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John Dee's Occultism

SUNY series in Western Esoteric Traditions
David Appelbaum, editor

John Dee's Occultism

Magical Exaltation
through Powerful Signs

György E. Szőnyi

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, address State University of New York Press,
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production by Michael Haggett
Marketing by Anne M. Valentine

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Szönyi, György Endre.

John Dee's occultism : magical exaltation through powerful signs / György
Endre Szönyi.

p. cm.—(SUNY series in Western esoteric traditions)

ISBN 0-7914-6223-4 (alk. paper)

1. Dee, John, 1527–1608. 2. Symbolism. 3. Magic—History. 4. Occultism—
History. 5. Renaissance. I. Title. II. Series.

BF1598.D5S98 2004
133.'092—dc22

2003069327

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Preface

My attention was drawn to the fascinating topic of Renaissance magic and occult symbolism by the books of Frances Yates, more than twenty-five years ago. Her *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964) and other works belonging to the intellectual tradition of the Warburg school introduced me to those aspects of Renaissance cultural history, which were almost *terra incognita* in contemporary Hungarian scholarship. I must emphasize “almost” because—in spite of all ideological pressure and limitations—I had professors, Bálint Keserű and Tibor Klaniczay, who were aware of the trends of intellectual history and called my attention to these works. It was they—and two other teachers, László Vekkerdi and Bálint Rozsnyai—who encouraged me to summarize this excitingly new image of the Renaissance in a small book which was published in Hungarian under the title *Secret Sciences and Superstitions: Questions of Fifteenth through Seventeenth Century Cultural History* (Szőnyi 1978). The topic has been haunting me ever since.

My early studies were stimulated by the question: how had it been possible that the so-called man-centered Renaissance also witnessed the golden age of magic? I was surprised to see how closely magic intertwined with the early modern scientific ideas on the one hand and with the premodern world picture on the other. I became even more surprised, however, to realize that magic did not disappear with the collapse of its foundation, the organic world picture. Magical approaches and magical symbolisation are present even in our contemporary world, and it is a challenging task to trace the roots of this tradition with the methodological equipment of the modern intellectual historian. As I see them today, these questions cannot be fully answered on the basis of the objective or positivistic techniques of traditional approaches to the history of science. We also need help from religious studies and historical anthropology. The concept of self-fashioning also seems useful, leading us, to some extent, to the territory of psychology as well.

The primary subject matter of this book is the magic of John Dee, of whom I also became aware through the works of Frances Yates. His

character seems a suitable focus for researching Renaissance occultism because his career and works clearly demonstrate the various sides of this complex phenomenon. His connections with Central Europe, at the same time, justify why I, a scholar from Hungary, choose him as an anchor for my presentation of early modern magical symbolism.

A number of heterogeneous topics meet in my book, but there is a connecting link which, according to my intention, provides coherence to my treatment. This is, the ideology of *exaltatio*, that is, the deification of man, which I see as the intellectual foundation of magic, a foundation that even today validates magical aspiration and its scholarly research. I also argue that it was the desire for *exaltatio* which framed and tied together the otherwise amazingly heterogeneous thoughts and activities of John Dee. I give a definition of *exaltatio* in relation to magic in the chapters under the heading "Definitions." The following two parts of my book operate with different methodologies. After the Introduction, in the chapters of the second part entitled "Input 'In many bokes and sundry languages . . .,'" I analyse a selection of eminent magical texts—all in the possession of Dee according to his library catalogue. Although these texts were all known to Dee, my aim is not simply to offer a review of his sources. As new historicism and related recent trends angrily rejected the positivistic ideals of source-hunting, I also think that what needs to be grasped here is the complex and often paradoxical interdependence of cultural and ideological inclinations and appropriations. In this section I disregard the chronology of Dee's intellectual development, and instead present the ingredients of the ideology of magic according to the chronology of European cultural history. The fact that Dee absorbed ancient, medieval, and Renaissance lores in a particular order and that his thought became composed of different layers of high and popular culture will become meaningful in the last part of the book, entitled "Output 'Glyms or Beame of Radicall Truthes.'" There I revisit Dee's works, following the order in which he wrote them, from his early scientific treatises to his most voluminous body of writings, the spiritual diaries or, as he called them, the *Libri mysteriorum*.

As for my intended methodology, textual interpretation will be complemented by historical approaches that touch upon various subtexts and contexts, including the history of mentality, historical anthropology, and comparative religion. I hope my chapters dealing with "Dee and the Interpretive Community" will highlight a little explored aspect of Dee studies. Here I connect the magical program to its psycho-sociological and politico-ideological contexts, using concepts such as patronage, self-fashioning, and techniques of identifying the Other. Some of these chap-

ters will deal with East-Central Europe, since this is the territory where I might offer unique information to Western readers.

My approach is markedly hermeneutical, so I cannot neglect historiography, the trends of interpretation that preceded mine. The often heated debates of the last decades (over hermeticism or over the “Yates theses”) did not always concentrate solely on the historical questions. Quite understandably, they also served as exercise fields for the transition from modern to postmodern historical and cultural theory. One of my objectives is to juxtapose the results of classical (that is the Warburgian-Yatesian) intellectual history with the newer approaches and see what is still useful in the classical material, which, in the controversy related to the history of science, has almost entirely been discarded. We certainly cannot overlook two lessons of the post-structuralist philosophy of history: 1) We have to accept that historicist reconstruction is nothing else than an ideological fiction, so whatever conclusion we arrive at, we cannot present it outside the *hic et nunc* position of us, the interpreters. 2) It also appears today that the efforts of the great intellectual historians to boil down each epoch or period to a single great leitmotif of ideas or social structure has been a failure and has led to (self)deception. Although it is a natural drive of any researcher to operate with abstractions and categories suitable for generalizations, one must be extremely careful not to blur the distinction among often contrary tendencies and the variety of opinions, desires, and ideologies—the evidence of otherness in the process of explanation and abstraction.

This book incorporates the material presented in two of my previous books on Dee, one written in Hungarian (Szőnyi 1998), the other in Italian (Szőnyi 2004). It should not be thought, though, that the three books are identical, related to each other through mechanical translation. I wrote the present book directly in English, having in mind the interests and needs of English or American readers, which differ from those of the Hungarians or Italians. I should also add that since the completion of the three books, a lot of things have happened in Dee scholarship. In fact, since the 1988 publication of Nicholas Clulee’s monograph on Dee’s natural philosophy, Dee studies have been booming, producing new evidence, new editions, new approaches, and new monographs almost every year. My present book is intended to represent Dee research as it stands in around 2000, and I am also aware of the fact that parallel with my work, other books are also being written or have just appeared.

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Acknowledgments

I have already mentioned some of my Hungarian masters but here I should also acknowledge the tremendous inspiration which the personal acquaintance of Dame Frances Yates meant to me. I met her for the first time as a young university student, coming from the East, thanks to a three-week British Council study trip, and naively ringing the doorbell of the Warburg Institute. She was most ready to meet me downstairs at the reception and then lead me into that “Temple of Renaissance Scholarship,” as I emotionally fancied it. Later on, I was privileged to be her personal guide during her last lecture tour abroad, which led to Hungary in the summer of 1981. Today I look at these experiences with a more sober eye but I think one should never entirely recover from these rites of initiation. Next to her, among English scholars, I owe most to Robert J. W. Evans (the exemplary historian and philologist, in many ways the opposite of Frances Yates) who encouraged and helped me since the beginning of my studies.

My academic worldview was significantly formed during those occasions I spent on various scholarships near the historical sources and in the inspiring communities of colleagues. I would like to mention among the following institutions, whose staff always offered cordial assistance Biblioteka Jagiełłońska (Cracow), Biblioteka na Piasku (Wrocław), Bodleian Library (Oxford), British Library (London), Collegium Budapest, Folger Library (Washington, D.C.), Herzog-August Bibliothek (Wolfenbüttel), Huntington Library (San Marino, California), Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.), Nationalbibliothek (Vienna), Statný Archiv (Třeboň), Somogyi Library (Szeged), and University Library (Hull). Among the many colleagues whom I met in these libraries and other research institutions I particularly thank the following: Michael J. B. Allen, Frank Baron, Enikő Basa-Molnár, Marianna D. Birnbaum, Audrey and Clifford Davidson, Joscelyn Godwin, George Gomori, Werner Gundersheimer, Richard Helgersson, Michael H. Keefer, Gábor Klaniczay, Nati H. Krivatsy,

Stanton J. Linden, Wolf-Dieter Müller-Jahncke, Michael O'Connell, David A. Richardson, Lech Szczucki. The completion of this book was made possible by generous grants of the U.S. Fulbright Fellowship Program, the IREX and Mellon Foundations, the TEMPUS Program of the European Union and, most recently, an Alfried Krupp fellowship of Collegium Budapest.

Among Hungarian friends and colleagues who were willing to read my writings and discuss my ideas with me, I would name only my wife, Ildikó Kristóf, herself a historian, who not only gave good ideas but also exercised a benevolent control on my style and expression.

One of the most difficult moments when one finishes the manuscript of a book is to find cordial and attentive readers to look through the text. This help is especially important when one has written the book in a language other than his/her native tongue. I am especially grateful for those who have read parts or the whole of my manuscript and were ready to polish my English as well as suggest possible improvements in my argumentation: first and foremost Urszula Szulakowska, then Håkan Håkansson, Stanton J. Linden, Michal Pober, and Marvin J. Overby who kindly helped with copyediting.

Special thanks to my sister, Etelka, who designed the Hungarian version of my book and who for many years provided important support for my work. I offer this book to the memory of my mother and father.

