CHAPTER FOUR

THE LANGUAGE OF DEMONS AND ANGELS

The most fleeting thought obeys an invisible plan, and may crown, or inaugurate, a secret design. . . . No one is someone; a single immortal man is all men. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, hero, philosopher, demon, and world—which is a long-winded way of saying that I am not.

—Jorge Luis Borges, The Immortal

In Book III, we move to the consummation of the magical art, the divine, religious, or ceremonial magic, which completes the magical and philosophical project begun in Books I and II. In the interest of clarity, let me briefly recapitulate the problems which remain at the outset.

In Book I, DOP implied that demonic magic is not only licit, but perhaps required for the highest forms of magic; Book III takes up this question explicitly, discussing demonic magic quite openly. In the present analysis, then, we must discover (1) what exactly is meant by demonic magic, and (2) how contact with demons can elevate the magus to the divine. Furthermore, we must ask what purpose is served by such elevation; that is, what the point of demonic magic is, and how it fits into the more general problematic of the magician’s relationship to God.

In Book II, the primary focus was linguistic, demonstrating the philosophical possibility of transparent and powerful written signs. As we begin reading Book III, it is not clear how this power of writing interacts with divinity. In other words, if the natural world is ruled by the power of speech, and the celestial world by that of writing, what linguistic structure applies to the divine? Beyond this, we must ask what kind of linguistic relationships obtain between the magician and the forces which rule the divine sphere, not only God Himself but also the angels.

Book III includes DOP’s most detailed discussions of both Kabbalah and ritual, issues which haunted the margins of both the natural and especially the celestial magic. In the present chapter, then, it will be crucial to situate DOP with respect to scholarship on Kabbalah and ritual. This analysis raises a number of questions whose answers will inform our
understanding of DOP in general; in the conclusion chapter they will also aid in explicating the ramifications of our reading of DOP for scholarship on the history and theory of magic.

With respect to Kabbalah, the primary question is whether Agrippa’s ritual-magical Kabbalah is Kabbalah at all. As we shall see, this leads to two broader issues: magic in Kabbalah generally, and the relationship between Christian Kabbalah and its Jewish sources. I shall argue that Agrippa’s Kabbalah is a deeply Christian and skeptical reinterpretation of Kabbalah, which nevertheless is not fundamentally at odds with the tradition of Kabbalah as it came down to him.

The second problem, that of magical ritual, takes us into the realm of ritual theory. At heart, the question here is whether Agrippa’s ritual magic can be understood as ritual, which is really dependent on the more general question of whether magic is religion. I do not propose to address the latter question in detail, although some consideration of the problem will appear in the conclusion chapter. For the moment, I shall simply take it for granted that DOP’s ritual magic is indeed ritual.

At the same time, the framework of Agrippa’s magic is such that it requires some rethinking of ritual theory more generally; in particular, much of the semiotic or symbolic interpretive theory of ritual depends upon a highly logocentric conception of language, privileging speech over writing in a way radically inconsistent with Agrippa’s magical precepts. As such, I will propose a writing-centered approach to ritual, whose value will I hope be borne out by its effectiveness in the analysis.

In what follows, then, I have three objectives. First and foremost, I wish to demonstrate that Book III does indeed propose a theory which connects the various problems and hanging threads from Books I and II, and furthermore does so in a way which satisfies the theological concerns at hand. Second, I want to show that this theory, depending as it does upon a written rather than oral model of communication, fits quite neatly into Kabbalistic structures, and thus indicates that academic dismissals of magical Christian Kabbalah are over-hasty. Third, I would like to suggest that the written theory of ritual magic proposed here has considerable utility for modern scholars of ritual. Moreover, I believe such a theory will aid materially in rethinking magic as a distinct category, not divorced from that of religion but nevertheless not entirely coterminous with it; this last point will be discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter.