

Spiral Bound: Spaces, Selves and Cosmologies of Contemporary Magick

William Redwood[†]

Spiral Bound: Spaces, Selves and Cosmologies of Contemporary Magick is a PhD thesis which was passed by the Department of Anthropology, University College London in 2004. It was supervised by Professor Roland Littlewood, Dr Allen Abramson and Dr Simon Dein (all based in UCL's Department of Anthropology or its Centre for Behavioural and Social Sciences in Medicine) and was examined by Dr Fiona Bowie (Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Bristol) and Dr Simon Cohn (Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths, University of London). While supervised and examined by anthropologists and medical anthropologists, the thesis is relevant to sociologists, cultural geographers and those in religious studies and cultural studies.

Initially the theory and data in question will be detailed. The theoretical stance of *Spiral Bound* can be summed up in the following three points:

1. It is not possible to fully comprehend the discourse and practice of contemporary western magick without an acknowledgement of the magickal universe, a unique and rich cosmology to which surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid so far.¹
2. Much of the focus of *Spiral Bound* is therefore on space and place, and the argument draws heavily on an interdisciplinary innovation sometimes glossed as the 'spatial turn'. Initially occurring in geography with the advent of cultural geography and then sweeping through sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, the spatial turn may be described as an attention to space and spatiality while treating space not as a Kantian absolute, but as a construct, as a process rather than as a thing. Space is integrally related to thinking, to being and to practice and as de Certeau (1984:115) writes, "normative structures have the status of spatial syntaxes ... every story is a travel story".
3. If contemporary magick is to be fully comprehended it should be acknowledged to be socially-constructed, though very little previous work on the subject has done so. 'Why this, and why now?' are the questions fundamental to a social constructionist approach and the

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answers are to be found in contemporary society and culture. One particular aspect of the contemporary which is of importance to the argument in this thesis is the experience “of *movement*, of *flux*, of *change*, of *unpredictability*” (Lash & Friedman 1992:1, original italics). Another relevant and related aspect of the present is that despite the rapidity of change, the modern notion of progress has become problematized. Throughout *Spiral Bound*, the contemporary is generally labelled ‘postmodernity’.²

To move from theory to data, no scholar who has looked in detail at contemporary magick and related phenomena has been able to avoid problems of definition and categorization. An entire chapter of *Spiral Bound* covers this issue in detail, but all the reader needs to know in this context is that I am inclined to regard magick as a part of, not apart from, western esotericism, the ‘New Age’, holistic spirituality and/or alternative spirituality more generally. According to the definition employed in *Spiral Bound*, magick entails the following:

1. The “doctrine of correspondences” which entails an acknowledgement of analogies between apparently discrete aspects of the universe. This is often expressed through the Hermetic formulation, “As Above, So Below”.
2. A consequent distinction between an individual’s inner world or psyche and the outer material world that is less absolute than it is in mainstream definitions of self/other, and at times totally absent. The macrocosm, it is held, is reflected in the microcosm and *vice versa*. This may also be expressed by a variant of the common Hermetic formulation, “As Within, So Without”. The practitioner of magick inhabits not so much a magickal universe as a “magickal youniverse”.³
3. A belief that one can effect change or ‘transmutation’ in the ‘outer’ world, often simply known as ‘results magick’. Such change is sought through meditative and ritual practices.
4. A belief that one can alter or ‘transmute’ the individual self and that this ‘inner’ change, ‘spiritual growth’, increased ‘spiritual awareness’, ‘psychic development’ or ‘gnosis’ is just as important as effecting change in the ‘outside’ world, perhaps even more so. Such change is sought through meditative, ritual and divinatory practices. At the same time, however, this aspect of magick can be very

psychologistic, with Jungian analytical psychology and humanistic psychology generally being preferred psychological models.

