



TECHNIC AND MAGIC

THE
RECONSTRUCTION
OF REALITY

FEDERICO
CAMPAGNA

OF REALITY
RECONSTRUCTION
THE
AND MAGIC
TECHNIC

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Technic and Magic

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The Reconstruction of Reality

Technic and Magic

BY FEDERICO CAMPAGNA

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ALTERNATIVE COSMOGONIES - A DIAGRAM

TECHNIC

Upper limit: *Ego absconditus*

Hypostasis	Archetypal incarnation
Absolute language	Truth is representation, representation is truth
Measure	Mathematical number
Unit	Piece of information/data
Abstract general entity	Processor
Life as vulnerability	Possibility

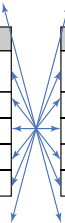
Lower limit: Double affirmation

MAGIC

Upper limit: Double negation

Hypostasis	Archetypal incarnation
The ineffable as life	Miracle
Person	Apollo and the Imam
Symbol	Mythologem
Meaning	Centre
Paradox	Self

Lower limit: *Deus absconditus*



Per Arturo e Teodora

*and any journey, any kind of trip,
are only mysticism for beginners,
the elementary course, prelude
to a test that's been
postponed.*

Adam Zagajewski, *Mysticism for Beginners*

PREFACE – THE KEYMAKER

Timothy Morton

How do you get there from here? Like a relentlessly greedy caterpillar that never metamorphoses into a butterfly, the present moment, illusory and specious in all kinds of ways, psychological, anthropological, political, seems to enjoy swallowing the future as fast as new futures are invented. Cynical reason gobbles up this up-gobbling, reproducing the caterpillar in its very attempt to out-caterpillar the gobblers. If I can show you how much more paralyzed you are than you could possibly imagine, I am apparently smarter than you, and more revolutionary than you. I get an extra prize if I can show you how my very way of showing you your extreme and hopeless paralysis is also part of the paralyzing forces, as I reinforce the impossibility of finding an escape route from the present, which very much depends upon sealing off the exits from the very notion of presence that underwrites the present, the notion of going on underneath appearances, the one that unleashed upon Earth the fatal, genocidal sense of the term *survive*.

Many a critique seems to do a great job of emulating the old man weaving a net around himself in William Blake's illumination of his poem '*The Human Abstract*', a series of lies in the form of the truth:

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody Poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we.
And mutual fear brings peace,
Till the selfish loves increase:
Then Cruelty knits a snare,

And spreads his baits with care.
 He sits down with holy fears,
 And waters the grounds with tears;
 Then Humility takes its root
 Underneath his foot.
 Soon spreads the dismal shade
 Of Mystery over his head;
 And the Caterpillar and Fly
 Feed on the Mystery.
 And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
 Ruddy and sweet to eat;
 And the Raven his nest has made
 In its thickest shade.
 The Gods of the earth and sea
 Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree;
 But their search was all in vain:
 There grows one in the Human Brain.¹

When you put it like that, you begin to see the stakes involved in being a writer who wants to change things.

Perhaps then it would be good, if only for a tactical moment, to ignore the blandishments of cynical reason, and the best way to do so would be to ignore the current, which is to say present, state of play regarding philosophy, the conventional reference points. He who controls the past controls the future, as they say, and they who adjust the past hold open all kinds of different futures, and more significantly, they hold open the very possibility of a (different) future as such: futurity. By adjusting chiropractically the spine of the thoughts that got us here, all kinds of *there* open up, and you start to feel less oppressed by the weight of the past, because within the nightmare you have found some keys to liberate thought from its relentless, nightmarish intensity. Imagine for example that you could look to Neoplatonic and Arabic philosophies to find some magic keys to open the doors of futurity. It might be much more refreshing than rearranging the coloured squares on the mosaic of

¹W. Blake, *The Human Abstract*, in *The Complete Poems*, London: Penguin, 1977, pp. 128–9.

contemporary theory, which too often results in rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic of cynical reason.

Federico Campagna has done such a thing. For every door there is a key, and what a delightful surprise that some very old, rusting, gnarly keys from imperial Rome and Persia turn out to fit snugly all kinds of locks that seem to be made of nano-engineered, almost unbreakably encrypted oppression metals.