Part 1



Definitions

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Principles and Demarcations

THE CHALLENGE OF THE ESOTERIC

The Magus (or as some might call him, the Magician) is entering his laboratory. His retorts are full of boiling, bubbling liquids; his mind is on the boil too, nursing dreams, noble or mad ambitions of omniscience, omnipotence, eternal life, and the ability to create gold or synthetic life—the famous homunculus. As the Great Work comes to a halt, some supernatural help is needed. The Magus now turns to God, praying for more strength, or, resorting to illicit assistance, calls on Satan. Often he is confronted with other men, friends or adversaries, dilettante antiquarians or greedy princes, who look at him with expectation or awe, who try to stop him or urge him to further efforts—but certainly cannot follow him on his dangerous path towards the unknown and forbidden. Almost invariably the end is failure. The Magus is punished for his arrogant self-conceit, or the Opus Magnum is disturbed by intruding bores—the retort blows up or the Adept cannot endure the presence of the Devil—until finally the Magus is paradigmatically killed among the flames of his laboratory.

The above narrative has roots as old as literature; the archetypal story of the magician gained cosmic significance in the Renaissance and has been popular ever since. Is this a story taken from life or merely derived from the pressure of literary conventions and the demands of the reading public? Does it follow the logic of scientific investigation, mixing experimentation with the supernatural? Is this all allegory and parable, or does it have a more direct relevance? One might be surprised that this literary

framework has even passed into twentieth-century fiction, virtually unshaken by the development of the natural sciences and the disqualification of magic as a scientific discipline. Should we then see this literary phenomenon as a reaction against the self-assuredness of the sciences? Is there any way of reconciling the rational-scientific way of thinking and the magical-occult worldview?

Questions like the above may bother the reader who finds himself in the web of modern fiction focusing on the theme of the magus, such as Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Marguerite Yourcenar's *The Abyss*, Robertson Davies's *What's Bred in the Bone*, Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*. The list could be extended ad infinitum. Looking at these novels of esoterica, we can clearly see the fascination of modern writers with the culture and world picture of the Renaissance, even if they place their plot in a contemporary setting. Due to the appeal of the sixteenth century, these magus figures paradigmatically seem to be variations either on the character of the historical, legendary Faust, perhaps the most famous black magician who ever lived, or his contemporary, the white magus-scientist Paracelsus. In fact, the hero of this book, the English magus-mathematician John Dee also offers himself as a suitable model for such characters. What is more, there is a growing set of modern novels in which Dee features as the main or secondary but nevertheless key character. One could start with Gustav Meyrink's *The Angel of the West Window* (1928) and more recently with Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1987) or Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Dr. Dee* (1993).¹

This increasing interest in Dee as a magus—and one should take into consideration the whole spectrum of publications between the above mentioned fictional works and the newly published scholarly monographs (such as Sherman 1995 and Harkness 1999), the manuals on Dee's Enochian magic (e.g., Laycock 1994), or the interest in his angelic conferences (cf. Fenton's edition, Dee 1998)—should hopefully justify yet another book on Dee's magic, this time focusing on his occultism as a self-contained discipline, although nevertheless situated, as Nicholas Clulee (1988) suggested, "between science and religion."

The word *magic* makes one associate a variety of things which may have little in common, except perhaps the atmosphere of secrecy, some mysterious elements, and, above all, the human will to control and manipulate the rationally incomprehensible sphere of life. Intervening in the supernatural world may happen in different ways and with different intentions: with pious or wicked purposes, with religious zeal or with a scientific interest, a philosophical or a folkloric foundation with guidance

from theory or from rituals. There was a time when enlightened scholars would speak about the disappearance of magical superstitions as a desired result of the accumulation of knowledge and the development of sciences. Even nineteenth-century anthropologists, such as Edward B. Tylor and James Frazer, would create a scholarly paradigm assuming a linear development from magic through religion to science.² These expectations, in fact, have not been fulfilled so far, and by now cultural theory and the social sciences have virtually given up the hope. One should add that it has also become unusual to mechanically identify magic and the occult with scanty superstitions.

Trying to map the place of magic in the complex of human culture, E. M. Butler claimed that she did not want to define it in any restrictive way as “pseudo-science,” or “pretended art,” or “debased religion” (1980, 2). Instead, she approached magic as an independent, self-contained discipline that naturally connects to other areas of human intellectual activity. This standpoint locates Butler among those intellectual historians who in this century step by step broke with the views of patronizing positivist anthropology that labeled magic as outdated irrational misapprehension. The seriously focused scientific interest in magic, however, was only the first step of a new understanding. It did not question the notion originating in the seventeenth-century paradigm shift of the Scientific Revolution, according to which human thinking had two irreconcilable and separate tracks, the discursive-rationalistic way of science and the mystical-irrational way of magic.