5. A belief that there is an ‘energy’ or ‘life force’ which pervades everything, in effect, a type of animism. It is this energy which provides a link between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, and ‘correspondences’ between things which are considered discrete and unconnected in mainstream western thinking. Any magickal act will involve working with an energy of some sort, though terms for it vary; it may also be referred to via the Chinese (Daoist) *chi* or *qi* or (after Wilhelm Reich) ‘orgone’.
6. As Greenwood (2000) has shown, a non-physical or metaphysical realm, an ‘otherworld’, is integral to magickal discourse and practice. Magick necessarily entails other dimensions, and it is to these other dimensions which one ‘imaginatively’ travels when, say, ‘shamanic journeying’ or ‘astrally projecting’. Much magickal practice involves interactions with denizens of the otherworld and hence as Blain (2002) has stressed there are markedly shamanistic elements to contemporary magick.⁴

1. Here Be Dragons

Spiral Bound consists of nine chapters, the first three of which are introductory: Chapter 1 presents a phenomenological description of magick in order that the reader unfamiliar with it may have some idea what it feels like to experience the magickal universe; Chapter 2 addresses the controversies regarding definition, taxonomy and the relation between magick, neopaganism, the ‘New Age’, western esotericism, and alternative or holistic spirituality; Chapter 3 consists of a literature review and an outline of the ethnographic method and theoretical orientation of the thesis.

The argument proper gets underway in Chapter 4 which looks at the often troubled relation between magick and the mainstream. The relatively simple geographical question of ‘Where does magick happen?’ is posed. The practical locations of magick are surveyed: we see the private rituals, carried out relatively secretly in private spaces, and note the larger gatherings in hired halls and centres which can cause tensions between magickal practitioners and the owners and other users of such venues. We survey the overlaps between the magickal subculture and other spheres of society and culture, in art and art galleries, music and clubs, in education, and in medicine and physical healing. We go on to note the occasions when magick

becomes countercultural rather than simply subcultural such as anticapitalist demonstrations. We note gatherings in places invested with particular meaning for magickal practitioners from small meetings in museums to much larger events such as some of those which take place at Stonehenge and Avebury. Such ‘unmodern’ places tend to be classed as significant because of an imputed positive orientalism (what Carrier 1992 terms ‘occidentalism’) and an imputed positive primitivism (what Fox 1992:152 terms ‘affirmative primitivism’), two phenomena rooted in the romanticism and surrealism with which magickal discourse and practice is now replete. We subsequently survey various ways of theorising these places, including viewing them as zones of Otherness or as types of heterotopias (the latter term comes from Foucault [1986]; see also Hetherington [1998] and Ivakhiv [2001]). Finally, we examine the more open-ended practice of the *dérive* or “sidewalk” (the latter term is Chris Penczak’s from *City Magick* [2001]): essentially a wandering through (re-)enchanted urban spaces. Here for example is an excerpt from Alan Moore’s imagined description of the visionary walks through London taken by the writer Arthur Machen and the experience of:

... a twilight ambience ... where fables walk the London streets and dreams loom forward suddenly, out from the violet shadows ... Arabian nightmares smoulder at the corners of Red Lion Square Exotic tableaux, fabulous grotesques in every court or close along the Gray’s Inn Road ... The lanes and alleyways become another place, transformed by the loadstone silver of imagination. Shabby promenades made new, made souks and minarets in the mind’s moonlight ... The gated yards of Holborn shiver with phantasmagoria and every gas-lamp has its blue and hissing genie ... There are Roc’s eggs hatching in the rainspouts ...

Everyone knows this Moontown that has ever dreamed or wondered. In our reveries we windowshop at its emporiums and in our fevers ride wild, steaming horses down its avenues. (Moore 2001:26-28)

However, we cannot linger in this phantasmagoria, but must move on to findings pertaining to magickal identities within the magickal subculture itself, the empirical, symbolic and imaginary locations of practitioners relative to one another.