Introduction

This is a book for those who lie defeated by history and by the present. It isn't a manual to turn the current defeat into a future triumph, but a rumour about a passage hidden within the battlefield leading to a forest beyond it.¹ I began to write this book in the late autumn of 2016, at the time when resurging fascism had joined environmental devastation and capitalist biopolitics, in the bleak Valhalla of world-making forces. In earlier years, I had believed that the catalogue of atrocities of our time called for a form of intervention that was quintessentially political. If the problems have to do with the form of our social institutions, I thought, then the changes that are necessary must take place at that same level. It is a matter of achieving change at the level of our organization of the economy, the politics and the social discourse. The rest will follow. Or so I thought. Then, the unfolding events and the apparent impossibility to put a stop both to the disintegration of those institutions that had prevented the return of recent atrocities and to the blatantly suicidal path of environmental wreckage, started to instil a doubt in me. Somehow, it appeared as if the range of the possible had dramatically been shrunk, and that our ability to act differently, or even to imagine otherwise than in a way already inscribed in the present, had been curbed once and for all. Like many others of my generation and of our time, I myself experience this paralysis. Whether by taking the form of political impotence or of individual psychopathology, the oppressive weather of our

¹'Once again, we have fallen into one of those eras that ask the philosopher, not to explain or to transform the world, but solely to build refuges against the harshness of the weather'. From N. G. Davila, *Escolios a un Texto Implícito I* – my translation from Franco Volpi's Italian version of the Spanish original, in N. G. Davila, *In Margine a un Testo Implícito*, Milano: Adelphi, 2015, p. 28.

age seems to impact all of us equally. But even though the present had little in store for anybody interested in fostering what used to be called 'emancipation', perhaps the future still hosted the possibility of a change as-yet to come. As anybody with children, I too didn't want to let go of a however implausible hope for a future, planetary turn in a different direction. And indeed, I too didn't want to renounce the dubious belief that even an individual can always contribute, however marginally, to social transformations on a large scale. Yet, such stubborn hopes didn't silence my doubts. For one, I wondered, what am I to do with myself, while we journey through these gloomy, penultimate times? And secondly, is it really true that a sociopolitical revolution would be sufficient to change the course of the events? Or is it perhaps the case that something else, at a different level, would have to change?

This double questioning – a pressing anxiety for my own well-being, and a more theoretical curiosity over the general mechanisms of change – led me to consider the problem through another angle. Might it not be the case that change seems impossible, because technically it *is* impossible? And might it not be the case that imagination, action or even just life or happiness seem impossible, because they *are* impossible, at least within the present reality-settings? At their core, both questions pointed towards an element within our reality that stood as the ground of the specific cultural/social/political/economic settings of our age. Perhaps, it is at that level, that we implicitly define what is possible and what is impossible within our world. Perhaps, it is at that level, that we decide what *is* our world. In traditional philosophical parlance, that is the level of metaphysics: the place where it is discussed what it means to exist, what kind of things legitimately exist, how they exist, in what relation they stand to each other and to their attributes and so on. By deciding on metaphysics, that is by deciding on the most fundamental composition of our world, it is implicitly decided what kind of things can or cannot take place in that world. In less specialist parlance, we could say that it is at that level, that 'reality' itself is defined. As the parameters of existence, particularly of legitimate existence, in the world change, so the composition of our world changes – and consequently, the range of the possible takes one or another shape, and with it the field of the 'good', that is ethics, and politics, etc.

It might be objected, of course, that metaphysics should be an exact science, much like hard sciences like chemistry or biology are

supposed to be. But this objection would require a belief in our ability, as humans, to apprehend the existent as it authentically is: of approaching ‘facts’ in their purest, uncompromised form. And, what is more, that we could convey these immaculate facts through descriptive language, as if onto the marble slab of a laboratory or a morgue, so that we could dissect them and acquire from them an authentic knowledge of things as they are. Such a demand on our ability to know and communicate exactly the ‘truth’ of ‘facts’ would resemble that placed upon the *Man with the Blue Guitar*, in Wallace Stevens’s poem.

They said, ‘You have a blue guitar
You do not play things as they are.’
The man replied, ‘Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.’
And they said then, ‘But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are.’
I cannot bring a world quite round,
Although I patch it as I can.
I sing a hero’s head, large eye
And bearded bronze, but not a man,
Although I patch him as I can
And reach through him almost to man.²

Whatever we can grasp and communicate through descriptive language – that is through the typical language of history, economics, science, culture – arrives to us always-already shaped by criteria that are not internal to it. Kant argued that the main filter through which the existent had to pass, to reach our perception, was indivisible from our very human nature. It is unavoidable, for example, that we perceive things in space/time – though these dimensions are nowhere to be found in the world as it is in itself. But aside from Kant’s considerations, language itself also plays a crucial role in our perception of things and of the world. Only a

²W. Stevens, *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, in *Wallace Stevens*, edited by J. Burnside, London: Faber and Faber, 2008, p. 28.

range of the existent can be conveyed through linguistic means, much like only a range of the colour spectrum can be perceived by the human eye. No matter what the evolution of our technological prosthetics will be, there will always be shades and things that will remain immune from language and from colour detection. Yet, this last statement is, in itself, a metaphysical axiom: it is a criterion which I suggest to place at the foundation of our understanding of what exists. Also the opposite criterion, that of the limitless ability of language and of its technology to grasp the truth of the existence, is an equally legitimate axiom. Both of them find their justification in themselves, and nowhere else. Since God's death, we have been left alone to decide the axiomatics of our understanding of the world. We have to set the ground over which we can place our meaningful construction of a world that we can inhabit. These axiomatics, I call 'reality-settings': the historically specific decision (witting or unwitting) over what criteria we use to understand the baffling experience of existing somewhere, somewhen.

I wondered if it was precisely at this axiomatic level, that I could detect the present constitution of our world and of today's range of the possible. I started asking myself: what are the implicit metaphysical assumptions that define the architecture of our reality, and that structure our contemporary existential experience? What defines at the core the peculiarity of our present time, as opposed, for example, to previous times populated by ghosts and gods? I began looking for clues along a cross section traversing contemporary culture, politics and economics, particularly in their globalized Western form. In doing so, my questioning was primarily metaphysical: for such and such cultural or economic forms to take place, what underlying assumptions are necessary at a metaphysical level? What kind of belief in the existence or non-existence of certain things is necessary, to support such and such combination of social practices? What ontology is necessary, to justify the ethical goals that are implicit in so many of our currently prevalent social institutions? And so on. We could also translate in architectural terms this form of questioning. Let us imagine we encountered a mysterious building on a newly discovered alien planet, and we wished to investigate its peculiar architecture. Even before looking for the name of its architect, the first thing that we would ask is: what kind of materials and forces would be necessary, to sustain this type of structure?

But just like a certain type of architecture requires a particular array of materials, so also a certain type of materials seems to have implicit within itself a particular array of possible architectures. As I continued looking for the metaphysical assumptions underlying the form of the present, I started to notice that this particular combination of metaphysical tenets seemed to have inscribed within itself, like a destiny of sort, a particular form of reality and of the world. Thus, my research took a morphological turn; I wasn't only interested in the building material that makes up our world as we experience it in the contemporary age, but also in the specific destiny of such a world. This destiny, we could call its cosmological form. All metaphysics is a set of decisions on how best to order the chaos of mere existence; it is the form of a particular universe, or *cosmos*. Cosmology, the 'discourse around the order of the cosmos', thus seemed to me a more apt term than just metaphysics, to define the object of my inquiry.³ But underneath every cosmology, as every good myth teaches us, there is a cosmogony: a process of creation of that particular universe. There, at the level of cosmogony, the various aspects of my research seemed to finally coalesce. At that level, at least, I could create a 'likely story' – *eikos mythos*, as Plato has Timaeus define his own cosmogonic tale⁴ – that would be able to reunite them in one coherent narrative.

My likely story unfolds as follows. The character of our contemporary existential experience, points towards a certain type of ordering of our world, and of ourselves within it. This ordering is superficially social/economic/etc., but in fact derives from a set of fundamental metaphysical axioms. These axioms combine together in an overall system, which is the reality-system of our age. A reality-system shapes the world in a certain way, and endows it with a particular destiny: it is the cosmological form that defines a historical age. At the same time, however, it is also a cosmogonic

³The inspiration behind this stylistic decision comes, in part, from C. Sini, *Raccontare il Mondo: Filosofia e Cosmologia*, Milano: CUEM, 2001.

⁴See Plato, *Timaeus*, 29d. On the interpretation of Plato's 'eykos mythos' in *Timaeus*, see M. F. Burnyeat, *Eykos Mythos*, in *Rhizai*, 2, 2005, pp. 7–29. G. Reale, *Introduzione*, in J. N. Findlay, *Platone: le dottrine scritte e non scritte*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1994, pp. XXIV–XXV. E. Berti, *L'Oggetto dell'Eikos Mythos nel Timeo di Platone*, in T. Calvo and L. Brisson (eds), *Interpreting the Timaeus – Critias*, Sankt Augustin: Acaemia Verlag, 1997, pp. 119–31.

force: its metaphysical settings and parameters actually create the world – if for ‘world’, as the Greek *cosmos* or the Latin *mundus*, we understand precisely the product of an act of ordering chaos. Here comes the mythological aspect of my *eikos mythos*. It is possible, narratively at least, to present this cosmogonic force as almost a thing, whose world-making activity is revealed by its internal structure. I chose to call the cosmogonic form of our age, ‘Technic’.⁵

