it wasn't worth translating, so you can draw your own conclusions!

JustMe says:

#19. May 12, 2021 at 5:23 pm

So what would you say are the best things you've ever written?

jbucks says:

#20. May 12, 2021 at 5:25 pm



I've got my copy of yours and Mark's translation in hand, along with a Tarot deck as well, and I've already given the Introduction a quick read. Looking forward to the journey. 4 years! Who knows what the world will be like in 4 years? Whatever happens, it looks like it will include a group of wiser people much more well versed in Lévi and the Tarot.

I think there's already a lot to reflect on in the illustrated image on the page right after Mark's introduction marked Part One. What does the text in that image mean?

@Steve T: I also find Clark Ashton Smith very enjoyable to read, I struggle a bit with some of Lovecraft's prose, but I have no trouble at all with Clark Ashton Smith.

Maybe we could make a rule that all book club comments have to be in florid prose? ☐ I jest, of course.

Aloysius Snuffleupagus says:

#21. May 12, 2021 at 6:17 pm

I got my Knapp Hall deck with an extra 7 and 3 of wands. Does this mean I should get back into ham radio?

brevdravis says:

#22. May 12, 2021 at 6:38 pm



Dear J.M.G,

I absolutely accept and embrace that possibility. Central to the thought process I was expressing was the idea that the order would indicate a great deal about the person creating that order. Perhaps I made a bit of a hash of that explanation, as it would not be the first time.

My example was a top of the head idea, more of a what if than a demand that everything change to suit my particular taste, and if it came across as that, I wholeheartedly and deeply apologize.

Brevdravis

Kfish says:

#23. May 12, 2021 at 6:44 pm

Argh! I just spent a few days wading through the preliminary remarks with my very basic French. Thank you for sparing me the labour of the next 30 pages! However, it was fascinating to see Levi lay out his argument that the study of Nature and the study of God are the same; it looks like a lead-up to “as above, so below.”

Onto the Introduction, then. Translating occult books with my dictionary in one hand is doing wonders for my French

lessons. I'm not sure if that's just the effects of practice, or the influence of something bigger.

Mark Notzon says:

#24. May 12, 2021 at 6:55 pm

I look forward to reading your essays on E. Levi, and participating in discussion, having followed your writings on occult and esoteric topics for several years now. Minor point: I think it was Aeschylus who wrote "Seven Against Thebes:" yes, but Sophocles who wrote "Oedipus the King" and "Antigone." Anyone who is familiar with the calibre of your thought and writing, however, would only mark this flawed attribution a minor error.

I once took a course in Greek tragedy some time ago, but I recall the prof's relative disdain for Sophocles as, compared to Aeschylus and Euripedes. He remarked that his five year old daughter could easily unravel the riddle of the Sphinx, as given by Sophocles.

I wonder if easy and conventional responses lead one to being "devoured" by life and the cosmos, instead of understanding them. I have thought that being food for the Sphinx is very much like mechanical life generating "food for the Moon" in the Gurdjieffean cosmology.

Eric Cole says:

#25. May 12, 2021 at 7:05 pm

What would be sweet is an edition with the translated and original French texts on facing pages. Also paper and binding like they did with The Dolmen Arch. I would definitely pay a premium for one of those.

Okay enough day dreaming for me. Gotta get my tarot cards out.

Phutatorius says:

#26. May 12, 2021 at 7:09 pm

An example of a terse English sentence: "A new voice hailed me of an old friend when, first returned from the Peninsula I paced again in that long street of Damascus which is called Straight; and suddenly taking me wondering by the hand, 'Tell me (said he), since thou art here again in the peace and assurance of Ullah, and whilst we walk, as in the former years, toward the new blossoming orchards, full of the sweet spring as the garden of God, what moved thee, or how couldst thou take such journeys into the fanatic Arabia?'"

I already have a bone to pick with Levi: footnote 73 on page 33 claims that Tristram Shandy features a donkey as a key plot engine. Somehow I must've missed that; a donkey does appear, briefly in Vol 7, but otherwise?????

In Proust, back when I had too much time on my hands, I found a single sentence that went on for a whole page, and a paragraph that was eight pages long.

Having said that much, perhaps too much, I'm looking forward to the upcoming discussion of Levi's book.

Errata says:

#27. May 12, 2021 at 7:39 pm

Having missed the opportunity to follow along with your series on The Cosmic Doctrine, I'm over the moon to take part this time. This will be the first book I've ever studied on magic and following it along with this community is something else. Thank you!

Augusto says:

#28. May 12, 2021 at 7:40 pm

JMG, what was the link where we could download Levi's book in french? I will be using the Sâr's approach you recommended me a while ago to re-learn French as we study it, seems like a good opportunity and motivation to do so while also encouraging me to read closely. I was going to use Les Miserables but this hits closer to home.

Derpherder says:

#29. May 12, 2021 at 7:45 pm



I gotta say, I'm really enjoying the writing style! Perhaps I was a French person in a previous life, but it feels lively and full of energy rather than purple and overdone. Kudos JMG on the loving and punctilious-seeming translation.

What a goldmine of meditation topics! More than any book I've read since Arthur Powell's the Astral Body, almost every other sentence jumped out as worthy of unpacking. Whew, this is going to be fun! I got the JMG translation from the library in order to figure out if I wanted to buy it, and it seems VERY worth a purchase so far. Too much to do, too much to read, too much to meditate on, too much to eat ... very often lately I have felt as though the day should be 3 times as long. I'm sure my feelings on the subject are nothing compared to yours!

I second the praise for the introduction. Crisp, clean, thorough, and full of detail, with some little wry jabs thrown in. Very nice.

Joshua says:

#30. May 12, 2021 at 8:12 pm

I understand you're not a fan of Joseph Campbell, but I believe one of his quotes is appropriate to the discussion

now underway regarding Levi: “Interpreting the Bible literally is like walking in to a restaurant and eating the menu.”

jbucks says:

#31. May 12, 2021 at 8:14 pm

We know from your post on the preliminaries that Lévi considers imagination to be one of the faculties important for magic, so while re-reading slowly the first couple of paragraphs from the Introduction, it struck me that part of the reason for the florid language is perhaps to begin to train this faculty. But also that, by reciting symbol after symbol, myth after myth, it almost doesn't matter what the symbols actually are, just that they are the only way to point to whatever he is referring to.

Mabadabadoo says:

#32. May 12, 2021 at 8:24 pm

The synchronicities have been piling up the past few days about daring, Diogenes and freedom, and now Levi's paragraph about needing a real man to take the virgin in a dark room. There was also the latest C-Realm pod “Men Not Need Apply” which talks about many things but also the fact that there are more lesbians than ever, possibly because boys are afraid to make the first move due to their maleness being under attack from toxic femininity. Our society has

embraced fear and conformity and is suffering greatly as a result.

The message seems to be not about sex but creative force in general, particularly the word Force. If someone finds that concept problematic then most likely they are not very creative. The door was made to be opened by the brave. Simps need not apply.

Will1000 says:

#33. May 12, 2021 at 8:32 pm

JMG,

I am interested in venturing through the text along with everyone else, but have a few questions:

1) Considering it is focused on High Magic, how much training, experience, background in magic is necessary for participating in this venture? (i.e., is this beyond the ken of a novice? I tried working along with CosDoc, but after the first couple posts, found it was way beyond me. Maybe low magic or slow magic is more my speed. I am a bit of a plodder.)

2) Does Levi focus on the steps for developing a practice in magic? Or, does he only focus on informing upon and explaining magic?

3) My last question I am having trouble putting into words, please bear with me. What should we generally expect in

practical terms by participating? What are we doing this for (other than because it is interesting/intriguing or maybe that is the reason)?

Also, many thanks for hosting this forum and the many enjoyable posts and books.

Will1000

VinZent ProNova says:

#34. May 12, 2021 at 9:04 pm

JMG: Thanks for all. Refreshing and sustaining insight at another oasis. I'll sign on for this part of the journey. Deck and book are at hand. Lead and illuminated. Best In all –
VinZent ProNova

Kay Robison says:

#35. May 12, 2021 at 9:14 pm

Ok, I have the book, it arrived a week ago and the deck which arrived very quickly, so I guess I am as ready as I can be. I will see what I have concerning Greek mythology. I always loved mythological stories, but I can't say I know more about them than just how I was entertained by them. It will be good to look under the hood as it were.

Degringolade says:

#36. May 12, 2021 at 9:49 pm

Pretty Straightforward question.

I have a Waite deck. I am a cheapskate. Will these work well enough or do I have to shell out for a new deck?

coboarts says:

#37. May 12, 2021 at 9:51 pm

Exciting

Ganesh Ubuntu says:

#38. May 12, 2021 at 10:11 pm

I must admit that Levi's book almost feels like home!

Russian literature was heavily influenced by French culture in the 19th century – about a quarter of 'War and Peace' is written in French for one example. Long sentences with colourful overtones, metaphors, and allusions were necessary for any text that would have any hope of going into print.

I attempted to read Gurgieff's 'Bezelbub's Tales' some several years ago and found that he took this habit into an overdrive with a surplus. Sentences spanning over a few

pages were only a beginning. They were actually rather easy to read, at least in Russian, while he was narrating the story. Every now and then he would break the narration and start talking about the actual material that he was passing on. It was covered with sentences of the same length of technical text in which he introduced nearly unreadable long words of his own invention for the jargon and then explained how these concepts are related to each other. I didn't have the chops to get through it – his flake filter was very effective!

Compared to that, Levi's book looks almost easy. I know it's not and that it'll take good effort to even scratch its surface. Still, I'm glad I don't have to flip through pages to even just grasp the basic wording and structure of a single sentence!
:}

Catriona says:

#39. May 12, 2021 at 10:13 pm

Hooboy, I am so excited for this ride—thank you in advance for this series! Three quick comments before I begin my re-reads of the introduction:

1) "It was in fact the case that what we now call magic was pervasive in ancient times, and was practiced by many of the ancient priesthoods as a matter of course. People in ancient Egypt, Babylon, and Greece who felt the need of supernatural help could get it from the religious

professionals of their societies, or from many other practitioners, without contradicting the teachings of their faiths or falling afoul of the civil laws.”

This may be a clashing of etic/emic definitions of magic, but at least with regard to Greece and Rome, there was a very clear distinction between religion, which was the purview of the state or head of household, and magic, which was necessarily secret and taboo. Many of those officially sanctioned practices might look to us today like magic (augury, dream incubation, etc.), but much like the example of Catholic altars, they were accepted expressions of supernatural interactions within the culture. Meanwhile, other “outsider” practitioners would offer services not necessarily found in the temples, such as curses and bindings (and poisons, oh my!). Magic was, by definition, that which was not approved by the temples of the city state or empire.

2) Richmond Lattimore’s translations of Sophocles’ (Oedipus the King, Antigone) and Aeschylus’ (7 Against Thebes [he did write a version of Oedipus but only a fragment survived, sadly]) plays are still among the most beautiful, if folks are looking for recommendations.

3) So far I’m finding all the sub-clauses rather relaxing? Although when I read the example sentence above to my 11-year-old, the disbelief on his face was quite entertaining!

~Catriona

John Michael Greer says:

#40. May 12, 2021 at 10:55 pm



JustMe, ask me that on an open post; it's off topic here.

Jbucks, I won't make such a rule, but should you decide in a sudden outburst of superabundant will to make your own contributions to this forum in florid prose; should it be a cause of trembling anguish to you that so few ornate sentences make their appearance on these evanescent pages; should a wild passion for convoluted language come surging up from the squamous and rugose depths of your own pallid and perfervid psyche and drive you to such a pitch of intensity that vast seething gouts of intricate language spill forth from your notional pen — why, by all means have at it.

Aloysius, so the synchronicity would suggest!

Brevdravis, so noted. It gets interesting, at least to me, when it's not just one person's order of emblems but a sequence that has been adopted and systematically applied by an entire tradition.

Kfish, translation is the best way I know to stretch my vocabulary and my sense of grammatical flow, so it doesn't surprise me that it works for you as well.

Mark, anyone who is familiar with my writing will be aware that I make such typos quite often. 😊 I've never understood the disdain for Sophocles; his apparent simplicity covers immense depths.

Eric, unfortunately I have no control over such details of publishing; I'd like to have such a volume as well.

Phutatorius, you could do longer and more ornate than that in Lovecraft! As for Proust, I've been learning an enormous amount from him; I'd encourage any writer to study him.

Augusto, it's linked in last month's book club post.

Derpherder, I agree — Lévi's prose is very much to my taste.

Joshua, well, even a blind mouse can find a broken clock...



Jbucks, excellent.

Mabadabadoo, force by itself is unbalanced; form by itself is unbalanced. Energy clumsily applied and limitation unthinkingly applied both fail. Find the balance between force and form, the moment of grace, and the door opens by itself.

Will1000, (1) This book was written for complete beginners. In Lévi's time, that's all anybody was, outside of a few rural wizards and a few urban eccentrics. (2) He doesn't give you step by step instructions, if that's what you mean. (3) What a fine theme for meditation!

VinZent, welcome to the journey!

Kay, just letting yourself be entertained by them is a very good way to approach them. They do most of their work when the conscious mind doesn't interfere too much.

Degringolade, as I mentioned last month, the Waite deck won't cut it. You can find and print out images of the Marseilles deck online if you're feeling really strapped for cash.

Coboarts, good.

Ganesh, if my limited exposure to Russian prose is anything to go by, Russian literature makes French look terse!

Catriona, yes, there are clashing definitions here. I'm using Lévi's, of course. Thanks for the recommendations!

(Panda, you posted your comment to last month's post, not this month's. The Universal Wirth is fine — any of the Wirth decks will do.)

Warren says:

#41. May 12, 2021 at 11:51 pm

Good Morning Mr Greer!

I went to my library app to check out if your book was there – one library no but I recommended it ... the other one did have it but as an audio book ... which might make it a bit hard to meditate on individual phrases I suspect...

Re the tarot deck. I have zero experience with tarot it being up there with Ouija Boards in popular Christian culture as things that would open you up to your trademarked evilly evil evilness and a quick google mentioned some kind of Christian tarot but I doubt it is the French deck you are referring to. Do you need an actual deck or can you use pictures found online and how would you link the study of this book in with your readers on the Christological side of the devotional paradigm?

William Hunter Duncan says:

#42. May 13, 2021 at 12:08 am

In the Verb....I have mostly let go of the news etc advocacy, focusing on poetry lately; and life as art. I am about 6 chapters in. Though I do not read in the French, I hear his voice, it is singular and the translation is more like spoken word.

I am grateful for this.

gnat says:

#43. May 13, 2021 at 12:57 am

@JMG et al:

A gift from me and Lévi to the community!! ☐ I just uploaded a public domain copy IN FRENCH of the FIRST volume of

Doctrine and Ritual to READLANG.COM. At this point the formatting is all wrong, but it works and, as a community, we can probably edit our way to a first-rate version.

Readlang.com is a godsend web-tool to those of us needing training wheels to read a foreign language. It is free and legit – with a paid version supporting even more sophisticated translation and learning tools. However, the free version is amazing in its own right.

Instead of having to painstakingly stop and look up words one at a time (generally losing context and enthusiasm, as you get lost in the train of thought before you can get to the bottom of even page one) you read one full page at a time and can click as many words as you like for immediate translation. The translation to your native language shows as green text above the foreign language word, which helps immeasurably in keeping the flow going and showing the entire page, with words you don't understand, in context. So you see this:

^Doctrine ^rituel ^high magic

Dogme et rituel de la haute magie par Éliphas Lévi

<https://readlang.com/library/609ca7962f4bd319880bceb5/from/2352>

As I said, because I just uploaded it on a lark, to see if it would work, the formatting is really run-on. But I still think those of us who are seriously interesting in trying to upgrade

ourselves via both French and Lévi, with John's assist, will find it useful even as is.

PLEASE LET ME KNOW IF YOU CAN ACCESS IT OKAY. IT IS IN NON-FICTION PUBLIC TEXTS IN THE LIBRARY. YOUR UP VOTE WILL MAKE IT EASIER FOR OTHERS TO FIND.

gnat says:

#44. May 13, 2021 at 2:21 am

Just to save some frustration, John's translation (page 3 in his book) begins just beyond 20% into the original French text (there is a lot of preliminary stuff which apparently isn't worth the braincells:).

So if you are in readlang, you probably want to skip forward until you see you are 20% through. THEN you want to proceed a few more pages looking for "62 DOGME DE LA HAUTE MAGIE"; that is page 62 in the original text. The first paragraph of John's book is about midway between that page "62" and the page "64 DOGME DE LA HAUTE MAGIE".

In John's book, the text begins with "Beyond the veil.." In the readlang book you need to find the equivalent French paragraph which begins: ""À travers le vuile..."

Now you are syncopated and I suggest you leave the tab open and otherwise make notes in your paperback so you

can keep in sync or get back to where you were.



TJR says:

#45. May 13, 2021 at 2:44 am

Hello Mr. Greer et al.

I am a long time reader, but have been content to lurk until now.

I listened to a big chunk of the audio book version, on a long road trip, a few years back. Thought, this is great, but I need to try again and do a proper slow read. It has been second or third on the reading list since. So, I am quite exited for the opportunity to do that study with company.

The deck that caught my eye is on pre-order so I'll just use some of the online resources until then. BTW, thank you for pointing out which decks are appropriate. A bit ago I tried using the Rider-Waite deck to follow along with Levi, but immediately got confused and dropped it again.

I like the writing style, but he dose seem like an adversarial author. It always feels like he is up to something. He is, but it's hard to tell just how paranoid to be. For example, when he talks about Cornelius Agrippa (page 11), I can't yet tell if his jab is in earnest, or I'm missing some context, or he means the exact opposite for the lolz.

His sense of humor is growing on me. Like how he tricks the reader into joining the witches' sabbat. Should be fine though, it's "just imaginary" after all.

p.s. Please forgive any of my dyslexic writing errors.



Trystan32000 says:

#46. May 13, 2021 at 2:55 am

There were aspects to Levi's writing style that reminded me in some instances of guided meditation like his description of what I understand to be the black mass for instance as he described where "you" were and what "you" were seeing and activities "you" were taking part in.

There were other aspects that seemed like initiation rituals of magical orders/lodges including being put in a new and unfamiliar situation that is intentionally ominous and include dire threats of what would happen to you if you revealed the secret teachings that seemed to be less an attempt to protect the "secrets" that could turn out to be surprisingly ordinary and more to create an emotional reaction in and transformative experience for the one being initiated.

BoysMom says:

#47. May 13, 2021 at 3:15 am

Well, my first question is which St. Martin is M. Levi referring to, on page 69 in the French? Martin of Porres, Martin of Tours, or Martin the Confessor being the three I think possible. St. Martin being associated with Swedenborg and Guillaume Postel in this sentence, I am leaning towards Martin the Confessor, but am not sure.

Has anyone a definitive answer or further speculation?



Also, I rather plowed into the preliminary discourse, thinking we'd be starting there, and discovered my French is not quite so rusty as I thought, and also rediscovered the merits of finding the noun first in these long sentences before reading the entire sentence. I had forgotten that little trick, so if anyone else is trying to read in somewhat rusty French, I'll reccomend that. I found the Kindle import file to be poorly formated, but the .pdf is a clear enough scan, if anyone is still trying to decide how to read.

I find myself disposed to like M. Levi, first for appearing to be fond of my favorite Gospel, second, for causing me to laugh out loud twice in sympathy over the church hierarchy (plus ca change, plus ca reste la meme, n'est pas?) and third for referrencing Jacques de Molay.

I shall have to finish the introduction on the morrow.

Bon nuit!

adwelly says:

#48. May 13, 2021 at 3:31 am

Yes, I did think that having an emotional reaction might matter – not that I'm very good at them. I'll just have to make do with intense curiosity. I reread the text again and there's various references to threes, fewer to fours and twos. I seem to recall in the past that you've commented

that books of this kind often hide their information not just in symbolic ways but in structure and word games. Is there something you've posted on that subject I could review please?

Helen says:

#49. May 13, 2021 at 5:21 am

Take two at attempting this.

My phone doesn't like you to leave the page!

Ok I'm really looking forward to this, being a Tarot junkie!

Already had your book, already many decks to pick from!

For those without a deck, you can go to the late Yoav Ben

Dov's website cbdtarot.com, where you can download the

entire Nicholas Conver Marseille, which he reproduced.

His book is a great read too, as is Robert M Place's. He also

has a great Tarot website.

But I digress!

Looking forward to the journey, best wishes everyone!

Helen in Oz

jbucks says:

#50. May 13, 2021 at 5:55 am

Ha! OK, here goes, time to channel my inner Lévi. You asked for it! ☐

Superabundant will indeed! A desire strengthened by the tepid and bland activity in which I find myself in daily life partaking, stuck as I am writing dull emails and tedious documentation for equally banal and insipid ends. Each such paragraph I painstakingly write, nay, each such lifeless word, each reference to 'resources', each generic and tepidly abstract use of 'action' as a verb rather than one more suited to the activity it points to, each smothered sentence; all these stack together relentlessly like bricks into a wall of dull and gray text upon which our business is built on. All such things serve only to deaden and foul my untaxed senses.

Oh, the task of Sisyphus himself, burdened for eternity with his ever-heavy boulder, is equally burdened by the sensuousness of his affair; the feeling of strain, the pain of his pressured muscles, the brief yet forlorn respite as his burden falls bouncing and almost malevolently back to the base of his ever-familiar mountain – the blandness of my monotonous daily toil equals the living intensity of his.

Yet every word typed to earn my daily bread stacks elsewhere, too. Every word is somehow also an ungrown seed, collecting through time into a patient store of unused yet potent energy, the unripened green within all the gray at times bursting with ornate promise, and expended only partially in a comment such as this. Oh, the life that urges within every so-adorned word! Oh, my imagined delight at the horror that such an ornate passage would have on my stifled-souled masters! Superabundant will, indeed!

Chris Smith says:

#51. May 13, 2021 at 10:43 am

I am utterly puzzled by Levi's statement that Oedipus's answer to the sphinx was a half answer, but am excited to roll this around my mind. This will be an excellent exercise for discursive meditation, along with the numbers 2, 3, and 4.

Question to JMG: will a rereading of the Illiad be of any value in studying Levi? Luckily I am blessed with a solid education in ancient Greek classics, and am looking forward to revisiting my old friends, Homer through Aeschylus to Aristotle with a new perspective.

Comparing the Marseilles deck and the Waite-Rider-Smith deck, I am beginning to wonder if the fool belongs both at position 0 and at position 21 (with the World at position 22). I'm thinking in the vein of returning to where you start as you approach the world, but now with awareness of your own aporia.

Justin Patrick Moore says:

#52. May 13, 2021 at 11:26 am

Yes, I guess it's not a surprise I gravitated to Baudelaire and the other French writers I mentioned. (Rimbaud's "The Drunken Boat" might be my favorite French poem though). Being something of a Gothic inclined bookworm working at

the library, I spent a lot of time up in the stacks in those relevant sections. Poe was already a favorite when I was in junior high, so I see a certain thread running through my taste. When assigned to memorize a poem in seventh grade I chose Poe's "A City in the Sea".

I'm quite in agreement with Baudelaire that the world is a forest of symbols. Is this Book of Nature one of the "books" Levi talks about that requires the secret knowledge to interpret? It's something I'll meditate on.

I've not read Clark Ashton Smith (except in collaboration with Lovecraft). I'm going to have to remedy that.

If I may, I'd like to post the poem Correspondences by Baudelaire here. It strikes me as having a magic quality.

Correspondances

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisseront parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
— Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

— Charles Baudelaire

Correspondences

Nature is a temple in which living pillars
Sometimes give voice to confused words;
Man passes there through forests of symbols
Which look at him with understanding eyes.

Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance
In a deep and tenebrous unity,
Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,
Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.

There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children,
Sweet as oboes, green as meadows
— And others are corrupt, and rich, triumphant,

With power to expand into infinity,
Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin,
That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses.

— William Aggeler (translator) *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954)

lp says:

#53. May 13, 2021 at 11:44 am



I've received the Marseilles deck I ordered and started reading the ebook. I am definitely going to go ahead and order a physical copy as I foresee a lot of underlining and margin notes in my future. It does feel like going back to school (in the best way possible)!

Prizm says:

#54. May 13, 2021 at 11:46 am

After finishing the introduction entirely last night, Levi really threw down the gauntlet to the priesthood, just as Jesus did in the temple, and it is no wonder that the priest institution has continued targeting the occult. He did illustrate beautifully that with every two points, there is a void that presents lots of opportunities . The introduction has loads of wisdom, and I have a feeling we'll be revisiting a lot of this over and over throughout the entirety.

Augusto says:

#55. May 13, 2021 at 12:38 pm

Thank you Gnat, that looks helpful!

Mollari says:

#56. May 13, 2021 at 12:51 pm



I'd like to share a story which at first glance will have little to do with The Doctrine of High Magic, but which I find quite beautifully illustrates a point Levi makes, albeit in a veiled fashion, in the introduction. I have begun to get some training to become an electrician, and something I found very interesting is an awkward feature of modern clothing: the affordable synthetic fabrics which can be made into clothing melt when exposed to high enough heat. Now, although I most likely won't have this problem, there is always the risk when dealing with electrical equipment of generating arcs, which can get very, very hot, and so melt synthetic fabrics.

Obviously having fabric melted to your skin is not good, and so I've decided I ought to replace my wardrobe. Natural fabrics won't melt, so I'll be replacing my clothing with those, given climate and cost, among other factors, this will mean chiefly cotton clothing. I have a birthday in a couple months, so I figured I'd ask for cotton clothing.

My parents' reaction has been bizarre, insisting that because cotton can catch fire it is no better (fires are easier to deal with); then moving to insisting that clothing which is a mixture is fine (it's worse than either one their own, as it can burn and melt!); then moving on to doing extensive research to try to find a synthetic fibre which won't melt, and accusing me of supporting slavery, due to the cotton plantations of the Pre-Civil War American South.

This is all because my observation that cotton clothing will work better in these circumstances violates one of their core symbolic narratives, which equates the natural with evil and artificial with the good. My guess is that this is a particularly brittle narrative because it's being disproved constantly, but they firmly believe in it.

I think that this highlights a point Levi makes in a veiled fashion: everyone thinks with symbolic narratives, all the time, and part of what makes the mage different from the common person is that he is aware of it.

John Michael Greer says:

#57. May 13, 2021 at 12:56 pm

Warren, the tarot deck was invented by an Italian Christian, Marziano da Tortona, back in the early fifteenth century. There's nothing diabolical about it. You can certainly use online pictures; the practices I'll be teaching, which are btw optional, have no religious dimension at all — they involve linking concepts to images. I'd encourage Christian readers to begin and end the practice with a prayer — the usual thing in Christian occult circles is to begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit for the gift of wisdom, and to end with the Lord's Prayer.

William, thank you! Mark and I worked hard to catch Lévi's distinctive voice.

Gnat, many thanks for this.



TJR, Lévi's definitely a trickster, and yes, he's up to something! The uncertainty over what he's doing is useful, and should be cultivated.

Trystan, excellent! You're paying attention, I see.

BoysMom, none of the above. He's referring to Louis Claude de St.-Martin, a notable French mystic of the late 18th century, and one of the two founders of the Martinist tradition. I'm glad you're enjoying Lévi — he's an entertaining cat.

Adwelly, curiosity will do very well. A quick look back doesn't turn up anything I've specifically written about the traditional methods of hiding magical insights in prose, but remember that Lévi wants you to figure out what he means; he's leaving plenty of clues and hints. Follow them and see how far you get.

Helen, phones are irritating creatures, aren't they? Many thanks for the link.

Jbucks, nicely superabundant. 😊

Chris, if you're puzzled, that's great. Get comfortable with the perplexity, welcome it, and let it settle in for as long as it wants to stay. That's one of the great tricks for getting past the obvious. As for Homer, it certainly won't harm you, and if you pay close attention to the discussion of the shield of Achilles in Book 18, you'll be grappling with a set of symbols

that occultists have taken as a theme of meditation since ancient Greek times.

Justin, you haven't read Smith yet? Oh, my — you're in for a treat. Here's his elegy for his good friend H.P. Lovecraft:

“Outside the time-dimension, and outside
The ever-changing spheres and shifting spaces —
Though the mad planet and its wrangling races
This moment be destroyed — he shall abide
And on immortal quests and errands ride
In cryptic service to the kings of Pnath,
Herald or spy, on the many-spangled path
With gulfs below, with muffled gods for guide.

Some echo of his voice, some vanished word
Follows the light with equal speed, and spans
The star-set limits of the universe,
Returning and returning, to be heard
When all the present worlds and spheres disperse,
In other Spicas, other Aldebarans.”

Many thanks for the Baudelaire — lovely stuff, and magical.

Ip, glad to hear it.

Prizm, flinging down the gauntlet at the established church was a common habit in his day, but Lévi did it with rare grace. The introduction is definitely worth many readings — and as you'll see, so is the rest of the book.

Mollari, that just makes my head hurt.



Kimberly Steele says:

#58. May 13, 2021 at 12:58 pm

Eliphas Lévi says:

“The particularity of the eighteenth century was to make fun of both the Christians and of magic, while at the same time becoming infatuated with the homilies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the magical illusions of Caligostro.”

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Compare today's angry atheists who laugh bitterly at the unpopulated void of empty space they are dead certain makes up most of the universe via memes and rants. Meanwhile, the same atheists quote poetry and fervently hope to fall in romantic love, or lust if all else fails.

What if the current state of materialist, overpopulated atheism (and secularized religion that is nearly the same thing) that characterizes this particular Equinox is the low point of the wave? Not only would this be the bon chance for a bunch of previously-suppressed demons to feed rent-free in the heads and hearts of a huge buffet in the form of hapless human materialist victims, but it would be the perfect, leaden foil to disguise the reality of the feast underway. Another thought I find provocative is the idea of this materialist era being an era of rest in its own weird way for its opposing forces. Is this demonic feeding frenzy of an era the thrust block for a distant but deeply magical future

where just about everyone and their aunt will be chest deep in a zillion garden variations of occult science?

youngelephant says:

#59. May 13, 2021 at 1:27 pm

JMG,

Is the “Great Work” distinct from the “Great Arcanum”? Or is this a subject for meditation?

SLClaire says:

#60. May 13, 2021 at 1:44 pm

I am a fan of Poe’s work, as it happens. Somewhere along the line, probably when I was in my teens, I found The Best Tales of Edgar Allan Poe among my parents’ books and started to read it. They never got the book back, and I still have it. It doesn’t have a copyright, but it’s a Modern Library hardback edition from when, the book jacket informs me, they sold for between \$2 and \$10.

You said to read the introduction quickly the first time, to get an overview. How can anyone read Levi quickly?? It takes time to figure out what those long sentences are saying! Interesting to look at the trump cards right after reading; I got some ideas about the symbolism though I know there is much more I haven’t gotten.