2. Searching High and Low

Magickal identities have of course been examined before by various scholars and my intention in Chapter 5 is not to disagree with the previous literature so much as add to it by demonstrating that magickal identities are spatialized identities, structured or articulated via as it were that “spatial syntax” to which de Certeau (1984:115) drew attention.

In his essay on heterotopias (1986:26), Foucault describes a simple spatial binary:

The space of our primary perception, the space of our dreams and that of our passions hold within themselves qualities that seem intrinsic: there is a light, ethereal, transparent space, or again a dark, rough, encumbered space; a space from above, of summits, or on the contrary a space from below of mud ...

In *Two Clear Paths*, Kabbalist Michael Berg argues:

In order to maintain a constant upward direction in our spiritual development it is important to remember clearly that there are only two paths, one of Light and one of Darkness. And, that we are on either one of the two, there is no middle ground. In addition it is important to be clear what each path contains, and the connection between our actions and these paths.

The path of Darkness holds within it all negativity, sadness[,] pain and eventually death. The path of Light holds within it all that is good, joy, freedom and life. The Kabbalists also clarify the two groups of actions that connect us to each path. Actions that are from our Desire to receive for the self-alone connect us to the path of Darkness. Actions that are for our desire to share connect us to the path of Light.⁵

In both cases higher realms (corresponding to notions of light) are contrasted with lower realms (which are linked conversely to notions of darkness), a familiar celestial/infernal division which some claim stems from magick’s Christian heritage, though others have claimed such a binary to be universal. Within contemporary magick (despite Berg’s denial of a middle-ground) one also encounters an intermediate zone which is said to ‘balance light and dark’ and looks towards ‘nature’ for much of its symbolism. We are thus presented with a third space which seems to originate in Romantic rather

than Christian thought, so ultimately one is reminded not so much of the binary structuralism of Lévi-Strauss as the tripartite structuralism of a scholar such as Georges Dumézil. For those more focussed on higher realms, ‘nature’ is a little *too* earth(l)y for comfort (eg Hanagraaff 1998:2), while those who do focus on ‘nature’ revel in their earth(l)iness and criticise the former for being excessively transcendent (eg Pearson 1998). Both types, however, look down on (and I use that phrase deliberately) a third subset whose focus seems to be more exclusively on lower, darker realms: “I will plunge into the depths!”, bellowed one demonologist during a ritual I observed.⁶ Or in the words of the goddess Promethea to the demon Asmodeus in a graphic novel by Alan Moore:

Hey ... Brimstone Boy ... we’re all part of the same thing, ain’t we?
It’s just I’m partyin’ in the *penthouse* while you molest first-graders
in the *boiler room*. (2002:np, author’s italics)

We might ask whether these realms are purely figurative or whether these three broad types of spatialized identities ever correspond to physical or empirical locations for magickal practice? Sometimes they do.⁷ It is hardly controversial to note that those magickal practitioners whose focus is on ‘nature’ will often meet and ‘work’ in ‘green spaces’ such as woodlands. By contrast the demonologist quoted above expressing an intention to ‘plunge into the depths’ was part of a group which performed rituals in both the basement and the boiler room of an abandoned building. There are also unsubstantiated tales on the magickal scene of ‘black magicians’ in London performing rituals in abandoned subway stations. Finally, to mention but one example of higher physical spaces, *Spiral Bound* analyses in some detail an article in *Spirit and Destiny* magazine entitled *Heaven Above* which recounts the creation of a bright, predominantly white sacred space through a loft conversion and abounds with phrases such as “the only way is up” and “spirit in the sky”.⁸

We might also enquire whether the otherworlds on which magickal practitioners focus display such a pattern? Indeed, they too can, and this is covered in Chapter 6 of *Spiral Bound*. While the otherworldly realms visited by magickal practitioners are many and varied, different types of practitioner seem to visit some types of realm more than they visit others. Those whose focus is on height and light tend to visualize themselves ascending to celestial, angelic realms. Other magickal practitioners tend to journey to more ‘natural’ realms. Finally, Dave Lee illustrates the sort of otherworldly focus of those magickal practitioners for whom dark depths are preferable:

