CHAPTER THREE

SIGN, SIGIL, TEXT

On the Study-table a book there lay,
Which Agrippa himself had been reading that day;
The letters were written with blood therein,
And the leaves were made of dead men’s skin;

And these horrible leaves of magic between
Were the ugliest pictures that ever were seen,
The likeness of things so foul to behold,
That what they were is not fit to be told.

—Robert Southey

The natural magic of Book I ends with a discussion of writing, in chapters 73 and 74. When we consider these chapters as transitional, developing the argument of DOP towards mathematical magic, certain points arise immediately.

First, we have seen that the natural magic is at heart a magic of logos, a magic bound up with the Incarnation, with the immanent, physical presence of God in the world, which grounds language in the material. The mathematical or celestial magic should, logically, be the magic of writing, and hence of Scripture. This is confirmed by the explicit focus of the two transitional chapters, “Of the virtue of writing. . .” and “Of the proportion. . . of letters. . .”1

Second, writing in DOP follows on from the mind, which as we have seen extends up to the mathematical and celestial sphere: “Now writing is the last expression of the mind, and is the number of speech and voice. . . .”2 Similarly, the extension of language into the celestial sphere is

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1 DOP 1:73, 240/221, De virtute scripturae et de imprecationibus et inscriptionibus faciendis; DOP 1:74, 241/223, De proportione, correspondentia, reductione literarum ad signa coelestia et planetas secundum varias linguas cum tabella hoc indicante.

2 DOP 1:73, 241/221: “Scriptura autem ipsa ultima mentis expressio est, sermonis vocisque numerus. . . ,” passage not in W.
logically superior to the fallen nature of speech, for the many human languages divided at Babel

have according to their diversity received divers, and proper characters of writing, consisting in their certain order, number, and figure, not so disposed, and formed by hap, or chance, nor by the weak judgment of man, but from above, whereby they agree with the celestial, and divine bodies, and virtues. . . .

Writing simultaneously rests upon the prior existence of speech and depends from the superior reality of the celestial. To understand the mathematical is to approach the written, and vice versa. Book II thus explicates the magic of writing from number through character to name.

We have seen (page 66 above) that Frances Yates understood the magic of DOP to depend on an “operative” conception of the magus; what has not been sufficiently stressed is that this operative conception was for Yates associated particularly with mathematical magic. Although she incorrectly concluded that such a stance vis-à-vis mathematics laid the foundations for the scientific mathematization of nature, her insight to correlate mathematics and operative power is of considerable value. In this chapter, then, we will consider how DOP understands the activity of magical power.

The natural magic, as we saw, develops towards its completion in the incarnation of the Word of God in Christ. At the same time, we saw no evidence of a theory of language as such, nor any clearly theorized channel

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3 DOP 1:74, 241/223: “... quae quidem linguae iuxta suam diversitatem etiam diversos ac proprios receperunt scripturae characteres, suo quodam certo ordine, numero et figura constantes, non fortuito, nec casu, nec fragili hominum arbitrio, sed divinitus sic dispositos atque formatos, quo cum coelestibus atque ipsis divinis corporibus virtutibusque consentiant. . . .” chapter not in W.

4 Yates, Giordano Bruno, esp. chapter 8, “Renaissance Magic and Science,” pages 144-56, in which mathematics and number is seen as a “master-key” to the development of science from magic. In this context, it is worth considering the implications of Giordano Bruno’s fifth definition of magic: “The fifth meaning includes, in addition to [natural magic] . . . the use of words, chants, calculations of numbers and times, images, figures, symbols, characters, or letters. This is a form of magic which is intermediate between the natural and the preternatural or the supernatural, and is properly called ‘mathematical magic’, or even more accurately ‘occult philosophy’” (emphasis mine). Bruno seems to mean that “occult philosophy” is a broad understanding of celestial or mathematical magic, suggesting that in his opinion, book II of DOP is the key to the whole work. As we shall see, Bruno’s reading is correct; it is unfortunate that previous scholars of Agrippa have generally ignored the interpretive testimony of those whom he influenced deeply. See Giordano Bruno, “On Magic,” in Cause, Principle and Unity, and Essays on Magic, ed. and trans. Richard J. Blackwell and Robert de Lucca, 105-42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 105.