It was especially the opposing movements of Romanticism and positivism around the middle of the last century that emphasized this fatal antagonism. The scientists interpreted esoteric attitudes as a kind of primitive phase in the development of mankind, which, in the course of intellectual progress, necessarily had to give way to logical thinking and the experimental sciences. The adepts of the spiritual approach, on the other hand, excluded discursive logic and historical thinking from their field. Let us compare, for example, two opposing early nineteenth-century opinions:

The improvements that have been effected in natural philosophy have by degrees convinced the enlightened part of mankind that the material universe is every where subject to laws, fixed in their weight, measure, and duration, capable of the most exact calculation, and which in no case admit of variation and exception. Beside this, mind, as well as matter, is subject to fixed laws; and thus every phenomenon and occurrence around us is rendered a topic for the speculation of sagacity and

foresight. Such is the creed which science has universally prescribed to the judicious and reflecting among us.

It was otherwise in the infancy and less mature state of human knowledge. The chain of causes and consequences was yet unrecognized; and events perpetually occurred, for which no sagacity that was then in being was able to assign an original. Hence men felt themselves habitually disposed to refer many of the appearances with which they were conversant to the agency of invisible intelligences. (Godwin 1834, 1–2)

At about the same time as William Godwin's proclamation of scientism, Mary Atwood was already working on her voluminous summary of esoteric philosophy, which was finally anonymously published in 1850. Due to a religious revelation and a moral panic, she later considered her book too dangerous for the general public and took great pains to suppress the edition. The text has, however, survived and provides us with an interesting insight into that mode of thinking that seems to have changed so remarkably little from Hermes Trismegistus through Paracelsus, Jakob Boehme, and Swedenborg to Atwood herself, Rudolf Steiner, Madame Blavatsky, and indeed to many of our own contemporaries. Speaking about alchemy, Atwood asserted its reality as follows: "But many things have in like manner been considered impossible which increasing knowledge has proved true. . . ." This may sound nearly like scientism but the second part of the sentence touches upon the theme which is common in all esoteric thinking:

. . . and others which still to common sense appear fictitious were believed in former times, when faith was more enlightened and the sphere of vision open to surpassing effects. Daily observation even now warns us against setting limits to nature. [. . .] The philosophy of modern times, more especially that of the present day, consists in experiment and such scientific researches as may tend to ameliorate our social condition, or be otherwise useful in contributing to the ease and indulgences of life; whereas in the original acception, philosophy had quite another sense: it signified the Love of Wisdom. (Atwood 1918, v–vii)

Clinging to her counterscientific and irrational principle, she did not see much use in employing a systematic historical approach when studying and explaining the hermetic philosophy. Her following statement clearly shows the romantic disgust with the then also fashionable piecemeal positivism:

Nothing, perhaps, is less worthy or more calculated to distract the mind from points of real importance than this very question of temporal ori-

gin, which, when we have taken all pains to satisfy and remember, leaves us no wiser in reality than we were before. (Atwood 1918, 3)

Looking back to the nineteenth century, we can observe that the more the positivist enthusiasts of the scientific and industrial revolutions asserted the notion of linear progress and heralded man's victory over nature, the more the adepts and mystics became imbued with the search for forgotten, hermetic knowledge.

FROM SCIENCE HISTORY TO CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

I want to make clear from the outset that unlike Mary Atwood, I do think is vital to situate our discourse in history. Consequently, when writing a book on the intellectual patterns of Renaissance magic and its representative, John Dee, I find it important to reflect on the historiography of the subject by looking at the intertextually connected chain of interpretations offered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Modern metadisciplines, in the humanities but even in the natural sciences, have been expressing a growing suspicion of claims for absolute validity. In cultural theory, weighty arguments have been put forward to subvert the earlier scholarly self-assurance. To begin with, post-structuralism on the whole (from hermeneutics through deconstructivism, reader-response theory, and new historicism, whether idealist or Marxist) has rejected the basic assumption of old historicism that the past can and should be faithfully reconstructed. These trends have also increasingly considered the interpretation of historical "facts" as a kind of fictionalized narrative, a discourse, that is constructed in the field between the traditions in the possession of the narrator on the one hand, and by the often antagonistic individual and community interests at work on the other. In the light of Thomas Kuhn's propositions, it becomes particularly interesting to see the consequences of the above mentioned interpretive strategies in the history of science. The current propositions of social science theory have taught us to follow the principle: each fact or phenomenon has multiple sides and aspects and the same subject examined from different angles will produce different profiles. The problem is that our theory, even if we have one, will not be helpful in finding the ultimate correct interpretation. Thus, instead of enforcing selection and hierarchy over our subject, it seems desirable to introduce a polarity of viewpoints that will consider the *polyvalent* and *polysemic* character of each historical "fact."³

The historiography of Dee research faithfully mirrors the paradigm shift of historical and cultural theory. In his time John Dee was a respected scholar and although sometimes he was accused of being a "conjuror," even half a century after his death he was still remembered as "the wise doctor." The publication of his spiritual diaries by Meric Casaubon in 1659, however, especially in the light of the distrustful preface of the editor, gradually undermined his reputation and by the time of the Enlightenment he became considered, if at all, as a poor, credulous, and deluded philosopher who got stuck among the manipulations of his charlatan alchemist, Edward Kelly.⁴