Way back at the start of my magickal career, during an attack of gematria, the numbers I generated brought together the phrases *The Shining City* and *The Tunnels of Set*. The image I got was of proud towering spires and skyscrapers, and the sewers and drainage systems above which they are built. The higher the towers are built, the deeper and wider must be the systems that carry away their waste. The cities are lit with electricity, the light of knowledge, light for visibility, for security from attack. This light is produced by the burning of fossil fuels – black oil and black coal from deep in Pluto’s mine ... The Tunnels are a half-mapped network of sewers beneath the Celestial City, where ontological terrorists move unnoticed from one zone of reality to another ... they are wormholes left behind in the construction of the city’s paramount reality, wormholes under the surface of orderly appearances, under the surface of time that is marked by clock ... They are accessed through tunnel vision, through the overwhelm of horror ... through the vision of the Sunken Ones in the abysses of Tim ... their journeying feeds the roots of our being in a way the conscious mind can barely grasp at all ... (Lee 1997:83)

To sum up for now, ultimately then there are three broad types of spatialized magickal identity, ie three general zones into which magickal practitioners will place themselves and/or be placed by other magickal practitioners. Moreover, there are parallels between these realms or identities, physical sacred spaces, and otherworldly locales. Finally, it should be noted that relations between occupants of these symbolic realms are not always harmonious; these three broad types of magickal identity do generally correspond to different moralities (Greenwood 2000:ch7), to different lifestyles, and to different systems of aesthetics. A final word of caution is however needed: this type of structuralist analysis is not something which should be overplayed, for poststructuralism has cautioned that we should always be aware that structures can be flexible rather than fixed, and tendencies rather than absolutes.⁹

3. **Spiral Bound**

The sort of analysis deployed in the previous section is fairly traditional in many respects and reminiscent of Durkheim and Mauss’ *Primitive Classification* (1963/1903) which likewise attempted to illustrate analogies between social structure, physical space and cosmology. Later in *Spiral Bound*, the more overtly postmodern facets of contemporary magick are brought into focus. Chapter 7, entitled “Jason and the Organonauts”, focuses

on another fundamental aspect of magickal discourse, practice and cosmology: *chi*, *qi* or orgone, that mysterious ‘energy’ which permeates the entire magickal universe. This Heraclitan notion of a universe (or ‘youiverse’) comprised of energy in flux reminds us of the focus of the papers in Lash and Friedman (1992:1, original italics): the contemporary sociocultural experience “of *movement*, of *flux*, of *change*, of *unpredictability*.” A cosmos of energy in flux also recalls the “liquid” condition which is the contemporary as expounded by Bauman (2000; 2003). Chapter 8, “Found In Space” builds on this aspect of magickal cosmology and examines topographical and cartographical metaphors employed by magickal practitioners, for these are unique in both their quantity and quality and present us with a (sub-)culturally-specific and therapeutic process of healing via orientation. For the sake of brevity I must refrain from summarizing Chapters 7 and 8 any more fully here, suffice to say that throughout both, the magickal cosmos is more richly described and more fully explicated in that it is shown to be related in various ways to a condition of postmodernity.

