The Tyranny of Print

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This whole train of thought got started by reading usenet posts from people arguing about books. It put me in mind of an incident a few years ago when I was at an 'occult study group' in Norwich. The topic under discussion for the evening was scrying, and the guy leading the session was going to take us through the basics. He had this little book by Leo Vinci, and literally treated it like 'holy writ' … "the book says this… the book says that". When asked a question about other methods he said "that isn't in the book". It was a bit like one of those Planet of the Apes film where the last survivors of humanity are worshipping a kid's book and stone people to death for daring to go against it.

One of my continuing rants about books on magic is that they are often delivered as hard fact. This is HOW IT IS DONE (according to tradition, my order, my inner planes contact, holy guardian angel, the gods, secret chiefs, red Indian shamans etc. etc.), usually backed up with some kind of warning about the consequences of deviating from the rules. "It is extremely dangerous to draw this sigil upside down". Related to this is the assertion that "magic is a science", usually backed up by much invocation of Jung and Quantum Physics. But what kind of 'science' are we talking about here? Somehow I don't think it's the kind of science where wild-eyed professors smoke opium get stunning ideas about engineering principles by watching spiders spinning a web. No, it's the science we were taught in school, where some leather-elbowed teacher hammers into your head the rules of basic chemistry or physics. It's about learning the rules - and following them to the letter.

Now if I say "magic is about following rules" then (hopefully) anyone reading this is going start jumping up and down and disagreeing. But it's very easy to fall into the mindset of approaching magic as though it was just a question of 'rules' and this becomes immediately apparent on the internet, particularly if you spend some time lurking on newsgroups and e-lists. People are looking for the 'right' way of doing something. The 'right ritual' (and rituals tend to be scripts - things to follow) and the 'right' book that will unlock the secrets of the universe for them. It's easy to say "well these people are missing the point" but it's something that reflects the western educational system - which more or less embeds the attitude that "books tell us what to do."

When Chaos Magic came along in the late 1970's it's early advocates started upsetting the occult applecart by questioning the rules-based approach to magic that, until then, hadn't had much in the way of critical attention. An early Chaos clarion call was "let's focus on technique rather than all the crap that surrounds it." In so doing, there was a separation made between techniques (do a, b, and c and 'x' may be the result) and the surrounding mesh of beliefs, explanations and justifications that are presented as 'occult theory'. Chaos Magicians went on to annoy even more people by asserting that magic was not made up of 'facts' but opinions, which are far more fuzzy, and so the occult tendency to absolutism was banished (for some people at least) by the phrase, "Nothing is True, everything is permitted."

For me, the whole point of Chaos Magic is that it encourages people to "think outside the box". The box being, in this case, the 'received wisdom' of modern occultism that is concerned, ultimately, with sticking to the rules of what should - and shouldn't be done. I came slap up against the boundaries of 'the box' when I was training in dramatherapy. I can remember going to visit the magical group I was then a member of and saying "this stuff has so many parallels with magic, we could try some of it out!" and the answer coming back "that's not part of our tradition". Which is why Chaos Magic texts were a breath of fresh air for me, and why I then wanted to pass on my own observations on the subject.

Doubtless someone reading this is thinking "Well, rules are there for a reason, you know. You shouldn't start messing around with them just because you disagree with them." And this is more or less what the anti-Chaos lobby said (and are still saying, particularly as the very term 'chaos' indicates a certain laxity when it comes to rules, if not utter anarchy, riots in the streets, the growth of deviant sexual practices and the total collapse of civilisation as we know it). Time for a computing metaphor, I think. There are hardware and application rules.

Hardware rules are the ones you don't really want to screw around with unless you really know the territory, where if you plug the wrong lead into the wrong socket your computer will in all likelihood stop working. Then there's application rules, which constitutes a whole different ballgame, because whereas hardware doesn't need much human intervention to get on with it's job (providing it's been plugged together properly in the first place) applications like spreadsheets, dtp packages and email programmes just sit there until humans get involved with them. The other day, a colleague at work asked me, "how do I do 'this' with 'that'." After about ten minutes of me waxing enthusiastically "she said "so there are three ways of doing 'that' - which way is the best way?" To which I replied, "It's up to you - there's also 'this way' which isn't in the manual but works just as well". My point being here, that when human beings are involved, rules get fuzzy and are often undocumented, so that you only get to discover what they are by trying things out and occasionally getting things wrong. And magic, at least for me, is very much in this category. And therein lies a problem. Not everyone is comfortable with fuzziness.

My observations indicate that some people, at least, are concerned with 'getting it right first time', possibly because they don't want to bother experimenting, working stuff out for themselves, or possibly because they think that getting it wrong might incur dire cosmic consequences. Again, the situation is rather akin to computer applications. Sit some people down in front of a new application and they'll instantly reach for the manual and start reading at page one. Others will spend a good few minutes 'poking' the software to see what it does. It seems to me that some people do want magic to be made up of facts, and underlying this is a desire for it to be 'True'. Truth (with a big T) in this sense isn't merely true for me or you, it's 'True' for everyone, in the same way that, like it or not, Christianity is True - at least according to the street preachers I pass on the way to work every day.

The occult 'Truth' game itself has certain well-defined rules. It goes like this; if I assert that x is True, then you cannot question it, because I am speaking from the lofty heights of my (a) higher initiation (b) inner-planes contact (c) secret tradition, etc. If you do question it, you're not merely questioning my opinion, but calling into question a, b, or c. So I can fly into a foaming rage and flame-mail you to a crisp (at least on the net). Furthermore, you're only disagreeing because you're not a, b, or c like what I am, so you don't know any better. Whilst believing that magical opinions are facts or True can be quite comforting, particularly if one is just beginning to dip into all this stuff, it can also be quite limiting in the long-term, because you just end up following someone else's trail rather than blazing your own. And books on magic are when it comes down to it, someone else's trail. Which isn't to say that they should be avoided or shunned. You can learn a lot from reading about other people's experiences, and trying their opinions on for size. The problem starts when you start treating books as more than just collections of opinions, speculations and anecdotes.