Dee was not much mentioned then until the nineteenth century, when some historians unearthed his diaries and letters and, as part of a positivistic historical reconstruction of the Elizabethan age, published those (cf. Dee 1841, 1842, 1843, 1851, 1854, and 1880). While these papers were treated as important documents of their time, the evaluation of their author did not change, and the expressions "superstition," "delusion," and "obscure magic" were often used to describe him. Also the factual accounts of his life were mixed with anecdotes of dubious origin. It was not until 1909 that the first biography of Dee appeared by Charlotte Fell Smith. It gave a general picture about the Doctor, but since she was not a professional historian, much less a historian of science, Dee's scholarly activities were not treated in detail and his magic was interpreted hardly at all.

At that time the history of science had a teleological approach and only those achievements that pointed toward future developments of science were acknowledged. Everything else was dismissed as a failure or a dead end. With such a mentality the safest field from which to assess Dee's scholarship was that of geography and thus he earned an important place in E. G. R. Taylor's *Tudor Geography* (1930) and some generous mentions in F. R. Johnson's *Astronomical Thought in Renaissance England* (1937), especially as someone who, in his *Mathematicall Praeface*, usefully contributed to the creation of a mathematical vocabulary in the vernacular.

The situation had greatly changed by the middle of the century when, especially due to the research of the Warburg school (Franz Saxl, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Erwin Panofsky, Edgar Wind, and others), a radical reassessment of the intellectual climate of the Renaissance was undertaken. This new approach acknowledged the importance of the magical world picture in the "antechamber of the Enlightenment." The scholars working on this interpretation focused primarily on the neoplatonic revival of Ficino's Florentine Academy and its influence all over Europe in

the first half of the sixteenth century. A typical fruit of this approach was D. P. Walker's monograph *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (1958), which traced the development of neoplatonic magic in the works of Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Agrippa, Giordano Bruno, and others. Walker belonged to the Warburg school; in fact, he was a member of the Warburg Institute of London, as was his famous colleague Dame Frances Yates. The latter was an extremely imaginative and erudite scholar who became receptive to the new interpretation of the Renaissance and developed it into an attractive and arresting vision that was soon to be known as the "Yates thesis." If one tries to summarize her thesis in a few sentences, the following model emerges. As Ernst Cassirer had already stated in his groundbreaking study on the Renaissance (*The Individual and the Cosmos*, 1963 [1927]), the most important philosophical innovation of that period had been the redefinition of man's place in the universe. The basic framework—the Great Chain of Being—remained more or less the same until the late seventeenth century when man's place was no longer seen as being fixed anymore. Instead he was imagined as capable of moving along the Chain of Being, either ennobling and elevating himself to the level of God, or degrading and associating with the brute beasts. Following the footsteps of Cassirer, Kristeller, and others, Yates came to the conclusion that the neoplatonic philosophers of the Renaissance developed the idea of man's elevation not only from the works of Plato and the Hellenistic neoplatonists, but also, in fact primarily, from the hermetic texts, attributed to the "thrice great" Hermes Trismegistus. The Yates thesis also implied that the Renaissance magus was a direct predecessor of the modern natural scientist because, as the *Corpus hermeticum* suggested, the magus could regain the ability to rule over nature that the first man had lost with the Fall. While the magi of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were mostly individual researchers, their seventeenth-century followers, as Yates proposed, came to the idea of collective work and formed secret societies, such as the Rosicrucians. For a while these ideas seemed to revolutionize our understanding of the early modern age and the birth of modern science. In such a context the magical ideas that had previously been discarded by intellectual historians now appeared to be important ingredients of human ambitions to understand and conquer nature.

The changing concepts of the Renaissance influenced the appreciation of John Dee, too. Already in 1952 historian I. R. F. Calder had written a Ph.D. dissertation in which he had contextualized Dee's magic as a neoplatonist theory. Although this thesis remained unpublished (today,

however, it is available on the internet), it inspired Frances Yates to include Dee as a key figure in her narrative of the neoplatonic-hermetic Renaissance, and in fact Dee featured as a favorite character in all of her later books (1964, 1972, 1979). As a climax of this trend, in 1972, Peter French, a student of Frances Yates, wrote a full-size monograph devoted entirely to Dee in which he characterized the English doctor as a prototype of the Renaissance magus.