This is a process which continues in the eponymous Chapter 9, “Spiral Bound”, which I can detail a little more fully. Herein the focus is on movement through space rather than space itself. We examine magickal directionality, and we see how modern notions of ‘forward progress’ are problematized by metaphors of circular and spiral transit.¹⁰

The spiral symbol is an extremely common one in magickal discourse and practice but one that has yet to be fully explained. I suggest that to understand what the spiral is we should start by noting what the spiral is not. It is most certainly not a regulinear (ie straight-lined) modernist symbol. A fetish of the modernist aesthetic is the straight line, and perhaps the paradigmatic example of the straight line is the arrow of progress which is ideologically fundamental to modernism; such regulinear movement is configured as ‘forward’, and also as ‘upward’ when the metaphor of the ‘evolutionary ladder’ is brought into play. Within magickal discourse and practice, we do encounter such scientism and paradigmatic modern notions of progress and evolution. For example, in Nevill Drury’s comment on the Kabbalistically-structured otherworld, we hear that “the shaman does not rest in Tiphareth - he [*sic*] pushes on further up the Tree” (Drury 1994:29), and this Drury regards as a form of “spiritual evolution”. A plethora of other examples could be used to support a claim that magickal practitioners think in terms of modernist-evolutionist ascension.

However, it is equally true that notions of evolution and progress are not always configured in such an unproblematic manner within magick. As noted above, magick features strongly the romantico-surrealist notion of positive primitivism and an endeavour to ‘go back’, ‘regress’, ‘devolve’ and thus travel in two normally mutually exclusive directionalities. A skein of antimodernism then is readily apparent, and a simple movement up the evolutionary ladder can be seen to have been problematized by the apparently paradoxical mixture of primitivism and scientism or evolutionism which presents itself.

It is moreover not only the case that for the practitioner of magick movement may be conceptualised as backward or atavistic rather than ‘upward and onward’; for the mage, the process of movement which is not straight or regulinear at all seems to hold a distinct appeal. Iain Sinclair for example writes of his:

[O]utwardly eccentric Dr Who-style progress, zigzagging by day and night from Liverpool Street and Canning Town up the Lea Valley to Ware, [which] struck me as a paradigm for a visionary exploration of the Essex fringes. An apparently scientific excuse for a glorious clandestine folly, joyriding the trail of the cosmic serpent. (Sinclair 1997:5)

Reporting also “jagged progress” (1997:2), “eccentric circuits” (1997:9), and “meanderings” (1997:76), Sinclair’s magickal *dérives* may be seen to literally act out a process of moving in a line which is not straight. As DH Lawrence wrote, “Live and let live, love and let love, flower and fade, and follow the natural curve, which flows on, pointless” (cited in Schiller 1994:52).

As well as not always thinking in terms of going in straight lines and revelling in zig-zags, curves and meanderings moreover, the metaphor of circular directionality is also a very common one for the magickal practitioner to employ. Nevill Drury, whom we previously noted writing of a process of spiritual evolution up the Tree of Life, also describes the Tree of Life as a “wheel” (Drury 1994:24), implying that movement is going to take a more circular directional pattern than a vertical ascensional one. Given the fact that one would not expect a tree of any kind to be wheel-shaped, this particular turn of phrase is striking. There are many other instances of circular symbolism within magickal discourse and practice: participants in group rituals often form circles; the wheel of the year is a familiar concept to ‘nature’-oriented practitioners; and the symbol of the *ouroboros* (a serpent eating its own tail) also comes to mind in this regard.

However, though circular directionality is clearly important within the magickal worldview, spiral directionality is arguably more common. Rituals often consist of participants forming spirals, energy is said to move in spirals and the symbol is a very common decorative one in esoteric jewellery, tattoos and artwork. Rather than being totally separate symbol from the circle, the spiral can be seen as an elaboration of circular movement. We find this point quite explicitly stated by Jill Purce in a book entitled *The Mystic Spiral: Journey of the Soul* (1974). Purce explains the symbol of the spiral (and its relation to the circle) thus:

If life is a path ‘through’ time, [we may conceptualise it] as a line; and [...] since it returns and yet flows on, it is a spiral. Only if it were possible to come back to the *same point in time* could it be a circle. (Purce 1974:13, original italics)

And yet, in traditional societies, coming back to the same point in time is (or was) possible (Eliade 2005). What is it about the contemporary which is so different? Perhaps the ephemerality which is integral to the contemporary may serve as one explanation? The “wheel of the year” may turn full-circle, but things are unlikely to be as they were a year ago in a society and culture like this one. Psychosocial flux, rapid change in world and self without a necessary correlate of ‘upward and onward’ progress and consequent high level of uncertainty is one aspect of the contemporary to which we may point to in order to fully explicate the meaning of the spiral symbol.¹¹ Thus in the final analysis, magickal directionality is not straightforwardly modern, rather it is markedly postmodern.

