



Iain McCalman

The Last Alchemist
ISBN13: 978006006914

The Spell of Magic in Popular Culture

Given the length of time magic has been declining, it is proving unconscionably difficult to kill. Throughout western history no system of beliefs and practices has been attacked more intensively. From at least the first to the sixteenth centuries, magic's dangerous and supposedly Oriental irrationalisms were subjected to intensive intellectual and legal proscription (as well as some assimilation) by both orthodox Judaism and Christianity. Thereafter, secular rational ideas in the form of Enlightenment philosophy and experimental science also began to lend their growing authority to this attack. As a result of this unholy alliance, the death of magic within modern western culture has been much predicted and many times celebrated.

True, magic as a set of technically or manually-induced illusions performed for money has been largely exempted from this historical assault. *Popular Enchantments*, a brilliant recent book by John Hopkins academic Simon During, has argued, for example, that the assemblage of performative tricks and optical special effects he calls 'secular magic' has deeply influenced mass culture, and especially the cinema within it. The latter finds its modern origins in spectacular performances by 18th- and 19th-century showmen using magic lanterns and associated optical devices. By the beginning of the 20th century, show-business magicians like George Méliès in France and Harry Houdini (Ehrich Weiss) in the United States were incorporating into their repertoires short narrative films showing fantastic illusions and breathtaking special effects. True to type, Harry Houdini took the pioneering process one step further in 1921 by founding his own movie company, the Houdini Picture Corporation, which went on to feature him in daredevil escape thrillers such as *Haldane of the Secret Service*.

Showbiz magic of this kind flourished because it provided commercially-based entertainment that appealed to a broad range of viewers and because its exponents went to considerable lengths to repudiate their profession's unrespectable mirror image-magic as a system of supernatural beliefs and rituals. Indeed, early 19th-century commercial showmen such as Etienne Gaspard Robertson, a French pioneer of magic lantern ghost-shows or 'fantasmagorie,' made a booming career out of replicating and exposing the illusions supposedly used by the most famous occult magician of the 18th century, Count Alessandro di Cagliostro.

In the early 20th century, Harry Houdini launched a similar campaign against what he claimed were the frauds and delusions practiced in the seances of the then influential occult-religious movement of spiritualism. He staged a number of celebrated newspaper challenges designed to expose the eerie effects generated by leading American and British spiritualists. In the process, he damaged his own formerly close friendship with a devout believer, Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of that consummate showman detective, Sherlock Holmes. Houdini told Doyle sorrowfully that he only wished spiritualism was true because it would enable him to make contact with his own beloved mother, Cecilia Weiss.

Ironically, it was thus occult or superstitious magic rather than its gaudy showbiz counterpart that, under the combined assault of religion and science, acquired a reputation for being vulgar, duplicitous and outmoded. In 1973 an influential book by the Oxford historian Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, charted with scholarly detail how western folk beliefs in witches, fairies and the evil eye had from the 17th century gradually dwindled to become the province of a fringe of superstitious plebeians and barmy counter-cultural dreamers. Thirty years on, however, the unexpected mass success of a new thriller by Dan Brown called *The Da Vinci Code* seems to suggest that popular magic is not so passé after all. As an object of mass cultural fascination, occult magic has, it seems, declined all the way to the bank.

Dan Brown's novel, which builds on two centuries of western esoteric history to reveal the supposedly suppressed and pagan magical origins of modern Christianity, has already sold more than six million copies and is causing a feeding frenzy among publishers of occult and religious history works, eager to hunt in its backwash. The usual bloated penumbra of movies, television documentaries, video games and musicals is well on the way. And Brown's is only the latest in a crop of recent mass-media hits based on the underlying appeal of supernatural magic. As well as feeding the cult of Harry Potter, which even Dan Brown will have difficulty surpassing, magical thinking informs such generically varied hit movies as *The Matrix* cyber-trilogy, the mystical Euro-American romance *Chocolat* and, of course, Peter Jackson's stunning rendition of Tolkien's fairy fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*.

Brown's book has fomented a crackling debate in the electronic and print media. Defenders and critics of *The Da Vinci Code* contest the book's historical claims with unusual vehemence for what is, after all, a work of fiction in an avowedly entertainment genre — the thriller. But for pro-Christian commentators in particular there is much at stake. Flaunting scholarly credentials, the novel purports to unmask a centuries-old Church conspiracy to eradicate the secret, pagan-inspired and women-centered nature of the Christian story. It is an appealing idea, and not a new one, but at the very least Dan Brown's storming success threatens to carry the ancient subversive traditions of the Gnostics out of the fringes of barmy bookshops and into the mainstream. As the chief modern-day representative of orthodox Christianity, Catholicism is Brown's particular target: both the Vatican and the modern-day conservative society Opus Dei emerge from the novel, if not as outright villains, then as tarnished by association.