No matter how convincing the Yates thesis appeared and how eloquently it was presented by its author, by the mid-1970s critical refusals could also be heard. The debate included questions of philological accuracy; for example, scholars could not agree to what extent the hermetic texts influenced the magi of the sixteenth century, or to what extent Frances Yates' conjectures on humanist and secret political links between certain English intellectuals and the German Rosicrucians could be validated. One should remember that just in those years post-structuralism started proposing serious revisions in the theoretical framework of the study of intellectual history, and perhaps this turn of conceptualization did the most for a new interpretation of John Dee.⁵

The post-structuralist historians started reproving intellectual historians for attempting to simplify history into great, overall patterns in which differences and contradictions were neglected and overlooked for the sake of the coherence of the "grand narratives." Yates was also suspected of having reduced those Renaissance magi to unproblematic champions of hermetic neoplatonism, when in fact more complicated, often contradictory intellectual patterns should have been detected. In relation to Dee, it was Nicholas Clulee who in 1988 ventured into writing with the aim of displaying the wide spectrum of influences and programs at work in the course of the career of the Doctor. Clulee rebuked the shared concept of the Warburg/Yates school as follows:

what is common to these works is that all approach Dee as a problem of finding the correct intellectual tradition into which he appears to fit, both as a way of making sense of his disparate and often difficult to understand works and activities and as a way of establishing his importance by associating him with an intellectual context of recognized importance for sixteenth-century and later intellectual developments. (1988, 3)

In his own presentation Clulee has managed to establish a dynamic picture as opposed to the more static previous image of the hermetic

magus. He also differentiated among various periods in Dee's career during which his intellectual outlook as well as the direction of his attention changed. Clulee particularly emphasized the medieval origins, such as al-Kindi and Roger Bacon, at the foundations of Dee's magical experiments.

The importance of the Yates/French interpretations lay in the recognition of magic as worthy of history of science investigations. They thus legitimized a preoccupation that had previously been considered mere obscurantism. Building on this legitimization of magic as a focus of inquiry, Clulee highlighted the diachronic reorientation during Dee's career and brought into the discussion the medieval roots of sixteenth century magic and science that had been overshadowed by the Yatesian enthusiasm for neoplatonic hermeticism.⁶ The next phase in the course of Dee studies was heralded by William Sherman's monograph of 1995, *The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance*, in which the author revealed a synchronic multiplicity in Dee's diverse interests and activities. If one contrasts the last three important opinions on Dee in modern scholarship—that of Yates/French, Clulee, and Sherman—one sees that each of them has contributed at least one important proposal to our understanding of Renaissance magic and its famous English practitioner. While looking at this historiographical line, we see a direction of scholarship moving from a somewhat static and simplistic interpretation of "Dee as an English magus" toward a more complex contextualization in intellectual history, in which elements of discontinuity have become emphasized and in which the originally proposed "master narrative" has become subverted by more and more—often conflicting and contradictory—subtexts.

It is interesting to notice to what extent the different orientations of scholarship determined even the possible range of questions and subject areas which a work on Dee could examine. As is well known, in his early career the Doctor had a humanistic orientation and concentrated on mathematics, but from the 1580s he gave up these endeavors and almost entirely involved himself with angel magic, or in his own terminology "angelic conversations." Researchers have been perplexed by the apparently sudden turn which transformed the venerable scientist into an eccentric enthusiast. Approaches from the viewpoint of the history of science—which, until recently constituted the majority of Dee scholarship—found this phenomenon difficult to come to terms with, and at best a superficial explanation was advanced, according to which the humanist became disappointed with the rational principles and logic of science and—not unlike Doctor Faustus, although avoiding the direct

contact with Satan—could only imagine achieving his intellectual goals with the help of supernatural powers.⁷ Very few efforts have been made to embrace both Dee's scientific experiments and his angel magic in their entirety and interconnectedness, especially given that such an examination would seem to promise little benefit for historians of science. Until recently, interpreters of Dee's magic have tried to underline the importance of magic as a vital precondition to the scientific revolution, and with this consideration in mind, Frances Yates invented the term "Rosicrucian Enlightenment" (cf. Yates 1968 and 1972).

As I have mentioned, the Yates thesis was challenged by historians of science, and although Clulee (1988) and Sherman (1995) have to some extent successfully restored Dee's place in the distinguished portrait gallery of science history, this restoration hardly includes his magic. My suggestion is to shift the focus of interest from the history of science to cultural anthropology and the history of mentality, inverting the usual question—"which elements of Dee's complex and largely unscientific ideas contributed to the development of modern science?"—by asking "in what way Dee's scientific activity inspired his visionary and occult program?" Seeking the company of angels may seem an eccentric monomania for the enlightened researcher; indeed, some historians have even suggested that Dee had become mentally ill (cf. Heilbronn, in Dee 1978, 15 and 43). By contrast, anthropologists and historians of mentality have learned how deep the roots of occult thinking were in the world picture of the sixteenth century.⁸ Among the most recent contributions to Dee scholarship, it is Debora Harkness whose approach seems to combine the historical and the anthropological concerns and thus her interpretation runs quite close to my own. Although I became acquainted with her book of 1999 only at the stage when I had nearly completed my monograph, I shall reflect on her suggestions in the following discussion.