4. Conclusion

The above should have gone some way to showing how space, self and cosmology interrelate within the discourse and practice of contemporary magick, and how contemporary magick interrelates with a wider contemporary sociocultural condition which may be described as a condition of postmodernity. It only remains to close by making the point that while of course any argument needs to be presented stage by stage, in sociocultural reality there is no such systematic layering and thus within the lived experience of the magickal practitioner, all those facets of magickal discourse and practice outlined above (and many more) tend most of the time to be thoroughly intermeshed.

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Notes

¹ There is however the work of Prince and Riches (2000), the approach of whom is markedly dissimilar to my own in terms of both data and theory. Bowie (2000:27-8) has made the intriguing suggestion that certain more recent western spiritualities appear to be more cosmological or cosmorphological than metacosmic or soteriological; magick is certainly thus.

² I should make clear that it is not my intention to quibble with the many scholars who have used the terms 'modernity' or 'late modernity', nor those who use 'postmodernity' in a very different way to myself. My aim in *Spiral Bound* is simply to contribute further to our understanding of the relationship between magick and contemporary society and culture.

³ The words "magickal youniverse" come from one of my informants, but his turn of phrase may perhaps have been inspired by Fraser Clark, "Head-Master of the Parallel Youniversity", a popular (and eminently magickal) London dance club.

⁴ This particular definition of magick is quite similar to some definitions of western esotericism, the 'New Age' and alternative or holistic spirituality more generally,

and also characterises much neopagan thinking. The above is however a necessarily truncated definition for the purposes of this relatively short summary.

⁵ <http://www.kabbalah.com/k/index.php/p=life/spirituality/shmot3>

⁶ Strictly-speaking, the mages in question were working with entities from the fiction of HP Lovecraft. I refer to them above as demonologists for the sake of simplicity.

⁷ This is of course not always the case simply for reasons of practicality. As a rule, ‘natural’ spaces are the least troublesome in which to practice, while deeper and higher spaces are less easy to occupy.

⁸ The article *Heaven Above* appeared in February 2003 edition of the popular magazine *Spirit and Destiny* (London: H Bauer Publishing).

⁹ There are many necessary qualifying remarks which this short summary cannot include. To allude to just two such points, first, these locations are indexical, not absolute (see Gell 1985), and second, notions of ‘up and down’ in practice coexist with a similar binary division between ‘right and left’ (as in Right Hand Path vs Left Hand Path) and ‘front’ and ‘back’ or ‘obverse’ and ‘reverse’ (in relation to the Tree of Life).

¹⁰ I am grateful to Michael York for comments on an earlier version of this segment of my argument. While I cannot agree with York’s (1995:168) contention that the spiral is a symbol specific to neopaganism, he is undoubtedly correct in stressing both its horizontality and its suggestion of “open-ended movement”.

¹¹ If a fluidity of self-identity is one of the things adduced to explain the meaning and prevalence of the spiral symbol then such an analysis would be readily compatible with what Heelas and Woodhead (2004) term the “subjectivization hypothesis”. It is worth also noting that were we to focus on a slightly different portrayal of the contemporary after Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994), the spiral is a perfect symbol for their “reflexive modernity”, implying as it does an almost but not quite return full circle. Finally, it can be said that the spiral is a symbol which seems to be more feminine or yonic than it is masculine or phallic, another interesting contradistinction to the old modern ‘arrow of progress’.