None of this ought to matter in a detective thriller, but both Brown in his introduction and many critics in their reviews make serious claims for the book's historical research. Neither he nor they are troubled about the cavalier way that such works erase the already hazy boundary between fiction and history. Church scholars and intellectuals are beginning to realize, therefore, that they must mobilize. However slight and slanted Brown's scholarship might appear, it will need to be combated. Otherwise — like the claims of the Holocaust denier, David Irving — Brown's anti-Catholic aspersions may well become gospel truth to millions of Americans. The Church's challenge, though, will be to find as appealing a package for their defences as *The Da Vinci Code*. We can look forward to the appearance of a crop of scholar nuns and urbane Jesuit snoops. Perhaps the English writer G. K. Chesterton's omniscient 30s' detective, Father Brown S.J., may find himself reborn. If so, his name is sure to be seen as a satire on the author of *The Da Vinci Code*.

In 1789, the portentous opening year of the French Revolution, one of the leading intellectuals of the Roman Catholic Inquisition, a Jesuit priest named Father Marcello (alias Monsignor Barberi) confronted a similar problem. He was addressing the vast celebrity that had blossomed around an unlettered Sicilian pimp and forger, Giuseppe Balsamo, who called himself Count Alessandro Cagliostro. Not only had Cagliostro's feats as a magician, alchemist and faith healer attracted elite supporters in every major country of Europe, but his bogus Egyptian freemasonic order was also — the Vatican believed — hatching an immense brood of terrorist secret societies dedicated to destroying throne and altar. The Vatican saw the recent outbreak of revolution in France as a case in point. Here, then, was a real-life conspiracy on the scale of that uncovered in *The Da Vinci Code*. Indeed, the two conspiracies seem to have shared at least one common historical agent: Brown's chief secret society, the Priory of Sion, and Cagliostro's Egyptian Freemasons are both supposed to have been the underground remnants of a suppressed medieval crusading order called the Knights of the Templar. In Cagliostro's case, though, it was the secrets of alchemy rather than Brown's 'sacred cult of the feminine' that his organization was supposed to have protected.

Ironically, given Brown's aspersions, the Roman Catholic Inquisition of two hundred years ago already believed the claims of magic to be archaic. Writing in an official Vatican publication distributed all over Europe, Father Marcello puzzled at the atavistic triumphs of the masonic magician Cagliostro. 'Who could have imagined that a man of his description should have been received with respect in some of the most enlightened cities of Europe? That he should have been regarded as a star propitious in the human race, as a new prophet, and as a type and representation of the Divinity? That he should have approached thrones? That haughty grandees should have become his humble suitors, and nobles paid him the most profound veneration?' Marcello could only attribute the spread of such absurdities to the faith-sapping effects of Protestant ministers and sceptical philosophers.

A Scottish contemporary, the astute and acerbic writer Thomas Carlyle, offered a more secular and historical explanation for Cagliostro's extraordinary success. He, too, was bemused that a pseudo-magician without brains or looks had been able to beguile some of the greatest minds of the age of reason, at a time when industrial technology was transforming the economy and experimental science the academy. His answer was that hunger had disordered the minds of the European lower orders, reform had made the middle orders restless, and the seductions of reason had smashed the faith and morale of the nobility. Into this vacuum had come peddlers of wonder like Cagliostro, a quack who made the age his own. Magic in his hands was less an atavism than a modish quick-fix for papering over moral and political emptiness. Cagliostro, in short, was the emblem of modernity: Carlyle concluded his own savage history of the French Revolution by having the magician prophesy the sorry new world to come.

A century after the French Revolution another brilliant European intellectual advanced a similar thesis in a sprawling, complex, occult thriller called *Foucault's Pendulum*. And though its author, Italian Professor of semiotics Umberto Eco, also excoriated Cagliostro, he shared the magician's proclivity for prophecy. Just as Cagliostro famously predicted the razing of France's Bastille, Eco's novel appears to have satirised Brown's *Da Vinci Code* some twenty five years before it was published.