Count me as another person confused, although every once in awhile a bit of light shone briefly in the darkness of my confusion, only because I have a tiny bit of experience with decoding symbolism through working with the Mabinogion.

If I'm not mistaken, I know of another answer to the Sphinx's riddle that neither #24's prof or his five year old daughter would have thought of. Maybe the 2nd or 3rd reading, or later reading, will suggest my idea is misguided. Or maybe it is a good answer. Time will tell.

Antoinetta III says:

#61. May 13, 2021 at 2:25 pm

Justin (and anyone interested:

You can get ALL of Clark Ashton Smith's work at

<http://www.eldritchdark.com/>

Antoinetta III

Robert Mathiesen says:

#62. May 13, 2021 at 2:40 pm

Thank you, John Michael, for posting that marvel of an elegy for Lovecraft! To the best of my memory, I have never read

anything by Clark Ashton Smith. I need to remedy that oversight with all the speed I can muster.

BoysMom says:

#63. May 13, 2021 at 2:47 pm

Mollari, would your parents listen to your local fire department? Or to a burn doctor? There are many folks who despise synthetic clothing for professional reasons and will talk your ear off. Doctor might be your best bet in their social circle, being as they're specialists. Pediatric burn doctors will give you nightmares.

Brother Greer, merci! I'll go look him up. I note this is one of those many texts that assumes the reader has a decent education.

Scotlyn says:

#64. May 13, 2021 at 3:30 pm

I have just dipped into the Waite translation at archive.org, while waiting for my book order, and have found keeping my pen in hand to diagram or outline what I'm reading is a huge help.

I have found it incredibly difficult to disentangle* this passage (Waite trans): "The women whom they loved became Stryges, their children vanished at their nocturnal

meetings, and men whispered shudderingly and in secret of bloody orgies and abominable banquets.”

* as in figuring out who is who – obviously this is only the “top layer” of disentanglements that are waiting to be teased out...

The “they” in this passage appears to me to refer to the “adepts and initiates” (and/or those who “allowed themselves to be carried away by the honeyed words” of the “adepts and initiates”) who have been subjected by the “positive Christians” to a campaign of “strange and alarming rumours” and “anathemas” launched following victory over the Alexandrian school.

But if I have this correct... ?? I am wondering if “their children” refers to the children of the adepts/initiates/carried away, and if “their nocturnal meetings” refers to the meetings of the adepts/initiates/carried away, or if either “their” is instead referring to the “positive Christians”? ie – does one make one’s own children vanish at one’s own nocturnal meetings?

I know... meditate. For sure. Still... I’d be grateful if a tip of the hat might help with a wee hint... Thanks.

Kyle says:

#65. May 13, 2021 at 4:01 pm

In the paragraph where Levi talks about Orpheus, Pythagoras, etc., I notice you didn't translate the following line into English: la lune, à sa voix, tombe toute sanglante due ciel.

Was that intentional, in order to call attention to it, or just an omission?

Mark Notzon says:

#66. May 13, 2021 at 4:17 pm

“Le monde est un champ de bataille que la liberte dispute a la force d’inertie en lui opposant la force active. Les lois physiques sont des meules dont tu seras le grain, si tu n’en pas etre le meunier.”

Tr: The world is a battlefield in which liberty quarrels against the force of inertia with the force of activity. Physical laws are the grinding stones of which you will be the grain, if you do not know how to be the miller.

Meditation these lines of Levi brought to mind the Hindu parable of the “horse-drawn carriage” of the human being: In an unenlightened state, the carriage (body) is out of tune; the horses (emotions) are ill-trained, and the driver (the mind) is drunk. The owner of the vehicle (soul) is inside fast asleep.

Walt F says:

#67. May 13, 2021 at 4:26 pm



Riddle: Why does a writer veil his meaning in florid vagueness interspersed with clues and hints?

Simple answer: to conceal secrets. To guard Thebes. But then, why write/publish the book at all?

Better answer: to get to the other side. That's the ultimate answer to all riddles (or at least, all that ask "why?"), but that answer isn't always useful.

Better still answer: to conceal secrets from "the wrong people," including potential persecutors; in modern parlance, "for liability reasons." To keep the way open to *admit* Oedipus into Thebes. Florid treatment prevents truth decay. (Sorry.)

Is that answer the best answer? I've thought of a better one, which if I'm going to ask about, I feel inclined to be a bit vague (and perhaps fluoridated) myself.

Computer program code can be hard to understand; not because the individual tokens they're made of (commands, functions, names, etc) are vague; in fact, they have to be extremely clear and specific and they can all be easily looked up; but rather, because most programs and parts of programs need to produce different results for different circumstances. So programs are full of variables, aka symbols, which affect the meaning (the process) and are affected by it. To run the program a computer need only

follow the steps using only the current state of each symbol, but for someone wanting to understand the program, “what do these lines of code do in general?” can be quite a riddle.

My question by analogy then is, for this study of *The Doctrine and Ritual of High Magic*, do you recommend focusing on running the program on my own current state, or striving to comprehend the whole schema?

Anonymous says:

#68. May 13, 2021 at 4:39 pm

I have to say that I found the parallels between the Bible and the Celtic Golden Dawn (particularly all the stuff about the sciences, Einigan comes forcefully to mind) a bit disturbing. I don't want to go back to Christ, my late hypocrite mother shooed me away from it.

tomriverwriter says:

#69. May 13, 2021 at 5:20 pm

To Mollari: That's the kind of thinking that anthropologists often encounter, contrasting the cooked (synthetic fabrics) with the raw (cotton). Many cultures prefer cooked things, because they have been changed from wild into part of the culture. We're no different; it just takes a foreigner to see our preoccupations. If a New Guinea tribe ever sent us an

anthropologist, they'd immediately see our raw/cooked distinctions.

To John Michael: I'm along for the ride, with a degree of trepidation. Four years is a long time, but I'd like to learn magic, rather than learn about magic. I hope I can do it, and that my mind won't stand in the way.

John Michael Greer says:

#70. May 13, 2021 at 5:54 pm

Kimberly, that's certainly what occult philosophy would suggest!

Youngelephant, the Great Work is what makes it possible for you to master the Great Arcanum.

SLClaire, maybe it's just me, but I find Lévi's prose very readable! Get comfortable with feeling confused; it's by realizing that you don't understand that you become capable of reaching toward an understanding deeper than you've reached so far. I'll look forward to hearing your answer.

Antoinetta, you beat me to it. Thank you.

Robert, you're in for a world-class treat. Smith was an extraordinary prose stylist and a first-rate poet — and, ahem, you'll find some familiar things in his writing, as I plundered him pretty systematically for my Haliverse novels.

Sister BoysMom, de rien! Yes, and St.-Martin was of course especially well known in 19th-century France, where his teachings were still very much in circulation.

Scotlyn, let's check the original. "Les femmes qu'ils aimaient devenaient des Stryges, leurs enfants disparaissaient dans leurs conventicules nocturnes, et l'on parlait tout bas en frissonnant de sanglantes orgies et d'abominables festins." Here "leurs enfants" refers clearly back to "ils" and thus to the subject of the previous sentence, "ces hommes," the adepts.

Kyle, what page is that on? I couldn't find it at a glance.

Mark, good. That's certainly one way to pursue it.

Walt, I'm going to suggest a different answer. Imagine that you have never heard of a computer, and have been taught a set of beliefs meant to keep you from thinking of one, and yet someone wants to teach you how to code, so that you can realize the potential uses of the oddly shaped object over there on the corner of the desk. How florid must the metaphors be to introduce you to the basic concepts of computing?

Anonymous, it's quite common for former Christians to go around with an uncomfortable sense that their former religion really is the truth, and to get uncomfortable at anything that looks too much like it. Ask yourself this; what if the old Pagans had the truth, and Christianity is a muddled reflection of it?



Kyle says:

#71. May 13, 2021 at 6:09 pm

The untranslated line is at the bottom of page 64 of the French text in the pdf I downloaded, which is the second page of the introduction.

Robert Mathiesen says:

#72. May 13, 2021 at 7:17 pm

@Antoinetta III and JMG:

Many thanks! I know what I'll be reading for the next several weeks ...

Dermot M O Connor says:

#73. May 13, 2021 at 7:18 pm

In another odd synchronism, the same day I read this post I picked up my copy of Southern's 'Making of the Middle Ages' (1953). He writes about medieval Europe's division into northern (Germanic) and southern (Romance/Latin) language groups, and the extremely different writing styles in each – quoting very entertaining French rhymes.

Kimberly Steele says:

#74. May 13, 2021 at 7:39 pm

Of course this will be 100 comments in, but for those who don't yet own the book, Amazon's preview of Dogma and Ritual of High Magic covers the assigned reading material of this unit. Here is a link:

<https://tinyurl.com/s3uk72nb>

Warren says:

#75. May 13, 2021 at 8:31 pm

You said: Remember that in decks that use the French pattern, Le Bateleur (the Juggler or Magician) is the first card, and Le Fou (the Madman or Fool) is the next to last card; also, La Justice (Justice) is card 8 and La Force (Strength) is card 11.

I downloaded the one referenced by Helen (#49) and while it does have Le Bateleur as 1 and La Justice as 8 and La Force as 11 the 21st (next to last?) is Le Monde and the unnumbered 22nd card is Le Mat ... is that the wrong set?

Prizm says:

#76. May 13, 2021 at 9:57 pm

My meditation topic inspired by the introduction.. There is a birth. There is a death. There is a void in between. It is a story of one. It is a story of all.

JMG,

Since this is going to be a four year journey, and many thoughts will come over the months, will there be any consideration to make the book club something similar to the Well of Galabes? I fear that a lot of thoughts will get lost between posts. Or is it perfectly acceptable to inquire about previous chapters and points as we proceed?

John Michael Greer says:

#77. May 13, 2021 at 10:54 pm

Kyle, curious. That seems to be an accidental omission: “the moon, at their voices, fell all bloody from the heavens.”

Robert, enjoy! I think you’ll particularly like his prophecy about San Francisco...

Dermot, interesting. I haven’t read that yet.

Warren, as long as you don’t mind studying Le Mat before Le Monde, you should be fine; there’s a certain amount of variation in the French tradition about that last pair of cards.

Prizm, you can certainly inquire about previous chapters and points; I’ll also be responding to comments on this post

for the next month, instead of letting it sunset off once the week is over.



Rita Rippetoe says:

#78. May 13, 2021 at 11:05 pm

tomriverwriter—New Guinea has sent anthropologists. I watched a PBS program years ago interview descendants of the people that Margaret Mead did some of her field work among. Papua New Guinea has modern universities now with departments of anthropology. One graduate student had done her field work in Berkeley, California, studying homes for the elderly. She said how strange it was, since in her culture the old people lived with their families, not segregated in such facilities. Another young lady told of hearing stories from her grandparents who had known Mead. Having had an undergraduate major in anthropology, I just laughed. Shoe on the other foot.

Scotlyn—I think the passage you are examining may refer to the slander made against many secret groups: that they have illicit, anonymous sex, sometimes incestuous, and later cannibalize the infants born of these unions. As Jeffrey B. Russell pointed out in *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, Cornell UP, Ithaca NY 1972, p 88-89, such accusations were made by the Romans against Christians and later by Christians against various heretics. Such beliefs were not confined to Europe, accusations of ritual cannibalism, sucking the life from babies and perverted sex were made

against evil magicians in many cultures. Sort of “they’re evil”-“how evil are they” –“well let me tell you . . . ” followed by list of most evil things one can think of. “Stryge” seems related to “strix” (Latin for night flying evil doer who drains blood from babies) and to “strega” (Italian for witch.)

team10tim says:

#79. May 14, 2021 at 12:55 am

For all interested,

You can see Knapp-Hall cards online here:

http://askthecards.info/tarot_card_decks/knapp-hall_revised_new_art_tarot_reading.shtml

one card at a time.

Thanks,

Tim

PS It says ‘revised new art’ but the art doesn’t look like it is new.

Robert Mathiesen says:

#80. May 14, 2021 at 3:04 am

@JMG:

“... A place fordone, forlorn, unnamed, uncharted ...”



Boy, could that man spin words into gold!

His imagined San Francisco, of course, is not quite the same as mine, but there is a strong kinship between the two. In my San Francisco, every vice is counted as virtue, and every virtue scorned as vice.

Scotlyn says:

#81. May 14, 2021 at 5:42 am

I am beginning to realise the extent of the deficiencies in my own education – even though the formal part of it took place mainly during the 60’s and 70’s. I never studied anything resembling the classics, and my Bible knowledge, though broad and extensive due to my evangelical upbringing, having been instilled in the most literal way, is not deep at all.

However, while I shall be taking a number of detours into the suggested readings, let me say that, as a complete novice to this type of material, my first impression in this introduction is of a story of tragic forgetting, and of the extinguishing of important knowledge, centring on this passage:

“What secret do these men bear with them to their tomb?
Why are they wondered at without being understood? Why
are they condemned unheard? Why are they initiates of

those terrific secret sciences of which the Church and society are afraid? Why are they acquainted with things of which others know nothing? Why do they conceal what all men burn to know?"

Key words – “secret” “unheard” “conceal”. It appears to me that there are two sides to the keeping (or difficulty of access) of this secret. There are those that do not want to hear it (or do not want it heard), and those who deliberately conceal it. A complex dynamic.

And it bears some resemblance to our own times, where cancel culture and the suppression of “misinformation” is coming from those who do not want to hear, while there are increasing moves (for protection of secrets and of those who know and/or study them) to conceal what is very quickly becoming forbidden discourse.

And also there is terrible danger, at this time, of certain people being summarily “condemned unheard”, while others are left/encouraged to imagine the dreadful Witches Sabbaths, and other evil evilness, that they **MUST** have gotten up to.

Walt F says:

#82. May 14, 2021 at 7:17 am

“How florid must the metaphors be to introduce you to the basic concepts of computing?”

To be honest, not very. “A variable is like a box with a number stored in it.” “A program is a list of instructions in sequence, like a recipe.” The second example is less robust (there being a lot of things that override the default “then go on to the instruction on the next line of the program” procedure) but one starts with simple examples that do execute in order and then learns the exceptions. The notion of a variable as a container with a location and current contents holds up longer into the study, because it’s fairly close to the underlying physical reality of actual locations on a memory storage medium with binary data recorded there.

All that might not actually be relevant, though, because I wasn’t trying to make a comparison between learning magic and learning computing, nor between magic and computing themselves. I was thinking about the nature of texts, along a spectrum from straightforward to... mythic, perhaps? I haven’t read much French literature, but I’ve read plenty of e.g. James Fenimore Cooper, where a negotiation between a barely literate pioneer and a native chieftain can run on for pages and read like a transcript from the House of Lords. One reads such a passage and perceives an import, a mental Cliff’s Notes version: “Chingachgook accepts Leatherstocking as an ally, but isn’t happy about it.” Hemingway would just write, “‘I accept you as an ally, but I’m not happy about it,’ said Chingachgook.” But, an English teacher could still test you on the Cooper version, on whether you’d read the import “correctly,” and while there might be some room for differing interpretations here and there, such a test wouldn’t be completely unfair.

A comparable test on the import of a passage of, say, *Paradise Lost* would be rather questionable, though, unless the teacher had told you an answer and expected you to echo it back, which is questionable on a different level. What's the import of the Tower of Babel passages in Genesis? That's more like a possible thesis topic (or, a fine topic for meditation) than a test question.

What I'm talking about isn't vagueness. Do you recall the passage from *Doon*, the *Dune* parody, in which the members of House Agamemnides hold an entire conversation with nothing but glances, gestures, and short cryptic phrases, like in the original... then find out they all have completely different ideas of what they've all just said, and resolve henceforth to use actual sentences? That's the problem with vagueness. But what if having each person who reads a text read a different import into it is the *intended* effect of the text? That's where I was making the analogy to computer code: no vagueness at all, but an intentionally variable outcome. Not a recorded narrative, but a device for evoking different narratives as needed for the reader's purpose.

Justin Patrick Moore says:

#83. May 14, 2021 at 9:07 am

@Antoinetta III and JMG:

Thank you! This is a great resource!

I immediately latched onto the short story of “The Door to Saturn” as the first one I read. There is already something in there I recognize from the Weird of Hali!

I’m excited to read his poetry too. The example above was an awesome tribute, and I’ll be reading some more of his poems.

I love poetry, but don’t really love the contemporary poetry scene, which I’d been involved in various ways here and there. Lacking the de rigeur MFA required to beat you into submission of liking contemporary poetry and conforming you to produce more of the same, I just don’t get much of it.

Granted there are still some individual poets I really admire, living or recently deceased (the late great Paul Pines (he was also a Jungian therapist) is an example) but most of it is like trying to read some version of Deluze or Lacan or Foucault parading as poetry. I’ll pass, as it just gives me a headache.

...now I want to look at people like Smith and Lindsay who realize that poetry is also incantation. I guess that is part of what drew me to the French Symbolists. They weren’t afraid of that.

I’m thinking of reading Hugo and Proust now too, maybe Balzac as they are all very well dead yet their words still live.

This is one side effect of the Levi reading I hadn’t expected: a revivification of interest in French lit (I’m more or less



always interested in eldritch pulp tales!)



Justin

Patricia Mathews says:

#84. May 14, 2021 at 9:26 am

Refresh my memory – when was that prophecy written? Because Gold Rush San Francisco was not like the San Francisco of the Great Fire, and quite unlike the charming and civilized city I lived in as a youngster. However, today's San Francisco has gone into overshoot and decay faster than the nation has. Are we looking at a city's childhood, youth, adulthood, middle age, and senility here?

Daniel Kislinger says:

#85. May 14, 2021 at 9:47 am

Hello JMG Just a thought... Four years is a long time, given my observation of today's instability of systems, to assume that the internet will be up and functioning for all but a very few. Any thoughts as how to carry this study beyond the lights out of the web? I think as we progress we will be able to study this independently, however have you considered putting in place a newsletter for this topic to launch if things go dark? I am thinking letter carriers will still be a thing. Or am I being spooky, melodramatic, and overblown?



sky rider says:

#86. May 14, 2021 at 10:33 am

Ok, rather than the riddle of the Sphynx.

Imagine the Sphynx comes to you for a tarot card reading.

He says “do a three card reading and tell me who I am.”

You take your deck you shuffle them until they feel right.

Then you deal them out, and the Sphynx get this reading:

The Emperor (4) The High Priestess (2) The Empress (3)

Who (or what) is he??

I am currently befuddled by the tarot.

But other here are not, so does anybody got an interesting interpretation for that tarot reading?

JMG – is this a useful approach to finding a different answer to the riddle of the sphynx? Or am really off base?

Phutatorius says:

#87. May 14, 2021 at 11:53 am

@Mabadabadoo #32: I've been mulling over your post and JMG's response. I don't think of it in terms of force so much as in terms of will and daring (which will come up in this chapter or the next). When I erred, as a young guy, which was often, it was on the side of manifesting too little will and daring. I hope that my diffidence didn't create any more lesbians. In “Practical Occultism in Daily Life” Dion Fortune

writes that “a bias can be corrected, firstly, by steadily neutralizing it and building up the opposite qualities by means of meditation....”

youngelephant says:

#88. May 14, 2021 at 12:44 pm

JMG,

With Levi warning against revealing some of these secrets, are we to take him at his word? How should we handle “to be silent” in this book club? If we have insights into the secrets and mysteries should we post and see how on the mark we are or keep it to ourselves?

EI says:

#89. May 14, 2021 at 12:44 pm

Degringolade –

I don't know what your budget is, but if you want a physical deck, I can tell you that I managed to find a basic Marseille deck for \$12 plus tax, shipping included. They called it a “mini-deck”, but it seems big enough to me. I don't even remember where I ordered it from, but if you google Marseille tarot deck and hit the “shopping” button, several options in the \$12-\$15 range will come up. I too wasn't crazy about spending money on another tarot deck when I

have several, but for me a \$12 (plus tax) investment for the years we're going to spend on the project seemed reasonable.



John Michael Greer says:

#90. May 14, 2021 at 1:06 pm

Tim, thanks for this. "The Revised New Art Tarot" was the original title of the deck.

Robert, that seems like a fair summary. My experiences with San Francisco helped me to understand what Steiner was talking about when he spoke of Luciferian evil, the kind that prides itself on being too good for mere reality.

Scotlyn, good. Yes, that's a common theme not only in Lévi but all through the magical literature that followed him, and for good reason.

Walt, what I'm trying to suggest is that Lévi isn't evoking different narratives for different people; he's trying to teach an unfamiliar way of thinking, and doing it with metaphors because that's the only tool he has. Imagine, to extend my metaphor, that the person you're trying to talk to has never learned to think of information as a thing, and when you say "a box with a number stored in it" they immediately start looking for a physical box with a child's plastic number toy stuck in it. That's roughly the situation I face when trying to

introduce magic to people who haven't already encountered it, and it's the problem that Lévi also had to confront.

Justin, yoop! 😊 Most modern poetry is of very poor quality because would-be poets are systematically discouraged from learning the craft of poetry; the cult of credentialism forbids that. One of these days I'm going to do a post about how to write a sonnet, and in the process talk about how limitation is the key to real creativity. I know, it'll go over rather less well than a lead balloon, but somebody's got to do it.

Patricia M, I'm pretty sure it was written in the 1920s or 1930s, and Smith's experience of it was colored by his own situation as a rural northern Californian — I bet you could find similar attitudes toward SF from Redding north all along.

Daniel, I don't expect the internet to collapse that far in the next four years, and if it does, we'll have bigger problems than a delay in studying Lévi! For what it's worth, however, I do have arrangements in place to move to print media if that becomes necessary, and if the internet starts showing signs of major instability or of serious rationing by price, I'll activate them.

Skyrider, excellent! The route to understanding requires ventures into unknown territory, and this is a good one. See where it takes you.

Youngelephant, what a fine theme for meditation!



bryanallen says:

#91. May 14, 2021 at 2:04 pm

Always-intriguing Archdruid, I did not read the Dion Fortune work though I followed along with the discussions (I'm of a more-mystical slant myself) but since my wife is French and we find ourselves for the moment in France (my mother-in-law had been sick with Covid-19 but has now recovered nicely) I thought I might look up a local bookstore which has the Eliphas Levi book and which has complementary Tarot cards as well. Jackpot! This is what I came home with today:
<https://photos.app.goo.gl/rJoMYo6QxSKtL8Aq9>

In the translation of your book, there is the following page:
<https://photos.app.goo.gl/91UndPaTavqKUE9h7>

Your book in translation is lavishly illustrated, and beautifully laid out. Less than 30 Euros, what a bargain!

An incredible bookstore, see the card in the first photo. Could have bought several more books; an amazing selection. Got to talking with the owner; astonishing personage!

You may have hooked me!

Patricia Mathews says:

#92. May 14, 2021 at 2:22 pm

Ah – Northern CA. That makes a lot of sense. And of course, 20s & 30s – the 20s being the Second Gilded Age, after all, and Gatsby to the contrary, probably as bad as the current rerun thereof.

tomriverwriter says:

#93. May 14, 2021 at 3:24 pm

To Rita Rippetoe: Thanks for the story. Love it!

Augusto says:

#94. May 14, 2021 at 4:01 pm

Regarding this being a book for complete beginners. Complete beginners in Levi's time seem much smarter and informed than I am!

I think I need to take a plunge into what were people reading in the 1800's. Where would you start?

tomriverwriter says:

#95. May 14, 2021 at 4:22 pm

Young elephant – When I was selling my software business, I became acutely aware that I had no power. There were hidden machinations that I couldn't control or even see. I

became very interested in how to acquire power. Then I ran into a quote for Lao Tse “Those who know, do not speak. Those who speak, do not know.” I learned that the quote applies to power, because its’ a hidden thing. Acquiring power is hidden, and no one with power will ever give away the secret. Consequently anyone who claims to have power or know how to acquire it, probably doesn’t have power. That’s the trick with hidden things.

In studying Levi, all of us are trying to acquire magickal knowledge, which amounts to magickal power. Anyone who tells you how to get the knowledge probably doesn’t know it. The only way to acquire it is to do it alone.

I plan to do the exercises John recommends, and see what happens.

Joy Marie says:

#96. May 14, 2021 at 4:42 pm

OK, here I am, ready to start the journey! I am bound and determined to complete this 4 year(!) course, no matter what gets in my way. If I have a period of excessive overtime at work or anything else that slows me down, I may not be posting much but will double down on making sure I get through the reading and study assignments for the month. And thank goodness that the chapter footnotes are at the bottom of the page rather than at the back. It saves a lot of time not having to flip back and forth for reference!

Joy Marie



Joy Marie says:

#97. May 14, 2021 at 5:03 pm

For those who don't have a Tarot deck yet, or don't have the right type, you can find online cards here:

http://askthecards.info/tarot_card_decks/index.shtml

I have the Marseilles deck, but plan on checking out the Knapp-Hall online, as I think it looks pretty cool. If copies become available again, I might order a deck.

JMG, is it advisable to stick with one deck type through the entire course, or can you use more? As in, start the month using the Marseilles, and then switch to the Knapp-Hall. Would we get any more insight into the month's lesson doing this, or would just it be confusing?

Joy Marie

Lathechuck says:

#98. May 14, 2021 at 5:38 pm

JMG – If it were the case that “secrets” were hidden in Levi's text steganographically, is there any chance that they would survive translation? For example, suppose reading down the third column of letters of a carefully typeset page

produced a parsable phrase, in French of course. The translator would have to discover it, and either embed it in the translation in the same manner, or perhaps mention it in a footnote. If the former, good luck on the typesetting; if the latter, you've changed the context in a way that might change the intention.

I confess that I will not be following along with the text. It seems like I have other priorities, with better prospects of creating the changes I want to see around me. (That church lawn isn't going to mow itself, nor will the ham radio antennas climb into the trees.) I may try to keep up with the comments, though, because they always go in interesting directions. And coming to this decision has been a fruitful theme for meditation.

Eldritch Piglet says:

#99. May 14, 2021 at 6:57 pm

I have yet to get a tarot deck. To my untrained eye, there appear to be several Wirth decks. One will be published in June and the author is Mirko Negri. I suppose 'author' means they wrote the interpretations for each card?

Then there are Wirth decks labeled 'English edition' and 'French edition' as well as 'Wirth Golden Rosicrucian'. I recall you saying something about English or Anglo Saxon tarots being different to the French ones. Or does this just mean the booklet will be in English or French? The product

descriptions are vague, leaving me a bit confused about which to get. Also, major and/or minor arcana? Which does one need to work with the tarot in general? I would like to do so if I can get the hang of it.

ilona says:

#100. May 14, 2021 at 8:06 pm

I've just returned from two days of travel. When I try to access

<https://ecosophia.dreamwidth.org/>

I get a severe warning message, filling the screen, red background with off-white type, saying:

Security Error

Deceptive site ahead

Attackers on 4.bp.blogspot.com may trick you into doing something dangerous like installing software or revealing your personal information (for example, passwords, phone numbers, or credit cards). Learn more

To get Chrome's highest level of security, turn on enhanced protection

Google Safe Browsing recently detected phishing on 4.bp.blogspot.com. Phishing sites pretend to be other websites to trick you.

You can report a detection problem or, if you understand the risks to your security, visit this unsafe site.

Have other folks experienced this problem??

I will check back in a day or so — I'm hoping someone may offer advice here, or perhaps that message will stop appearing. If the problem continues I'll ask my computer guy to look at the message and give me his advice.

SLClaire says:

#101. May 14, 2021 at 10:14 pm

Here's my second possible answer to the Sphinx's riddle. (Not that the Sphinx would have given me another chance — my first guess was Oedipus' — but that's the luxury afforded me by only having to read about the riddle instead of being in front of the Sphinx having to answer it.)

This possible answer is the zodiac. Two different dictionaries give the word as being derived from a Greek word meaning animal. The quaternary or four feet referred to is the elements (fire, earth, air, water), one of which is assigned to each sign. The duality or two feet referred to is the polarity (male or female), one of which is assigned to each sign. The ternary or three feet referred to is the quality or mode of each sign (cardinal, fixed, mutable). Morning, noon, and night refers to the way that as the earth turns,

different signs present overhead, one after another, each of the feet changing as the sign overhead changes.

John Michael Greer says:

#102. May 14, 2021 at 10:55 pm

Bryan, what fun! I hadn't seen *Le Livre des Science Occultes* yet — the original publisher, Sterling, pays promptly but doesn't always get me foreign editions very fast — but yes, it seems like a very good bookstore. The copy of Lévi you got is the same edition I have, btw.

Patricia M, very likely so!

Augusto, start with the Greek myths. Any good anthology of them will give you the stories, which is what you need to begin with. I've already cited the plays that would be worth doing first. Everybody in those days read Greek and Roman literature in school, so that's your starting place. After that? Hmm. I'll have to consider.

Joy Marie, welcome to the journey. As for the tarot cards, for the specific exercise I have in mind it helps to choose one and stick to it, but you can study other decks if you like.

Lathechuck, we didn't look for steganographic clues; those often don't survive even in the original language — once the book is typeset by a second publisher, bye-bye. (You now have me thinking of a far future SF novel in which radio

antennas do in fact scamper up into the trees on their own power...)

Piglet, any Wirth deck will be fine; “written” does indeed tell you who wrote the book, and English and French editions simply indicate what language the booklet and maybe the card titles are in. For the exercise I have in mind, all you need is major arcana, but any 78-card tarot deck comes with both.

Ilona, thanks for this. I figured out where the link was — the image of Marjorie de la Warr on one of the radionics posts came from that site — and I replaced the image with one from another site. Check it in a bit (once the new version propagates) and see if you get the same response.

SLClaire, fascinating! That’s plausible, and worth meditating on.

Darkest Yorkshire says:

#103. May 15, 2021 at 4:04 am

Levi’s writing style kind of reminds me of the famous British music journalist and ‘ranting Trotskyist’ Steven Wells. Another American who did purple prose was Iceberg Slim – he could really lay it on thick. However both of them kept their sentences short enough you don’t feel out of breath reading them. □

I'm also one who prefers telling to showing. Some writers can do show really well. But for example some of my favourite bits of Iain M Banks' Culture novels are where he just tells you what's what. It also allows a different type of humour.

Darkest Yorkshire says:

#104. May 15, 2021 at 4:19 am

Mollari, the 1980s had some bad incidents of synthetic clothing in fires. The Royal Navy switched to synthetic uniforms after centuries of using cotton uniforms, flash hoods and gloves. When the Exocets started flying in the Falklands, the severity of the injuries was directly tied to synthetic fabrics. In the Bradford City stadium fire there were horror stories of anoraks melting onto people.