Looking at the relationship between magic and science in the early modern age, it would be a simplification to claim, as Frances Yates did, that Renaissance neoplatonist magic, let alone hermeticism, fostered the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in a direct way. On the other hand, it is possible to say that in the works (as well as in the minds) of Dee and his fellow scientists/magi, layers of discursive logic and irrationalism, scientific thinking and occultism, happily coexisted in a variety of ways that would be dangerous to generalize. Each case should be approached individually: some of them entertained magical concepts that complemented their scientific thinking (Giordano Bruno, Francis Bacon); in others the two orientations showed an almost total

discontinuity (Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton); in still other cases science and magic were intermixed in a somewhat disorderly concoction (Paracelsus), and in Dee's case it seems that his magical ideas totally absorbed his scientific orientation, although in his middle career one can still see independently functioning subsystems in his thought (e.g., his interest in geography or his ideas about the publicity of science). To handle such a complexity of ideology and ideas, one needs to analyze the intellectual and the psychological constitution of the investigated subject as well as the philosophical and social contexts in which he was situated. At present, it seems to me, historical anthropology and post-structuralist iconology can offer the most fruitful methodologies to cope with this task.

THE POST-COMMUNIST PERSPECTIVE

In the year 2000, what can a scholar coming from Eastern Europe offer? Perhaps a few sentences about the background of my Dee research may be appropriate here. As I have already pointed out, I consider the historiographical aspect of great importance, especially to monitor the transitions that led from the negative attitude of the last century's positivists to the understanding of today's historians. For East-Central Europeans this process is particularly significant, since the establishment of officially enforced Marxist theory after World War II has made us particularly sensitive to nuances of theoretical grounding. Since state-promoted Marxism was almost exclusively interested in economic and social history with an emphasis on class struggle and a typological prefiguration of future revolutions, historical research in several fields became cut off from the main trends of Western scholarship during the 1950s and 1960s. It happened particularly in intellectual history, but also in the history of mentality and historical anthropology. The examination of areas that would testify to the inherent role of a "superstitious" misconception such as magic in a "progressive" age like the Renaissance was at best not encouraged in the centers of historical research and the syllabi of higher education listed more important issues on the agenda—such as the fight of the repressed for a better life and for liberation from ideological manipulation—than the investigation of the stubborn persistence of premodern ideas. Interestingly, this homophonic Marxism suppressed even the reception of alternative Marxist concepts. Thus, not only intellectual history and the analysis of cultural symbolization remained beyond the horizon of our historians, but so did the works of radical writers such as

the early Foucault, whose works otherwise would have been available from the 1960s.

Although Renaissance research in Hungary was less affected by the official party ideology than other, more contemporary fields of history, the elimination of the mentioned white spots could only start in the mid-1970s, and only with small steps. Scholars such as the late Tibor Klaniczay did a lot to disassociate period styles from the labels "progressive" or "reactionary," thus enabling, for example, a balance within Baroque research in general, or an examination of the shadowy side of the Renaissance under the banner of Mannerism (cf. Klaniczay 1977). In this engagement the propositions of the Yates school came in more than handy and greatly refreshed the research topics as well as the vocabulary of our Renaissance scholarship. It should be noted here that the newly discovered intellectual history in East-Central Europe became not only a research tool and a theoretical orientation but also a means of ideological resistance against the grim, official party line. I set about examining John Dee and Renaissance occultism with this motivation in mind.

From the early 1980s, as a young scholar, I was applying for scholarships to the West with the intention of learning more not only about the facts, which were not readily available in Hungary, but also about the methods and theories that seemed so balanced, objective, and wide in spectrum compared with what was practiced at home. Without a party membership, of course, it was not easy to get such a stipend. After a brief visit in 1984, I finally received a Fulbright grant which in 1986 enabled me to get to the sources in the Folger and the Huntington Libraries.

One can imagine my enthusiasm arriving at those shrines of learning I had heard so much about, and also how stunned I was in realizing that the approach I wanted to follow was just going out of fashion. It was enough to buy Raman Selden's *The Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* and see that as opposed to twenty-eight pages on Marxist theories (the book has 149 pages) no (sub)chapter was devoted to any form of intellectual history. The preface explained: "I have not tried to give a comprehensive picture of modern critical theory. I have omitted, for example, myth criticism, which has a long and various history, and includes the work of such writers as Gilbert Murray, James Frazer, Carl Jung, and Northrop Frye. It seemed to me that myth criticism has not entered the main stream of academic or popular culture, and has not challenged received ideas."⁹ A look at the programs of talks and seminars at the libraries where I spent my time warned me that with new historicism and feminism on the offensive, I could hardly hope for sympathetic support towards my interests. I

witnessed an enormous divergence between the nature of the bulk of the books available at those libraries and the scholarly discourse I came across in the lobbies or during coffee breaks.¹⁰

This abrupt paradigm shift in literary scholarship can be well illustrated by Norman Rabkin's words, which, although they refer to Shakespeare criticism, can easily be extrapolated to most researched authors and literary periods:

Only yesterday it was widely assumed that the critic's job was to expound the meaning of literary works. Today, under an extraordinarily swift and many fronted attack, that consensus is in ruins. The reader-response theories argued in various ways by such critics as Stanley Fish and Norman Holland call into question the power of an imaginative work to elicit a uniform response from its audience; Jacques Derrida and his deconstructive allies see language and art so intractably self-reflexive as to be incapable of analyzable significance; Harold Bloom argues that all reading is misreading, that one reads well only to find oneself in the mirror.¹¹

Since the time of its publication, Rabkin's examples have become outdated in the context of the present post-structuralist vogue, but his diagnosis still has the same startling validity. The problem is still not "why there is so much bad criticism," but "much more importantly: why is much of the best criticism vulnerable to attacks of the new critical trends, so that the kinds of theoretical rejection of critical study I mentioned at the outset have been able to find so ready an audience?" (Rabkin 1981, 4).

From 1986 onward I have developed an understanding of a great many of the concerns post-structuralists raised against traditional criticism, especially against close reading and the history of ideas. I myself have become aware of the reductionist dangers of explaining cultural phenomena from a set ideological framework, although I (and other Eastern European scholars) had suffered more from Marxist reductionism than the so-called "bourgeois idealist" or "humanist" approaches. In fact, I did find that new historicism could be suitably used as a weapon against the stalemate approaches that were to be changed in the East Bloc around 1990. And I have also learned that one of the strengths of post-structuralist approaches is that they can successfully reveal the politics of interpretation. Capitalizing on this insight, as an outsider, I would like to propose to revisit some of the fields of the historiographical battles.

It may seem surprising, but at this point, after the above historiographical and theoretical excursus, I would like to advocate a kind of

cautious return to the Yatesian “master narrative,” albeit with some modifications. While the above described diversification of the historical understanding of Dee has made me sensitive to the subtleties of our researched subject, alongside these I have become convinced that nonetheless there was little or no changes in the central concern of Dee’s philosophical investigations. In spite of the various activities and diverse theoretical approaches he applied, I see a permanent and invariable feature that characterized all his works and actions. This was a fervent desire for omniscience in order to understand the divine plan of creation and God’s intentions with the cosmos and man. His ambition was to use his knowledge for elevating himself to the level of God, thus realizing the potential granted in the Genesis: “And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion [. . .] over all the earth. So God created Man in his own image, in the image of God created he him” (Genesis 1:26–27). To describe this ambition I use the concept of *exaltatio*, as I shall explain it in the following introductory chapters. Parallel to my view, Deborah Harkness used another, similar metaphor, found also in the Bible: she compared Dee’s natural philosophical orientation to building Jacob’s ladder. This mytho-icon supported the ideology that communication between heaven and earth was possible, and as Harkness notes, “Dee, along with many of his contemporaries, searched a variety of authoritative treatises for information on how to ascend ‘Jacob’s ladder’ to learn the secrets of the cosmos, and then descend to share that information with the waiting world” (1999, 60).

In the followings I am thus going to approach Dee as a “magus” who had an amazingly wide range of interests but who also increasingly had a focused obsession, a magical program, not necessarily to improve the sciences in order to prepare for the scientific revolution, but rather to find an alternative system of knowledge. Since Dee clearly distinguished between science after the Fall and that of the primordial wisdom (the “radicall truthes” as he called it), we have to take seriously the fact that here we are really talking about *alternative* systems of knowledge. His aim was to restore the Adamic or Enochian wisdom of the Golden Age that had been lost with the Fall and which would not be compatible with the methods and means of the fallen science relying on discursive logic. Dee’s program was by no means exceptional in the intellectual spectrum of the late Renaissance but in its compactness—together with its variety—it remains certainly outstanding.

The examination of magic is pertinent in our age, too. It is a challenging but also disturbing task to assess how our frustrated civilization

with its relativistic views looks at a system of knowledge that, since the advent of rationalism, has been professing a declared alternative to analytical thinking. It is notable, at the same time, to what extent this alternative system has had a fundamental and orthodox nature, remaining practically unchanged for long centuries. In spite of its rigid doctrines, however, it invests the world with a multiplicity of meanings that for its believers and researchers seems inexhaustible. I am going to examine the paradoxical relationship of literature, culture, science, and the occult, concentrating on the epoch of the Renaissance, which witnessed the crystalization of the esoteric philosophy, parallel to the birth of Cartesian logic and modern experimentation.

It is intriguing to examine the parallel rise of two such contrary world pictures between which we can still observe intricate cross-fertilization. I am suggesting that occult philosophy and magic to some extent have catalyzed the development of experimental sciences—by now this has become a commonplace in science history—at the same time they have fostered a subversive approach that in fact prevented the ultimate conquest by the logical-rational world picture. Thus it contributed to the survival of a symbolic language, with some pathos one might say, and to the continuous rebirth of poetry. It is because of this effect that I propose an investigation into the ideology and iconography of occult philosophy.

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