Foucault's Pendulum tells the story of three cynical publisher-intellectuals who decide to perpetrate a giant literary hoax by feeding two thousand years of esoteric history into a computer in order to manufacture the ultimate occult secret. This will explain the links between all hitherto unconnected secret societies, and synthesise all hitherto unsolved occult mysteries. Their uncovered ur- secret is that the earth possesses 'telluric' powers which can be tapped to control all mental and physical phenomena. More important, the plotters themselves gradually begin to believe both in the truth of their secret and the fact that it is being protected by a group of ruthless global conspirators. Ultimately, all three fall victim to their own pseudo-conspiracy. Eco's coded message is that his heroes have become entrapped by mankind's delusional lust to find secret connections between all things. The addictive power of the occult lies in the fact that the processes of secret making and secret breaking are insatiable. Each secret uncovered only reveals a further secret — in an infinite regression. Magic has always held out the promise to reveal what is occluded and invisible — the proverbial turtle under the surface of the water on which the world rests — but what if there are only turtles all the way down, forever and ever?

At least at the level of the surface there are some intriguing parallels between the two novels. Eco, like Brown, presents an alliance of three heroes pursued by a tough policeman who may well be implicated in the occult conspiracy that has entangled them all. Both novels launch their plots (in all senses of the word) from Paris: Brown's thriller, being art oriented, opens in the Louvre Gallery at night; Eco's, which has a scientific slant, is situated in the midnight halls of the Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers. Both cultural institutions, heavy with symbolism, become the sites of bizarre murders. Both novels track a desperate race between their protagonists and an unnamed group of villains to uncover an ancient occult secret that has been protected by a succession of secret societies. The Knights of the Templar feature prominently in each, though Dan Brown's claim that this secret society was pledged to protect the real identity of the Holy Grail as the cult of Mary Magdalene is only one among a plethora of occult theories surveyed by Eco.

There the resemblance ends. Brown has written entirely within the generic conventions of a fast-paced thriller; Eco's novel is much closer to a wry parody — and *The Da Vinci Code* might easily have been its target. Eco's novel tilts, for example, against the tendency in modern culture to confuse fiction with reality, a confusion exhibited by many of Brown's readers, if not the author himself. Brown's knowledge of esoteric history is at best superficial and always tendentious; Eco took the trouble to buy and read 1500 books on occultism from ten cities and three countries in order to complete his research. His book is a giant compendium of occult lore and learning, much of it disguised and some of it invented — and, of course, he believes none of it. Brown's tone is positivist, that of an earnest scholar who is convinced he has uncovered the real bedrock of truth. His fictional protagonists, and possibly Brown himself, believe that they are unveiling a genuine historical conspiracy. This is exactly the social pathology that Eco's book was designed to expose.

Foucault's Pendulum is really an extended illustration of the elusive and allusive meaning of signs, and of the strange human compulsion to connect everything together to create universal cosmic explanations. In the world of occult secrets and their decodings there can be no closure, no ultimately satisfactory revelation. It has been well said by the novelist academic, David Lodge, that every decoding is a new encoding; and so it is proving with *The Da Vinci Code*. A glance at the proliferating web correspondence about the novel reveals that it is breeding a fission of ever more Byzantine conspiracy theories. Learned articles exposing the errors in Brown's scholarship will do nothing to check this unstoppable process, and his book will, quite justifiably, be further publicised in the process.

Elsewhere, Eco's writings on the semiotics of modern mass culture are more explicit as to why various forms of occultism will continue to burgeon in our time. He diagnoses a fascination with occult secret societies like the Templars and Rosicrucians as one manifestation of a ubiquitous neo-medieval nostalgia (and of which he, as the author of several medieval novels, must surely be a beneficiary). The victims of such nostalgia, he implies, are the socially sad, psychically dislocated and intellectually confused of our day. Earlier counterparts in 1930's Germany were beguiled by the kindred anti-semitic conspiracy theory of the 'Elders of Zion', touted by a shabby Viennese painter called Adolph Hitler. Bewildered by the pace of modern change, disturbed by the dessicating influences of postmodern thought, intimidated by the complexities of modern scientific and technological achievement, the magically minded believe that the real cosmic truth is being withheld from them, and they look back longingly to a golden age of unity and simplicity when it was supposedly known.

Such people, Eco argues, inevitably fall prey to latter-day Cagliostros — preachers of the crisis of reason, television clairvoyants, builders

of castles of salvation, knights errant slaughtering conspiratorial dragons. In essence, occult conspiracy theorists share the mentality of political populists; they are the intellectually insecure who feel excluded from the established knowledge system. Magic has always promised to reveal a universal solvent and panacea, and in the social circumstances of our time such offers will never lose their lustre.

Yet Eco's bleak anatomy cannot surely apply to all the vast and variegated consumers of *The Da Vinci Code*, let alone of *The Matrix* or *The Lord of the Rings*. His hostility to the Cagliostros of our time has perhaps blinded him to more positive aspects of the esoteric tradition. One suspects that audience surveys of Brown's novel would also reveal a considerable quantum of the rich, the successful, the psychically adjusted and the intellectually sophisticated — the counterparts, indeed, of many who are known to have admired Count Cagliostro two centuries ago. What attracts people of this kind to magic?

A great émigré German intellectual of the 1930s, Walter Benjamin, offers one clue: he saw Cagliostro not as a quick-fix quack but a counter-cultural prophet who resisted the tyranny of his day. Benjamin is among those twentieth-century critics who argued that reason's drive for absolute transparency can lead us to totalitarianism. Humans, he believed, need to preserve psychic spaces for mystery, wonder and the irrational. Herein lies the attraction of magic. If science's promises have become limitless, if gene-splicing and quantum computing can achieve the hitherto unthinkable, at least they cannot realise the impossible dreams of magic. We humans, in order to remain human, must have our utopias; and orthodox western religions have tended to make their heavens far too secular and attainable. To Walter Benjamin, Cagliostro the alchemist, prophet and healer was a bearer of the lost magical origins of science, and, specifically, of its emotional, creative, and messianic human possibilities.

Moreover, magical systems of thought are, at one level, inherently democratic because they are open to ordinary experience. We do not need massive institutional edifices, or extravagant technical and scientific investments to mediate their messages. Magical beliefs are also intellectually capacious: they are only too ready to assimilate or link with other forms of human culture such as religion, art, music and science. Magic appeals, therefore, to the holistically minded: after all, its key belief is that our spiritual and material worlds are inseparably connected. An even earlier maverick genius, the engraver-poet William Blake, celebrated Cagliostro not only as a resister of Inquisitorial tyranny, but also as a creative visionary, an artist and an alchemist of soul. To Romantic poets and painters like Blake, magic provided a metaphor for the creative imagination, a means of unlocking the fantastic and playful aspects of our psyches and culture. Seen this way, magic becomes a seed-bed of artistic freedom and creativity.

Artists like Blake tended also to be drawn to the idea that mind or spirit could influence matter. We can imagine this aspect appealing, by extension, to latter-day ecological romantics who believe that the whole universe is in some way sensate. Deep ecology holds to the occult view that the earth and heavens reverberate with feeling. We could do a lot worse than heed this possibility.

Magic also offers a place of safety from which we can undertake dress rehearsals for the outside world. One suspects that many of the children who read Harry Potter or the young adults who revere Gandalf the Great do so because the enchanted but troubling worlds these characters inhabit are havens from adult dominance. They also provide imaginary spaces where difficult subjects like love, sex and death can be ritually rehearsed without external compulsion or dangerous emotional cost.

And of course the mysterious, if not the conspiratorial, side of magic has a close affinity with our attraction to aesthetics. Einstein once said that 'the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science'. His fellow scientists Watson and Crick knew instinctively that their early models of DNA, mankind's genetic building block, were wrong because they were just too ugly. All doubt vanished when they first witnessed the elegant simplicity of the double helix; and their language in describing the discovery is the language of enchantment. To me, it is also wonderfully fitting that Cagliostro, the pimp, forger and charlatan, began by using magic to swindle people but eventually became so intoxicated by its beauties that he ended his life healing people for free and dying for his beliefs as the Inquisition's last martyr.

Make no mistake, *The Da Vinci Code* has its enchantments too: there are tantalising mysteries as well conspiracies in its pages. Dan Brown's achievement is to have steered the best-selling thriller into new and unlikely intellectual realms. Who could have imagined that scriptural philology, Hebrew hermeneutics and patristic history would become the stuff of spine-chilling adventure and wistful romance? And if *The Da Vinci Code* has the effect of eventually bringing Umberto Eco's wonderful satire and Chesterton's Father Brown back into circulation, then both the thriller as a genre and mankind as a whole will be forever in its debt.