There was similar thing in the industrial revolution. Early northern England textile mills were built of stone with wooden frames. Then they learned how to use structural steel and marketed the new designs as fireproof. But it's not the frame that burns. Usually the fire starts in oily lint and spreads to things like floorboards. A thick wood frame will char and smoulder but not burn through. Steel will soften and fail. So after fires the old type of mills were burned-out shells. The new 'fireproof' mills ended up heaps of rubble on the ground.

RandomActsOfKarma says:

#105. May 15, 2021 at 9:05 am



@SLClaire: I really like your second possible answer to the Sphinx's riddle (being the Zodiac). When I meditated on it, I thought of a slightly different interpretation, since each Zodiac sign is associated with a Ray. Rather than the ternary referring to the quality or mode, I thought perhaps it referred to the triad of Rays in one quarter of a phase of Logoidal evolution. (One circle, divided into four quarters, alternating between positive and negative (Cosmic Day and Cosmic Night), with three Rays in each quarter.)

Cosmic Day and Cosmic Night / positive and negative fit with Zoroaster duality.

For the triad, I looked up "Plato Triad" and found truth, beauty, and justice. Hmm. Then I looked up "Pythagoras Triad" and found it referred to the a, b, and c values for a right triangle (Pythagorean Theorem). But that is not the cool part... Wikipedia posted this picture https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pythagorean_triple#/media/File:Pythagorean_theorem_-_Ani.gif which shows squares as an illustration of how the numbers work. And last night, I was skimming some articles on the Keys of Solomon (because this chapter refers to it and I know next to nothing about Solomon) and one of the articles I read talked about Solomon's magic squares. Go here <https://www.magicalkeysofsolomon.com/> and scroll down to the image titled "Planetary Spirits Corresponding to the Magical Keys Chart". Those magic squares look like they

could be used in the Pythagorean Theorem image on Wikipedia! (The easiest one would be Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars, but there might be more. And I haven't meditated on what Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars together would mean.)

But then I thought about Plato's Triad and thought I had something like that in my CosDoc notes. I went searching. I didn't find Plato, but I had copied something from JMG's comments:

1. In the Cabala, these are force, form, and balance
2. In Masonry, these are strength, wisdom, and beauty.
3. In Systems Theory, these are action, reaction, and equilibrium.

So now I need to figure out how truth, beauty, and justice (or force, form, and balance) tie back to the Rays (or the Zodiac). And how the magic squares of planets tieback to the Rays (or the Zodiac).

So, @SLClaire, THANK YOU for sharing your insight... it has sparked some very fruitful meditation.

@YoungElephant, I know you had asked if we should keep our insights to ourselves. Obviously, you should do what you think is best for you. But one interpretation of "to keep silent" is "to listen." I have learned a great deal by 'listening' to the commentariats' insights, and I hope the commentariat will continue to share. ☐

As always, JMG, thank you for the books you write and the wisdom you share.



DanielleThePermaculturist says:

#106. May 15, 2021 at 9:46 am

@JMG

Thank you

Ludovic Viger says:

#107. May 15, 2021 at 10:47 am

Hello JMG,

I was wondering if I could use the Wildwood Tarot with this book. The Wildwood Tarot made by Mark Ryan and John Matthews.

Thank you

Kirsten says:

#108. May 15, 2021 at 11:57 am

Hello JMG,

Thank you for the adventure. I'm in for the ride. I've started my ride: re-reading the introduction for the second time. Is there any particular reason you show a slight preference Knapp-Hall deck? Could you elaborate please? When it

comes to Tarot de Marseille I have them all. I particularly love the beauty of Tarot de Marseille by Jodorowsky, but he seems to add his own touch, for example, La Papesse is sitting on an egg. I also have many “original” decks, Dodal, Noblet, etc. Are they any closer to Levi than others?

adwelly says:

#109. May 15, 2021 at 12:20 pm

My best guess at the solution to the riddle so far is something along the lines of the growth of knowledge. Starting with the Quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Then religious knowledge at odds with philosophy, and then something. I suspect I'll have to ask a Druid – they are fond of threes I hear.

Lothar von Hakelheber says:

#110. May 15, 2021 at 12:29 pm

Mr. Archdruid, for the edification of your simple acolytes, I beseech you to eschew obfuscation!

Walt F says:

#111. May 15, 2021 at 1:01 pm

Okay, I accept that my speculation about variable (between readers) meanings is not a good explanation of the metaphorical qualities of Lévi's text. I thought there might be more to it than just the unfamiliarity and different ways of thinking required for the core concepts, but that's a path of inquiry I need not concern myself with.

I still think metaphors used in learning computation or programming isn't a good analogy for that. In grade school I did a "how computers work" lesson in which I wrote and changed numbers written (in pencil) in rectangular boxes on a diagram printed on cardboard, and another that involved adding and removing different color beads from (real physical) matchboxes. Actual boxes with plastic numerals would have worked just fine for either exercise. If that were someone's mental model of how variables were really implemented inside the computer, they could still write perfectly good programs, as long as they followed the rules of the programming language. Most programmers have no idea how the electronic circuitry actually works anyhow.

But there are plenty of other areas, such as many branches of higher mathematics, that I understand only by metaphor, or not at all, and some of those metaphors get really strange, and even then are not adequate for complete understanding. Quantum mechanics is an example, for me and for most people including most physicists. So, I'm not questioning the point you were making. Thank you for explaining!

John Michael Greer says:

#112. May 15, 2021 at 1:54 pm



Yorkshire, those long sentences are a specialty of French literature. We actually cut some of Lévi's sentences in half to make the results clearer in English!

Ludovic, nope. It's a good deck in its own right, but like so many specialized decks these days it goes very far from the classic imagery, which is what you need for the exercise I have in mind.

Kirsten, it's purely a personal preference; I like Knapp's artwork, and as a longtime Hall fan I also appreciate some of the subtleties that Hall worked into the design. You can use any of the Marseilles decks you like; the Jodorowsky is a fine reworking of the classic designs.

Adwelly, interesting!

Lothar, no doubt I can channel Hemingway as needed. 😊

Walt, well, I'm not a computer programmer — the most I ever managed was writing my own autoexec.bat and config.sys files for early MS-DOS — so it wouldn't surprise me at all if my metaphor isn't a good fit.

SLClaire says:

#113. May 15, 2021 at 2:01 pm

@RandomActsofKarma #105: your interpretation is really interesting! It offers a path of insight from the ancient Greeks through Levi through Fortune. I'll give it some more thought when I have a chance.

Walt F says:

#114. May 15, 2021 at 2:38 pm

An athletic centipede (or spider, etc.) devoted to a rigorous and very specific schedule of daily conditioning exercises.

The shadow of a tall parallelogram-shaped table that has its four actual legs positioned in a certain way relative to its latitude (I won't try to describe, but I could build one*) on certain days of the year.

A shoggoth. Or, if that's a mischaracterization, an amoeba. (It also goes on different numbers of legs, at those and other times of day; the sphinx didn't ask what goes *only* on four, two, or three legs at those times.)

The seat used by a farmhand who eats breakfast on a kitchen chair, lunch on a fence rail, and dinner on a workshop stool.

"I don't know the true answer, and I intend to go on seeking it. Now, devour me if you must."

*Oh, heck, I'll describe it, it's simple. Align the eastern two legs due N-S, and align the western two legs N-S also. Then

shift one of the pairs due north or south so that a diagonal pair of legs aligns along the direction of sunset. Shift the other two legs due north and south as needed to make sure no pairs are aligned with the direction of sunrise. Won't work too close to an equinox (sunrise aligns with sunset), or when/where the sun's course crosses too close to the zenith (no shadow legs at noon).

Goldenhawk says:

#115. May 15, 2021 at 3:13 pm

I can't help but wonder if Lévi might be a snake oil salesman like the Madison avenue advertising geniuses of the 1950s who beguiled our post-war imaginations with visions of flying cars.

"She [occult philosophy] reigned in Persia among the mages, who one day perished, as do perish the masters of the world, for having abused their power; she endowed India with the most amazing traditions and an incredible poetic treasure, with grace and terror in its symbols; she civilized Greece with the sounds of Orpheus's lyre; she hid the principles of all the sciences and of all the progress of the human spirit in the audacious calculations of Pythagoras; myths were full of her miracles, and history, when it attempted to consider this unknown power, fused with mythology; she shook or strengthened empires through her oracles, made tyrants turn pale upon their thrones, and dominated minds through curiosity or fear. For this science,

said the masses, nothing is impossible: she commands the elements, knows the language of the celestial bodies, and directs the progress of the stars; the dead rise in their tombs and articulate with fatal words the wind of the night that whistles in their skulls. *The Doctrine and Ritual of High Magic* (pp. 3-4, Kindle Edition)

What is Lévi promising here? The power to change the course of the stars? To overcome one's destiny?

"If Oedipus, instead of killing the sphinx, had tamed it and harnessed it to his chariot in order to enter Thebes, he would have been a king free of incest, free of calamity, and free of exile." (p. 19)

I'm keeping a reasonably open mind balanced with a healthy skepticism.

On the other hand, maybe snake oil has its uses. 😊

Regarding the answer to the ternary riddle of the sphinx, I'm looking in this direction:

"One, two, three, but where, my dear Timaeus, is the fourth...?" – Plato, Timaeus

Scotlyn says:

#116. May 15, 2021 at 3:34 pm

@Rita R – thank you. I reckon you are right. I think the passage is starting to make some sense to me... it helped me when I mentally added the phrasing placed in [***] below.

“Moreover, strange and alarming rumours began to circulate concerning initiates or adepts; these men were everywhere surrounded by an ominous influence... [It was said that that] the women whom they loved became Stryges, their children vanished at their nocturnal meetings...”

Lathechuck says:

#117. May 15, 2021 at 3:56 pm

JMG – I suppose that poetry might be more carefully typeset in successive editions, and better able to contain some forms of steganography.

I recall you saying some years ago (regarding messages allegedly from a long-dead spirit), “just because he’s dead, doesn’t mean he’s wise” (or something like that). In a similar vein, just because a message is secret, doesn’t mean that it’s true.

Lathechuck says:

#118. May 15, 2021 at 4:37 pm

JMG & WaltF – I, with a BSEE, was once asked by an acquaintance, working on a PhD in education, to explain to him how a video game works. I was completely unsuccessful at explaining even how digital logic can count, much less present visually-appealing images, much less execute rules by which player actions modify the images. We simply had no common vocabulary to build on. I think I wrapped it up with “you don’t understand how a huge number of interconnected switches can create behavior; neither of us understand how human cells can create behavior, so let’s just let it remain a mystery.” Come to think of it, I’m not sure he understood how the light bulb “knows” to light up when the switch is flipped.

Mark Notzon says:

#119. May 15, 2021 at 8:14 pm

Il n’y a qu’un dogme en magie, et le voici: le visible est la manifestation de l’invisible, ou, en d’autres termes, le verbe parfait est dans les choses appréciables et visibles, en proportion exacte avec les choses inappréciables à nos sens et invisibles à nos yeux.

TR: There is only one dogma in magic: the visible is a manifestation of the invisible, or expressed otherwise, the perfect word is in things perceived and visible, in exact proportion with things unperceived by our senses and invisible to our eyes.

Currently one of the most arresting passages I have read in the first chapter. There is the definition of “verbe” in French, which can mean “word” or (if capitalized) the theological “Word” of St. John’s Gospel, the “Logos” which means more than “name” or “word”—it is a moving and creative power.

I have no doubt that an accomplished adept such as Levi, realized such an equilibrium through experience, but speaking for myself, there is a lot of wobbling!

ilona says:

#120. May 15, 2021 at 10:07 pm

Now when I try to access

<https://ecosophia.dreamwidth.org/>

I don’t see the “Security Error” warning message.

Access has been restored ... many thanks!

John Michael Greer says:

#121. May 16, 2021 at 12:34 am

Walt, these are great. Shoggoths don’t normally go on any number of legs — they travel on their bellies, more or less, using rippling motions — but the black spawn of Tsathoggua are known to sprout legs when this is convenient for them.

Goldenhawk, and that's also a way to approach Lévi. Just be aware that like most occult teachers, he used a variety of tricks to chase off the insufficiently serious. As for Plato, excellent!

Lathechuck, true enough! As for digital logic, I'm not at all surprised.

Mark, it's a crucial passage.

Ilona, glad to hear it; I'll be wary of images borrowed from Blogger from here on in.

Alvin says:

#122. May 16, 2021 at 12:51 am

Reading the questions raised by Walt, I think there are a few things to unpack from each other.

There's Levi's use of florid metaphors because that's his style (and a common enough 19th century French style) and there's his use of them because they are how you "train the mind, not to inform it" as our host often quotes Dion Fortune. The two overlap but are not quite the same use of metaphors.

There are any number of examples of clearer metaphors used to train the mind in certain modes of thought, perhaps the most well known in the West would be the parables of the Gospels.

I think rather than the analogy of a computer program comparing it to learning a new language with its associated ways of thought makes more sense.

The Piraha language doesn't have the concept of number, yet they seem able to perceive things that anthropologists and missionaries sent there don't. How would you begin to introduce the concept of number to them? It seems that all efforts to do so have failed.

East Asian languages like Korean and Japanese have systems of honorifics based on the speaker's relative status compared to his interlocutors. It isn't really that complex, billions of humans over the centuries have learnt it, but it takes some getting used to and some outsiders never really get it. They might get the vocabulary (e.g. different forms of the word "to eat") but never get their head around the idea of relative status. How would you introduce the concept to them?

Just my 2c

Walt F says:

#123. May 16, 2021 at 8:16 am

@Lathechuck, I'm not surprised. Explaining digital systems on that level of functionality is a real challenge. Before I studied how the hardware works step by step, I too found general descriptions of interconnected switches confusing,

long after I'd learned the basic concepts of programming (variables, loops, conditional branching and so forth), and even though I also knew basic electronics and the binary number system. Like most people my experience of switches was mostly light switches on the wall and on/off switches on appliances, all of which do nothing unless a person manipulates them. "So the mysterious demon that turns the correct individual lights on and off to form the letters on the electronic sign board does so using switches. Well, that makes sense but it doesn't really explain much."

Which demonstrates JMG's point about challenging or misleading metaphors. The difference is, with digital logic if you really want to study it you don't need to work on metaphors. You can sit down with a page like this one and a breadboard and a bunch of chips and LEDs and build each type of counter (the page linked would be good for about a week of lab work, after having covered a lot of previous material first) and see how they work. But yeah, "explain to me (right now in a casual conversation) how video games work" is no more reasonable a request than "explain how cells work" or e.g. "explain how to speak French."

Paul says:

#124. May 16, 2021 at 10:26 am

I noticed one discrepancy in the text: " "Here at last are the seven minor powers of the mage". It turns out there are 8 listed (as is necessary to include the full 22 letters).

Assuming this is intentional, is it a reference to squaring the circle (22/7), or perhaps a commentary on the ideal (7/7/7) vs. the actual (7/7/8)?

RandomActsOfKarma says:

#125. May 16, 2021 at 11:31 am

My original meditation path led me to a dead end, not the end because I had figured out all I needed to, but dead because I did not have enough knowledge to pursue it further. I spent some quality time with Google and found a different triad for Pythagoras than I had originally thought. That led to two different retellings of Plato's Timaeus (neither of which were complete, but together, *mind blown*).

Then I went back to Levi's text, to try to make sense of all the symbolism in the paragraphs referencing Oedipus and the Sphinx.

And then back to my original question, what does the riddle of the Sphinx reveal about the Great Arcanum?

My short answer is the Cabala (or, perhaps more specifically Daath) shows us the path to change our consciousness to reunite with the One.

If I had to answer the Sphinx, I would still answer 'Man', but not meaning infant/adult/elderly, as Oedipus did. Rather, when Man is on four feet, he is "of matter", as in concerned

with the material. When Man is on two feet, he is concerned with right and wrong, good and evil. When Man is on three feet, he understands the triad. (more on the triad in the link below) And then Man understands that he is of the One (an impress of the Logos).

JMG, my 'working' notes on this meditation are eleven pages long. I have tried to distill the parts I think are most important to the document I linked below (much shorter than eleven pages!). If you have time, I would very much appreciate your feedback.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xD3yl-7aARLNS43jy_0rMK7ljk2ZiKSOURBg4wPmRZ0/edit?usp=sharing

RandomActsOfKarma says:

#126. May 16, 2021 at 11:44 am

Had two more thoughts:

First, the document was originally done in Word, so a PDF might be easier than the Google Drive version:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uR81pdZoNFT6XxKCupeXHolZNmDzyK5O/view?usp=sharing>

Second, when Man is on three feet, he starts on the Path to the One.

Dylan says:

#127. May 16, 2021 at 11:58 am

Hi JMG, I own Robert Place's Tarot of the Sevenfold Mystery and his Alchemical Tarot, both of which are based on the Marseilles in that they have Justice in position VIII and Strength in position XI. I've been working with the Sevenfold Mystery deck for some time and I quite like the artwork.

Is the Justice/Strength ordering the key detail in choosing a French-style deck, or are there other details that I should take care not to miss out on? What I'm asking is, would these Robert Place decks be suitable to study, or should I order a copy of the CBD Tarot (recommended in a comment above) that reproduces the Nicholas Conver Marseilles? Thank you for this new excursion!

Ian Duncombe says:

#128. May 16, 2021 at 1:09 pm

JMG and Commentariante

"If all the world's myths and religions are telling the same story, he inquires, is it wholly impossible that the story might be true? If that story is reflected in the stars, is it wholly impossible that the story is the original source, and the stars turn in obedience to it?"

I think this is a powerful teaching that some people, notably young people, can resonate strongly with. I have noticed before a yearning for the turning over of stagnant stories from old religions to bring the soil of our original myths to the surface. The stuff with which to refresh ourselves and grow anew.

The resulting strength that a young person might gain after accepting Herculean mythology as a spiritual path, or other mythological streams, would be wonderfully enormous I think. If another dark age is where we are headed, then also a sufficiently beneficial path... I understand some of the commentariate have done this already or something similar.

I came across a guest on Jeffrey Mishlove's YouTube channel that noted the most powerful mages now are coding video games. I deeply reject this notion instinctively and I'm very excited to spend the next four years on this study to help sharpen my answer to this statement, and countless others.

I'm closing the story on my current novel with some characters that would have doubtlessly been helped by this study, but perhaps I will do some fixing up in the editing process...

I know you don't do video JMG, but that 'Thinking Allowed' channel Mishlove runs does seem to have a lack of practicing ceremonial magicians featured on it 😊

John Michael Greer says:

#129. May 16, 2021 at 1:11 pm



Alvin, thanks for this. Yes, the language metaphor works well.

Paul, a very suitable question for meditation!

Random, I'll see what I can do, but I'm working on a writing project with a hard deadline right now and also have two older books to revise for republication, so I can't promise that I'll have time. Your interpretation is most interesting and I think Lévi would be pleased with it.

Dylan, Place's decks are absolutely glorious but they don't have the same imagery as the standard French pattern decks, which is what you need for this. I'd encourage you to pick up the Marseilles deck of your choice.

Ian, that's an excellent point, and one that allows for constructive action; I'll see what I can do. As for the comment by Mishlove's guest, you're right to reject it. There is magic involved in video games, but it's a debased form of magic — a spinning of illusions for grubby commercial purposes. There are much more potent magics being worked just now.

Christophe says:

#130. May 16, 2021 at 3:34 pm

Kimberley Steele wrote, "Is this demonic feeding frenzy of an era the thrust block for a distant but deeply magical future where just about everyone and their aunt will be chest deep in a zillion garden variations of occult science?"

Very much so, and not nearly as distant as we might imagine. Strange forces are beginning to rise and work together in concert, while the perpetually clueless demons prematurely celebrate their endlessly hoped-for victory. It has ever been thus.

Demons always imagine the trough of the wave to be some newly achieved, stable plateau— they have a bit of a problem sensing the cyclical nature of the ebb and flow of the universe. Fortunately, larger and far more influential life forms on this planet than we are have been watching and timing those cycles for ages now. When they respond, I expect it will be perfectly timed, and unlike any thrust block our puny imaginations can even begin to contemplate.

Paul says:

#131. May 16, 2021 at 5:32 pm

I see on a more careful reading that Tav is intended to be on its own (Let us add to these three septenaries...). So apologies for the dumb question... while meditating on this subject as you suggested, I wondered whether this list of powers / privledged might relate to the tarot trumps (which I noted as being a synonym for power) – however the

relationships seemed sketchy at best (at least when using card ordering). Was I off on this or might it represent a useful line of inquiry? Thanks!

youngelephant says:

#132. May 16, 2021 at 7:15 pm

RE: "To be silent": Thanks for the replies everyone. I've had some good thinks about JMG's urge to meditate on "to be silent" and decided on a way to post skillfully (I hope); I also hope I don't come across like a buffoon. I arrived at an understanding (in a definitely haven't completed the Great Work don't know how to use it way) of the "Great Arcanum"; I don't know if it is *the* understanding, but I'm decently confident in it. I'll just post some assertions about it, and leave the conclusion absent so I don't spoil the fun of investigation.

-If you told the average person on the street the Great Arcanum, they might think you are psychotic (and if the idea possessed someone unprepared they could very well go psychotic)

-If you told a new ager they would likely happily agree with you

-It's hinted at in Cos. Doc. and a commentator guessed it in the discussions (JMG didn't explicitly validate it and it wasn't in the context of the "Great Arcanum")

Goldenhawk says:

#133. May 16, 2021 at 9:36 pm



RandomActsOfKindness:

Your meditation notes are interesting. I'm thinking along similar lines and your observations helped me expand my understanding and connections. Thank you!

Chris at Fernglade says:

#134. May 16, 2021 at 10:06 pm

Hi John Michael,

Thanks for introducing the concept of the qualitative difference between the English and French languages. I rather enjoyed the ornate language and elaborate sentence structure you chose, and in some respects it reminded me of a scene setting paragraph from the author Robert E Howard in a Conan tale. I've long felt that the Conan films did the author and the character a disservice, because the Conan character in the series of tales was quite eloquent and could stick it to his neighbouring Kings using words as easily as he could do so with a sword. Perhaps this is why he was not to be trifled with? ☐

Mate, my area of interest is nature magic, and whilst I'll follow along, I'm uncertain as to what contributions I can add to the next four years of discussions. It is a sad realisation, but a person must know their limits and candidly my brain is

rather full – if I push too much in one side of my brain, something else might fall out of the other side! This would not be a pleasant experience, I can assure you! Hehe!

Interestingly, now that I dwell upon the matter, the English language and mindset is very useful for conveying commands and instructions. In the past year I read John Steinbeck's classic: *The Grapes of Wrath*, and overall it has a really lovely cadence to the structure, almost like a marching beat just out of hearing was accompanying the words. And there was definitely no mysticism involved, the words took the reader directly to and along with the characters day to day experiences. Oh well, life is short.

Cheers

Chris

OtterGirl says:

#135. May 16, 2021 at 11:01 pm

Hi JMG,

Spent several hours reading the introduction on my patio this afternoon. Thanks for the heads up on what to expect. Very helpful! Also, I find that I much enjoy this style of writing. And, I see where three readings may be a minimum requirement! The footnotes are most helpful.

While reading about the Phoenix, what crashed into my mind was: We are the body of the Phoenix, and it is indeed immolating itself in this era. No wonder so many of us are beside ourselves with pain and confusion of a gazillion varieties.

OtterGirl

Christophe says:

#136. May 17, 2021 at 1:08 am

Lévi wrote, “Les hommes, fatigués de la lumière, se réfugient dans l’ombre de la substance corporelle : le rêve du vide que Dieu remplit leur semble bientôt plus grand que Dieu même, et l’enfer est créé.”

Dreaming of the void is a very dangerous pastime. Once captivated, its victims pretty reliably end up getting seduced by its disorienting lack of reference. There must still be some underlying reference point within the emptiness because its victims invariably come to the same strange conclusion that the void itself is the source of all power and deserving of their fascination and worship.

Dreaming of heaven, they become obsessed with hell. Dreaming of a way out, they become obsessed with the penumbra. At least they leave us with a reminder and warning of which direction the hellish emptiness lies in. If only they could recognize the immense vastness of the gods

filling that void, perhaps the void itself would no longer seem quite so appealing to them. The brilliant light filling the endless darkness to overflowing is such a divine miracle to contemplate. We are truly blessed!

RandomActsOfKarma says:

#137. May 17, 2021 at 7:25 am

@Goldenhawk, I am glad you find the notes interesting. I would encourage you to read the full articles at the links... there is so much more detail that is worthy of meditation than I included in the notes.

And Levi says there is a triple hieratical meaning to the riddle of the Sphinx, so I am thinking there are multiple interpretations he hoped we would find...

Tomxyza Tom Anderson says:

#138. May 17, 2021 at 10:13 am

JMG Well I am truly intrigued. The third and fourth readings are beginning to produce some interesting realizations. The first is that it strikes me that any system of thought that develops the capacity to exercise enough power to cause change is subject to abuse. Thus, one of the strong needs for secrecy. Humans being the animals we are, seem to be unable to resist abusing power. It also strikes me that once

a system of thought capable of generating power is abused it becomes problematic in that it is hard to get it to fit well into the broader needs of thought. It reminds me of ecosystem imbalances where it is hard to get back to equilibrium once a player has had a population explosion and is way out of balance with the system.

The other thought is that cooperation is a key. Secret societies facilitate a level of cooperation that is not common in human culture, at least the cultures of today. Cooperation and the use of power in agreed ways that support that cooperation without abusing the power is one of the secrets of success. How to get there in a world of 7 billion people is currently outside my comprehension. But it seems to me that a well-run secret society would have a better chance than other possibilities.

Now the above also confuses me as I struggle with secrets. People who refuse to provide me details of their thinking have a hard time gaining my trust. My best personal example is the medical profession. I have a hard time trusting what they tell me if they will not openly share what they are thinking.

A lot to learn!

Scotlyn says:

#139. May 17, 2021 at 4:24 pm

Hello – one more wee puzzle – see below:



Levi: “Or, la multitude ne conspire jamais QUE contre les puissances réelles...”

Waite trans: “Now the multitude never conspires EXCEPT against real powers...”

Greer & Mikituk trans (as quoted above by Eric Cole #10):
“Yet the multitudes never conspire against the real powers...”

Since I am still relying on the Waite translation, I noticed that the sense of the above passage in Waite’s English (which includes the word “except”) is almost exactly opposite to the sense in Eric Cole’s quote from the Greer & Mikituk translation, which does not.

I am guessing, but am not certain, that the “except” in the Waite translation corresponds to the “que” in the original passage, in which the sense seems to be something like...

“ordinary people only conspire against real powers... [they may not know what is entailed, but they recognise strength when they perceive it]”

Would this be a fair reading of the above?

RandomActsOfKarma says:

#140. May 17, 2021 at 7:25 pm

Levi states:

“If Oedipus, instead of killing the sphinx, had tamed it and harnessed it to his chariot in order to enter Thebes, he would have been a king free of incest, free of calamity, and free of exile.”

Levi gives an important clue earlier in the text:

“...a serious study of magic and the Cabala would bring serious minds to a reconciliation, until now regarded as impossible, between science and doctrine, and between reason and faith.”

Plato (as far as I can determine) had many triads.

Pythagoras, though, considered the triad (the number 3) to be a perfect number, because it had a beginning, middle and end. It represents proportion, harmony, and perfection. The Sphinx (in Egypt) has three names: the morning sun, the noon sun, and the evening sun (Kherperi-Re-Atum). So at first I thought the Sphinx might represent the triad.

But then I read about one of Plato's triads... the tripartite soul, represented by a charioteer with two horses. The charioteer represents the Rational, one horse represents the Spirit, and one horse represents the Appetite. So rather than the Sphinx representing the triad, I thought Levi's clue meant that the Sphinx should be *part of* the triad. If Oedipus has tamed and harnessed the Sphinx to his (soul's) chariot, he would have reconciled reason (the Rational) and



faith (the Spirit) to keep his emotions (the Appetite) under control, been in harmony, and avoided his prophesied fate.

And then Oedipus would be ready to study magic and the Cabala...

A. Karhukainen says:

#141. May 18, 2021 at 4:06 am

Reading this, I start to glimpse why Tarot has so big role in Meyrink's Golem, the book I asked about in the Open thread, and which has inspired so diverse authors as Borges and Lovecraft:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Golem_\(Meyrink_novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Golem_(Meyrink_novel))

For example, pagat-card (magician) seems to be the personal talisman of the protagonist, and one of the main characters tells how Tarot actually is Kabbala.

It would be nice to read a critical analysis of Golem by a person well-versed in these traditions, as for me it seems that most of the literature critics miss the point of the book, even though I do not deny that the novel is delightful also by its style. Some of the dialogues remind me of Dostoyevsky, and some of the dream-like chapters of Kafka and Sadegh Hedayat's "The Blind Owl". (Note that the latter admired Kafka, who of course also lived in Prague).

@Walt F: Interesting analogies! I have myself pondered that if machine intelligence really rises or if people's thinking will

one day grow more capable of following algorithms, what would they think of texts and metaphors mentioned here:

<https://dkeen.com/Lambda/> ?

Would that kind of material form a part of their own “esoteric tradition” ? Also, I think anybody searching such bridges should take a look at Leibniz’s large corpus. But now I probably veer too much off-topic...

Phutatorius says:

#142. May 18, 2021 at 12:21 pm

Some common sense and, no doubt, literal-minded reflections on Oedipus’ “killing” of the Sphinx: first, Oedipus didn’t actually kill the Sphinx. Rather, she killed herself (by running off a cliff?) after he answered her riddle. Second, what choice did Oedipus have? If he failed to answer he’d have been devoured by the Sphinx. Obviously, he had to come up with something. (This is based on what I read in Robert Graves’ Greek Myths. It’s been a real long time since I actually read the plays. I need to go back and read them again.)

I do understand that this literal minded approach is the wrong way to go about approaching Levi and the Greek Myths, but you gotta start somewhere, n’est pas?

Is the riddle of the Sphinx a good meditation theme?

John Michael Greer says:

#143. May 18, 2021 at 1:23 pm



Paul, everything is a good theme for meditation — but that one's been more than usually useful to me.

Youngelephant, nicely riddled!

Chris, Howard was influenced by his good friends Lovecraft and Smith, and more generally by the distinctly French quality of weird tales in his day. As for this sequence of posts, not to worry — the other weeks of each month will go into different topics, including some I know you have a lot to say about.

Ottergirl, that's a powerful metaphor, and, I think, a good one.

Christophe, to my mind that's the most bitter consequence of the Piscean-era faiths' attempt to force human beings to attain an inhuman ideal: so many people flee to the void in an attempt to find a place to be human. There are other options, but it'll take the fading out of the last of the Piscean influence before those become readily perceptible.

Tomxyza, excellent! Yes on both counts. As for the people who won't tell you what they're thinking, they may be trying to pull something on you, or they may be worried that you may be trying to pull something on them; it's always wise to consider the latter possibility.

Scotlyn, thanks for this. I don't think I've ever published a book without a mistake in it, you know.

Random, good. Very good.

A. Karhukainen, such an analysis would indeed be worth reading. A great deal of late 19th and early 20th century occult-influenced literature badly needs that kind of study.

Phutatorius, the literal meaning is always the starting place. Look for the things that don't make sense in a literal way, and you've spotted the signals that show you where to start looking more deeply. As for meditation themes, why do you think Lévi put so much emphasis on that riddle?

Raphanus says:

#144. May 18, 2021 at 1:28 pm

@Scotlyn #139, "que" is an all purpose conjunction in French. "Except" is its least common use. Que means that, than, either, I'll just stick in que to indicate emphasis, comparison, order, and various modifications of sense that in English would be indicated by the straightforward conditional subjunctive, "might could" mow that lawn tomorrow.

I think that translating it without ambiguity, as Waite did, loses in translation.

Raphanus

Dan says:

#145. May 18, 2021 at 5:43 pm

Those following along in French might enjoy this audio edition I found:

Walt F says:

#146. May 18, 2021 at 8:10 pm

@Alvin, thanks for unpacking that.

All languages have limitations on what can be explained by solely using that language. The world is much larger than any language, though, so languages can be extended by referring to interactions and experiences with the world.

For instance, some ancient languages had no separate words for green and blue shades, just a single color. I don't believe that means those people were unable to perceive any difference between blue and green. With a time machine you could teach them by showing them "these are the shades we call green" and "these are the shades we call blue." Just as I recall learning some time ago "these are spring green shades" and "these are moss green shades." They can then add the necessary words or phrases to their lexicon if they need to. But you might need to show them the actual colors, or at least refer to things familiar to them that are consistently those shades. (A bit more difficult if you have to use e.g. the sky or the sea, for "blue" shades,

because they're not always.) The researchers examining the Piraha language appear to have been more interested in studying their linguistic cognition rather than attempting to teach them new concepts to see if they could understand them, which I suppose is good anthropology at least in the short term. There's more recent evidence they're perfectly capable of learning a counting number system.

Applying that to TDoHM: It's quite reasonable, based on such examples, to suppose concepts exist that our present languages cannot describe but the world of experience can express.

@A. Karhukainen, my first thought was that to a sentient AI (should such a thing be able to exist), that material would be to them more like the equations of quantum mechanics are to us. That is, a sort of fundamental formulation too deep and small for them to directly apply to most experiences. But it's quite plausible it could become part of an esoteric tradition instead—possibly even for some of us too. I've seen glimpses of potential correspondences between aspects of self-referential computation and seven-law occult philosophies, but so far the details have been elusive.

Eldritch Piglet says:

#147. May 19, 2021 at 5:56 am

Thanks for saying any Wirth deck will do. I decided on the one by Mirko Negri and pre-ordered it (it will be published by

Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd at the end of June), but only then saw there is another Wirth deck by the same author already in print and published by Lo Scarabeo.

I am assuming he's just changing publishers. However, can anyone here speak to the quality of either publisher? Would I be better served waiting for Llewellyn to publish in June or getting the Lo Scarabeo deck now?

I'm sure I'm making this more complicated than necessary. It's what I usually do when I'm in unfamiliar terrain. I wouldn't be surprised if you answered "What part of 'any Wirth deck will do' didn't you understand?" It's just that I'm not familiar with the terrain or the publishers who sell the maps.

Scotlyn says:

#148. May 19, 2021 at 6:04 am

@ JMG – Please understand that I am not a sub editor, and this is not an attempt to catch you out. I am simply a reader, trying to make the best sense I can of the material.

May I understand from your reply that the sense that seemed to be offering itself when the word "except" is included in the phrase IS closer to what Levi wished to convey? If so, then I will include this sense in my own musings.



What I am coming up against in myself is a strong disinclination to pursue an art that offers this level of power over others. That one's strength to affect others might be easily detectable, while the source of that strength remains secret, is something I do find disturbing.

What might come close to this was the passage I learned as a child:

Matthew 17:20 "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Which always made me wonder – well, what does the mountain want?

Power to move mountains, whether they wish to be moved or not, seems to be a power that I do not wish to engage with. On the other hand, in the spirit of the phrase (hat tip to the Harry Potter oeuvre) "Defense against the Dark Arts" – it does seem that it would be worth understanding how to stand against magical attempts to move one against one's will.

I am meditating on this.

Robert says:

#149. May 19, 2021 at 6:24 am



Greetings to all my fellow companions on this rich and extended exploration. Although I'm still on the third reading of the text, it's already quite late in the week. So here are several examples of how Levi's words have elicited a plethora of questions and impressions.

In the second sentence of the Introduction he writes, "Occult philosophy seems to have been the wet nurse or godmother of all religions, the secret lever of all intellectual powers, the key to all divine enigmas, and the absolute queen of society in the eras in which it was reserved exclusively for the education of priests and kings."

If occult philosophy is "the wet nurse," who or what is the mother and why is a wet nurse needed? When and how does a child wean? ("...For everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But meat is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." Hebrews 5:13-14) A fairy godmother, moreover, is defined as "a fairy-tale character who uses magical powers to help a hero or heroine." And "education" differs from instruction in that it's not a filling up but a drawing forth.

The "secret lever" associates to the aphorism of Archimedes, which Levi will return to later in the Introduction: "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world." Which raises the question of what and where that fulcrum might be. The "key to all divine enigmas" is an allusion to the Tarot keys,

especially given that an enigma is “a saying, question, picture, etc., containing a hidden meaning.”

Then on page 17, Levi notes that “Homer’s graceful fictions soon seem to make us forget the simple and abstract truths of the primal revelation. Man takes to the form and forgets the idea. The signs, in multiplying, lose their power...” This causes me to wonder whether Levi might intentionally use the endless multiplication of signs, symbols, and enchanting stories to distract the unwary from certain key ideas and a premature exposure to power.

Finally, on page 19, Levi suggests that “the great magical secret is thus Psyche’s lamp and dagger, it is Eve’s apple, it is the sacred fire revealed by Prometheus, it is Lucifer’s burning scepter, but it is also the holy cross of the Redeemer. To know this well enough in order to abuse it or divulge it, is to merit every type of torture; to know it as one should know it, to use it and to hide it, is to be master of the absolute.” Such an evocative cascade of correspondences, followed by a significant caution. The last phrase of the passage takes me back to the magical word-book called the dictionary to explore the interlacing meanings of both absolute and absolution.

Scotlyn says:

#150. May 19, 2021 at 8:53 am

@Raphanus – thank you. Your careful explanation is a great help.

Obviously ambiguity is the biggest trap for a person attempting to make sense of what is written and must be read bare, with no inflections or body language or voice to give a hint as to intended meanings. Written in a different language, the difficulties of ambiguity widen immeasurably.

Regardless of which way Levi meant to put it, there is also my own natural “reading response” which is measuring what I am reading against what I have personally experienced of this world, and trying to work out whether it is more likely that people conspire against powers that are real, or that they never do.

It is true that scapegoating is a thing, and on the whole people are probably likelier to punch down than to punch up, but still, the sentence after this one seems to say that while people may not understand how a power is exercised, they still recognise the strength of it. Which seems to lend more credence to the first reading.

Anyway, I not much wiser as to Levi’s intended meaning, but both phrasings give food for thought.

Robert Mathiesen says:

#151. May 19, 2021 at 10:32 am

To add to what Walt F just said about language and its semi-adequate relationship to reality, especially so-called “higher” reality:

I would recommend two seminal papers by the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, “The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language” (1941) and “Language, Mind and Reality” (1942). In them he enunciated what is sometimes called the Linguistic Relativity Principle, which is simply the observation that our **unexamined habits** of thought and behavior follow the lines of last resistance laid down by the language in which we are doing our thinking — and thus, our behaving. Note the emphasis on “unexamined” and “habit” here. (He drew heavily on Native American languages, the grammar of which is radically different from our familiar European languages, to make his case.)

Since they are so relevant to our discussions of magic here, I have put both articles up on archive.org for anyone to download and read at leisure. Whorf’s 1941 paper is written for the ordinary reader; his 1942 paper is directed at an audience already familiar with esoteric thought.

Whorf, in addition to being a fine engineer (with degrees from MIT), was also a Theosophist, and more generally an esotericist; he was opposed in principle to the dogmatic materialism of mainstream science. This shows through in his papers, which made them somewhat unpalatable to the academic establishment of his day (and ours).

One of the academic reactions to Whorf's work was to formalize something it called the "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis" in linguistics, and then to refute it. However, this "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis" has as little relation to what Whorf (or Sapir) actually wrote as a duck-billed platypus has to the price of oranges in today's economy.

As for "blue" and "green," my wife and I can only rarely agree on whether the color of any given object should be called "blue" or "green": our ideas of these two colors differ quite widely. We find this amusing ...

Mary Carole Hamm says:

#152. May 19, 2021 at 10:45 am

Eldritch Piglet, both Llewellyn and Lo Scarabeo make cards of equivalent quality, and in fact Llewellyn distributes for Lo Scarabeo. I think they're just issuing a reprint of the original Lo Scarabeo and you'd only be waiting around for a reissue.

Robert Mathiesen says:

#153. May 19, 2021 at 11:00 am

@Scotlyn:

Your concern is right on target. This is why, IMHO, the best and wisest magicians use their power very, very rarely.

There is real power in magic, and that power can reach awesome levels.

So Lord Acton's dictum applies to it, too: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority, still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it."

This saying of Lord Acton's should (IMHO, of course) stand at the beginning of any magician's own personal book of magic.

In Christian mysticism one distinguishes between cataphatic roads to God and apophatic ones. Cataphatic ways are ways of affirmation, honing one's words and deeds even more keenly until they lift the mind as far as it can go toward union with God. Apophatic ways, in contrast, are ways of wordlessness and deedlessness that lead toward the same goal. (They partake of the same dangers as empty-the-mind meditations, and are customarily to be practiced only under the guidance of an exceptionally experienced elder.) Since, in Christian theology, God is beyond all words and all thoughts, apophatic ways—for all their real dangers—may even possibly take the Christian mystic further toward his goal than cataphatic ways ever can.

As in mysticism, so in magic. Cataphatic magic is the magic of spell and ritual, of chant and ceremony, or even the

simpler magic of affirmation and concentration. In sharp contrast, apophatic magic is the magic that one can deploy when one has gone beyond every word and every sensation, and has perceived (not by any bodily sense-organ) and touched (not by any bodily limb) the great web of interconnection between all things, the web formed of something indescribable (“living fire” may be the closest English can come to describing it), which lies outside of every time and every place, and can be perceived only by means that are not of flesh and blood, bone and brain. Apophatic magic seems to be more powerful than cataphatic magic, and hence far more liable to corrupt its user.

Here be true dragons!

John Michael Greer says:

#154. May 19, 2021 at 12:43 pm

Piglet, both publishers are about the same quality — I have several Lo Scarabeo decks and they’re quite workable — and yes, any Wirth deck will do.

Scotlyn, what if it turned out that you and everyone else have that power, and have been using it all your life, but you didn’t realize that fact?

Robert (non-M), a good set of meditations. Keep at it!

youngelephant says:

#155. May 19, 2021 at 8:42 pm



It seems to me that most everyone who has created or discovered anything of value has done so using first principles. So to find the Great Arcanum we have to apply the first principles of the Universe/Cosmos, or more specifically, the Universe or Cosmos as mapped by occult philosophy. Now all we have are symbols of the first principles whether it be the Ring Cosmos, the number 1, or The Magician/[insert French equivalent] tarot card. So in occult philosophy the first principles Levi intends us to use are the number 0-21 and their corresponding tarot cards. So if one wants to unpack the secrets, all one has to do is figure out the corresponding first principles and think a little bit intuitively. Mixing and matching equivalent first principles helps, which is why Levi hints at so many. Cos. Doc. is ripe for application. Also, thanks to Skyrider, whose first answer I think percolated in my subconscious for awhile.

AWLamp says:

#156. May 19, 2021 at 11:26 pm

Thank you JMG – for this space and all you offer. I've followed and gained so much from your writings for a long time, as well as from the lively, informed and courteous community you have here. (Hello everyone! Blessings to you all.)

I've never commented before, but have been drawn by the Levi study program to join in. I took the plunge and got your translation of High Magic a few weeks ago, and intend to do the work and stay with you.

The depth and potential of the material excites and yet somewhat unnerves me – as someone who has been burnt in the past by spiritual groups. I practice solitarily now, but my practice informs who I am everyday. I feel very strongly that I need to be cautious and take good care of myself – this is not dabbling territory. I appreciate the gentle way you treat people.

As well as learning and gaining so much from everyone here, I hope to be able to offer some useful input in return.

I'm looking forward to this collective four-year adventure.

Rajesh says:

#157. May 20, 2021 at 6:19 am

Dear John,

Many thanks for doing this.

Would we need the full 78 cards of the Marseille deck, or would the trump cards suffice? I do not have access to a Marseille deck and was wondering whether I could manage with printing and laminating only the 22 trump cards.

Regards,

Rajesh



Marko says:

#158. May 20, 2021 at 7:12 am

Thank you for hosting this for an extended period of time. I have been reading over and over this chapter and have some thoughts.

– I have been thinking about the paragraphs where Levi talks about abuse of this power meaning death. And the reflections of Goldenhawk and the others. What is this abuse he talks about? Levi writes that the Knights Templar transgressed against a greater power than the pope or king. First I thought that this is strange; why were civilizations of old ruled by priests and mages and today this “science” is so banned? But now I think it is something else. Were the priests and mages (adepts) ever really in charge? Or was it a separate class. Sure a respected class, but were they ever lawgivers and administrators, kings? Could I ask for a second opinion from a much more read historian: Were there ever societies ruled by mage-kings, or priest-kings? Not officially, like a ceremonial role, where a child king is declared the protector of the faith (Great Britain), but a society ruled by actual adepts?

– If I could ask for a history lesson about catholic altars? I find myself in a situation where a sufficiently learned catholic priest is not readily available. What is the significance, where does it come from?



Scotlyn says:

#159. May 20, 2021 at 7:20 am

@ JMG – Thank you for:

“Scotlyn, what if it turned out that you and everyone else have that power, and have been using it all your life, but you didn’t realize that fact?”

sucks breath *blows it out* Hoooooowowie!

goes off to sit

@Robert – “here be dragons” indeed! Thank you for your thoughts.

jbucks says:

#160. May 20, 2021 at 10:21 am

After the second rereading of the introduction, some thoughts:

– Magic is a creative act: it is not just about the finding of correspondences between symbols, it is also about forging them, especially as the planes get more mutable the further up you go. The latticework of myths and symbols throughout the introduction, which seems to extend beyond the introduction, seems like it’s there perhaps to be expanded upon.

– I have been thinking about the riddle, and I currently puzzling through an idea that is kind of ‘geometric’ in nature, and relies a bit on what you’ve written before about ternaries.

– Levi tells us repeatedly the dangers of revealing the great and incommunicable secret, yet at the end of the introduction, seems to tell us that he is going to do so. So why explain the dangers of doing this and then give it away anyway?

– The only answer I can think of: The Great Secret that can be spoken of is not the true Great Secret.

Certainly the introduction has given me food for thought, and I also think I see one of the reasons you asked us to review the Tarot cards frequently while we re-read the introduction.

RandomActsOfKarma says:

#161. May 20, 2021 at 7:32 pm

Levi: “The two feuding brothers express the second part of this great mystery, which is divinely completed by the sacrifice of Antigone; and then war, the last war, the feuding brothers killed one by the other, Capaneus killed by the thunderbolt he had defied, Amphiaraus devoured by the earth, are all allegories which by their truth and their

grandeur fill with wonder those who penetrate the triple hieratical meaning.”

My interpretation of a “triple hieratical meaning” is that there are three interpretations of the Oedipus story that provide an answer to the Sphinx’s riddle. Levi even gives some blatant hints (two feuding brothers, three other characters), but how to relate them to Zoroaster, Pythagoras, and Plato? I could not see how, so I decided to explore other parts of the Introduction that I did not understand.

Levi: “God, for us, is the Azoth of the sages.”

I did not know what Azoth is, so I searched online. Wikipedia had some good explanation and some interesting quotes, one from Levi (Transcendental Magic): “Sulfur, Mercury, and Salt, which, volatilized and fixed alternately, compose the Azoth of the sages. Sulfur corresponds to the elementary form of Fire, Mercury to Air and Water, Salt to Earth.”

A-ha! The four elements are represented by three substances. Plato (Timaeus) said the world’s body was composed of earth (for tangibility) and fire (for visibility). Usually, two substances require a third substance for stability. But the World was not a surface, it was a solid (a sphere), so it required two more substances for stability (air and water).

Capaneus was killed by the thunderbolt (fire).

Amphiaraus was devoured by the earth (earth).

So Antigone would be mercury (air and water).

From the Cosmic Doctrine, Mercury is Hermes, represented by the caduceus... which symbolizes the reconciliation of two forces... the two brothers (the duality, a polarity) resolved by the sacrifice of Antigone.

So the answer to this version of the riddle would be Azoth.

But what exactly is Azoth? From Wikipedia: "The Azoth is believed to be the animating energy (spiritus animatus) of the body, and the inspiration and enthusiasm that moves the mind. The Azoth is believed to be the mysterious evolutionary force responsible for the drive towards physical and spiritual perfection. Thus, the concept of the Azoth is analogous to the light of nature or mind of God."

"Inspiration and enthusiasm" sounds like Awen; "light of nature or mind of God" sounds like the Solar Logos.

RandomActsOfKarma says:

#162. May 20, 2021 at 7:41 pm

@Robert (#149) Re: occult philosophy being the wet nurse or godmother for all religions

In the same sentence, he also refers to occult philosophy as being the absolute queen of society and, like you pointed out, it was reserved for the education of priests and kings.

Wet nurses and godmothers and queens are feminine.

Priests and kings are masculine.

Perhaps the duality of feminine occult philosophy and masculine priests and kings is resolved by religion?

Larry Ulfik says:

#163. May 21, 2021 at 6:04 pm

Many Thanks for this series. I'm not familiar with the details of the Oswald Wirth Tarot, or any Tarot and I've been intrigued by Tarot for many years. I look forward to delving into the use of them in the series. If possible I'd like you to help me to understand the suits, and the details, and I hope my lack of familiarity will not be a burden for you to keep in mind that not all of us have the expertise. I've never been much of a card player since my cousin played 52 pickup when I was about 7 and in a nearly full body cast! He made me cry! Ever since that experience cards have not been of interest. I'm giving that up and look forward to learning and perhaps mastering the symbolic connection to Levi's work and your guidance.

RandomActsOfKarma says:

#164. May 21, 2021 at 7:38 pm

My search for a meaning for Azoth also provided another great quote, this one from Manly P. Hall (The Secret Teachings of All Ages):

The universe is surrounded by the sphere of light or stars. Beyond that sphere is Schamayim (שמים), the Hebrew word for 'heaven', who is the Divine Fiery Water, the first outflow of the Word of God, the flaming river pouring from the presence of the eternal mind. Schamayim, who is this fiery Androgyne, divides. His Fire becomes Solar fire and his Water becomes Lunar water in our universe. Schamayim is the Universal Mercury or Azoth—the measureless spirit of life. That original spiritual fiery water comes through Edem (“vapor” in Hebrew) and pours itself into the four main rivers of the four Elements. This comprises the River of Living Water—the Azoth—or fiery mercurial essence, that flows out from the throne of God and Lamb. In this Edem (vaporous essence or mist) is the first or spiritual Earth, the incomprehensible and intangible dust out of which God formed Adam Kadmon, the spiritual body of man, which must become fully revealed through time.

This fits with the biblical clue provided by Levi, though he is quite sneaky this time:

“The mysterious origin of Oedipus... recalls the symbols of Moses and the tales of Genesis.”

Pages earlier, Levi says:

“Yes, there exists a formidable secret... summarized by Moses at the start of Genesis... Moses symbolizes it as a tree which is at the center of the terrestrial Paradises, and which is near, which even embraces with its roots, the tree of life; the four mysterious rivers have their source at the

foot of this tree, which is guarded by the sword of fire and by the four forms of the biblical sphinx, Ezekiel's Cherubim.”

We start with the Tree.

At the base of the tree is four rivers “of the four Elements” (according to Hall quote). Out of this, Adam Kadmon was formed.

Adam Kadmon is the Primordial Man. I have not studied the Cabala yet, so I have come up with some alternatives of getting from “four feet” to “two feet”.

The first interpretation, based on the Hall quote, is that God formed Adam Kadmon and that Adam Kadmon is hermaphroditic (and eventually is split into two, Adam and Eve). (Or, possibly, Eve taking an apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, good and evil fitting it with Zoroaster's duality.)

The second interpretation, based on <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/themes/adam.php>, is that Adam Kadmon (the first creation) is a “configuration of primordial light-energy”, also known as YHVH (the Tetragrammaton for God). So Adam Kadmon is the “body” of a mind, so he has body *and* mind, a duality.

To get from “two feet” to “three feet”, <http://www.newkabbalah.com/adam.html> stated that Adam Kadmon, as a symbol, links God, Man, and the World.

So the third answer to the Sphinx is the Tree of Life.

Goldenhawk says:

#165. May 22, 2021 at 12:14 pm



Lévi does not directly mention the Fool in this Introduction, but it seems to me that the 0 card dances in the shadows.

The Fool in the Knapp-Hall deck is blindfolded. He appears to be about to trip over a fallen pillar and walk into the jaws of a crocodile. Naive and innocent, he steps boldly forward.

Oedipus, unconscious of his true identity, overly confident in his ability to avoid his destiny and outwit the monstrous Sphinx, was similarly oblivious to the moral abyss ahead of him. When the awareness of his terrible crimes finally hit him, he blinded himself.

Psyche, “in the dark” about the true identity of her lover, fell prey to the doubts sown by her envious sisters, betrayed Eros’ trust, and suffered the consequences.

“These visions are getting very awkward, very complicated, it needs much more painstaking work to bring them home, to trace them to their origin and see what they mean *in the human being*. Otherwise there is danger of the whole thing losing itself in vapors and symbolism.” C.G. Jung, Visions Seminars, 1930-1934

The “triple hieratic meaning” (one example):

1. esoteric, non-rational, symbolic
2. exoteric, rational, scientific

3. numinous (the confluence of the individual human being and the divine; synchronicity)

Phutatorius says:

#166. May 22, 2021 at 5:33 pm

Regarding Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx: Now I see it as a testing or initiatory moment similar to the Chapel Perilous/wounded king or the "sword in the stone" (which is also quite a symbol). Ask the right question at the Chapel Perilous and the wounded king is healed, or some such. It's not just a matter of "coming up with something" on-the-fly during a chance encounter. All of this went way over my head back in college when I was forced to read Greek Tragedy many years ago, so naturally I found it all deadily dull.

There's some good stuff up above that other commenters have posted; I'll have to take a closer look at some of the posts, having read Levi's intro at least five times by now.

Rajesh says:

#167. May 24, 2021 at 3:50 am

On reading through the rest of the comments, I realized that my question was already answered by you (in response to 'Eldritch Piglet'). Apologies for the oversight.

Regards,

Rajesh



Michael Northup says:

#168. May 25, 2021 at 7:40 am

Brother JMG, I recently found your blog and look forward to reading Levi's book guided by your thoughts and insights. I have the Waite translation but ordered yours yesterday. I have led a study group on "Morals and Dogma" by Pike and see reading Levi as a return to the source (ad fontes!) I hope to see you around town. Best fraternal regards,
Michael Northup

Dennis Gaudet says:

#169. May 25, 2021 at 8:54 pm

Hi John. Thank You. I have been reading everything you write for 16 years now. You, Jim Kunstler, Charles Smith, and many other rational and thoughtful writers. I have not supported any of you near what you all deserve. You John, stand out. Druid, Mason, magic, ecology, Arobindo! – WTF?! I have everything Arobindo has written. You like French, how about Andre Padoux and 'Vac', Shaivism and Mark Dyczkowski and others. Bringing it back to earth, Joseph Naft and his grounded and accessible take on "The Great Work". You John are knowledgeable and wise. You are

consistent, patient, and firm with your responses. You are a TEACHER, and you are getting through.

I just received 'The King in Orange'. Lets add that to Levi's magic, Price's Tarot, and all the other suggested related reading – and loving it! I'm thinking my Scorpio birth sign that is associated with Hermes, along with a short stint in childhood Demloday, combined with a respiratory (prana/pneuma) medical degree, along with another environmental degree, and I can't help but think what a mistake it would be to not follow along and apply myself to something I did not adequately appreciate before meeting and now trusting you as much as I do now.

I apologize for not participating more. My 2 slow finger typing combines with my fear of exposing my ignorance and inadequate expression.

Please everyone support John's honest and important work to the best of your ability.

Best. Den

Dennis Gaudet says:

#170. May 25, 2021 at 9:53 pm

Sorry I said Price when I meant Place's Tarot.

Jennifer Richardson says:

#171. May 27, 2021 at 8:36 pm

“Remember that in decks that use the French pattern, Le Bateleur (the Juggler or Magician) is the first card, and Le Fou (the Madman or Fool) is the next to last card; also, La Justice (Justice) is card 8 and La Force (Strength) is card 11. (They’re the other way around in decks based on the Golden Dawn tradition, such as the Rider-Waite.) ”

Oh dear, I suspect something might be off with the deck I ordered (the CBD Tarot of Marseilles).

The Fool seems to be #22 (last instead of second to last, although actually unnumbered on the card), and The World is labeled as #21. The Magician is #1, Justice is #8, and Force is #11.

Am I misunderstanding, or are the Fool & The World out of order in my deck?

Jennifer Richardson says:

#172. May 27, 2021 at 9:04 pm

Ah, I see that my question about The Fool and The World being switched was answered above. I shall reverse their order in my study. That also makes a certain correspondence that I noticed make more sense.

I am really delighted by Levi's prose; the description of the witches' Sabbath tickles all my gothic fancies, I must confess, although it was almost too vivid to be safely imagined! I have been doing a great deal of extra reading and brushing up on my mythology and history. It's a good thing we'll have four years to unpack this! I suspect I'll want to revisit the introduction regularly throughout that time.

I find that I can't really tell what some of the objects on the cards are meant to be, especially for The Magician; is there some agreed upon answer as to what exactly the objects on his table are, or should I just keep making my best guesses? (A purse? Knives for sharpening pens, or a small sickle blade? Cups? Coins? A glass tube? I hate to jump to so obvious a conclusion, but they do seem a rather phallic and yonic collection for the most part...)

youngelephant says:

#173. May 27, 2021 at 10:22 pm

Levi just redpilled me again and we're only on the introduction. Rereading bears fruit. I might enjoy these 4 years...I have another riddle to share. When speaking about the philosopher's stone or perpetual motion, what came first – the chicken or the egg?

RandomActsOfKarma says:

#174. May 28, 2021 at 6:30 pm



@Jennifer Richardson,

I do not know which deck you are using, but if you look at the pictures on the Revised New Art Tarot available at http://askthecards.info/tarot_card_decks/knapp-hall_revised_new_art_tarot_reading.shtml, the symbolism might be a little easier to recognize. (The deck I bought doesn't have as many symbols on the card as the Revised New Art Tarot does, so I've saved the pictures from the website on a Word document, so I can refer to them easily.)

On the Magician card (The Juggler on the askthecards site), the mage is holding a caduceus. To me, it looks like the objects on the table are a sword, cup, wand, and yellow circles (coins or pentacles).

That and the World card (The Universe on the askthecards site) gave me lots to think about. □

Dennis G says:

#175. June 1, 2021 at 6:33 pm

Cross reading different teachings. Seeing correspondences with Kashmir Shaivism and Dzogchen. Seeing correspondences with the Dzogchen imagery. Sorry, not to star, steer?, the discussion east, just that we only know things in comparison to other things and those are the

things I invested time in the past and enjoy seeing connections now that I would have never have appreciated if they were not presented by you



Dennis G says:

#176. June 8, 2021 at 10:47 am

Alright JMG. Now you got me spending money at the PRS. Found Aurobindo on consciousness and Apocalypse Unsealed. Reading is a great way to break from the internet. Thanks. Den

Comments are closed.

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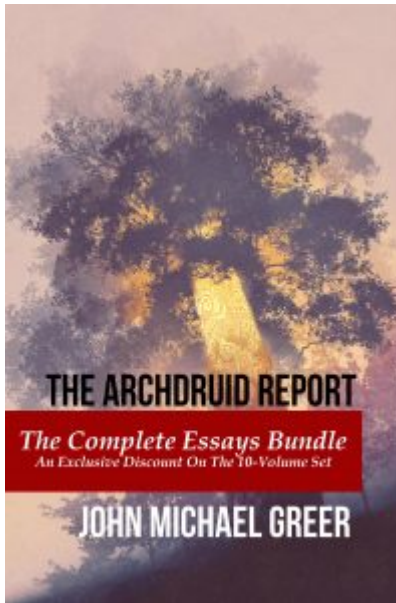
John Michael Greer is a widely read author, blogger, and astrologer whose work focuses on the overlaps between ecology, spirituality, and the future of industrial society. He served twelve years as Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America, and remains active in that order as well as several other branches of Druid nature spirituality. He currently lives in East Providence, Rhode Island, with his wife Sara.

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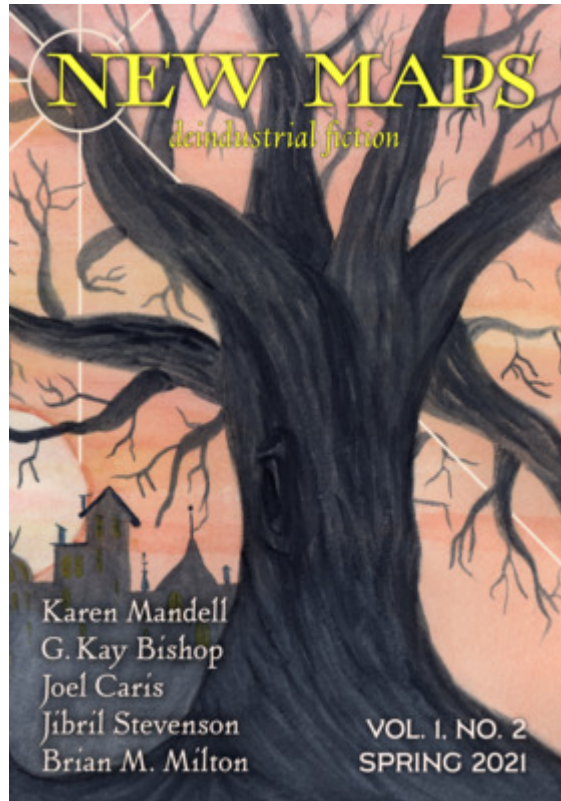
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