In this book, particularly in Chapter 2, I wish to offer a possible anatomy of Technic, detailing the different parts that compose it and that account for the main reality-settings of our time. This is no normal reality-system, however, since one of its main characteristics is that it involves a disintegration of reality as such. Such a disintegration of reality – which will be described in detail in the intermission between Chapters 2 and 3 – accounts for the nihilistic quality of Technic. This metaphysical nihilism is the destiny that Technic inscribes within the world that it goes on to create, and it can be found in its purest form in the central kernel of Technic: the principle of ‘absolute language’. In the course of my analysis of Technic’s cosmogony, absolute language will figure as the first principle, acting as the innermost level from which all other aspects of Technic are emanated, like light out of a merciless sun. In keeping with my attempt to convey my analysis in a narrative, almost mythological form, I have chosen to borrow from Neoplatonic philosophy the use of ‘hypostases’ to describe the various levels that compose the overall form of Technic. Every hypostasis acts as a sub-force in its own right, defining a specific layer in the overall cosmogonic architecture through which Technic structures our world. Evermore mythologically, I have paired each hypostasis with an ‘archetypal incarnation’: a figure from our everyday world that embodies the main qualities of a particular level of Technic.

But Technic is just one possible cosmogonic force, and only one possible form of reality. Without doubt it enjoys hegemonic status today, and it shapes the world and the existential experience of

⁵I have chosen to adopt the (mis)spelling ‘Technic’, rather than the more common ‘Technics’ or the German ‘Technik’, as an oblique homage to the Italian form ‘Tecnica’. This inopportune choice, can be read as part of my overall mythopoeic project of a ‘Mediterranean’ philosophy.

billions of our contemporaries – but this doesn't make it any less contingent than any other possible form of reality. The second part of this book proceeds precisely from the realization of the contingency of Technic's cosmology, and from the necessity to imagine a different world deriving from different reality-settings. If the metaphysical architecture of Technic's world has produced such an annihilating immiseration of our existential experience, then we must imagine a new set of reality-principles that would allow for a new range of the possible to emerge. Let's be immediately clear, though: my attempt is not to provide a blueprint for a global process of renewal of reality. This book is not a political manifesto, or a general call to arms. More modestly, it is a reminder that reality-systems are contingent conglomerates of metaphysical axioms, and that their modification is always possible. Indeed, we are always able to modify our own reality-settings beyond the diktats of our social context, even when history tells us that we are powerless and stuck. This volume is intended for those who lie defeated by history and the present, in the most general and most tragic sense. Regardless of the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves to live, and even if we are completely hopeless about our power to modify the balance of forces on a macroscopic scale, we are always capable of modifying our own reality-settings – thus giving to ourselves a different reality, a different world and a different existential experience within it. Is it pure illusion? Not any more, or any less, than any other reality or any other world that is hegemonic enough to impose its own social institutions over a specific historical period.

At this point, however, a second clarification is needed: I am not claiming that we should relinquish altogether any involvement in worldly activity and politics. Rather, I am pointing in two directions, one pre-political and one post-political. On the one hand, the silent acceptance of a certain reality-system over another goes to define which politics and social policies are possible. Changing reality-settings is a pre-political process that is crucial to any radical rethinking of our political and social life. On the other, my attempt is to offer an emergency plan that is immediately useful to individuals living in a 'worst case scenario'. My main concern was: how can we still have a dignified life, even when everything seems to have been taken away from us? In this sense, this book suggests a possible therapy to the historical maladies that affect us today – as they

affected countless others before us, and predictably also after us in the future. Precisely, to the malady of having to live within history.⁶

I chose to call 'Magic' the therapeutic path of embracing a particular, alternative reality-system. This is, once again, a mythological trope. Like I personified the current reality-system as 'Technic', so I named 'Magic' the alternative cosmology that I would like to propose. Indeed, neither Technic nor Magic are actually 'things' that we physically encounter – rather, they are akin to those 'hyperobjects' described by American philosopher Timothy Morton⁷ as massively distributed, invisible entities that are perceivable only through the mark that they leave on the world. I preferred to define both of them as 'cosmogonic forces' – as if they were mythological deities that could feature in Hesiod's poem. In a sense, I borrowed the method employed, by Giordano Bruno in his 1586 book *Lampas Triginta Statuarum* – where he identified each cosmological principle with a 'statue', and each cluster of statues with original mythological characters going under the names of Chaos, the Ogre, the Night, the Light and so on. As Bruno pointed out:

All things can be easily figured in the form of statues, inasmuch as it is possible to orderly explicate all their ways of being as certain hypostatic configurations.⁸

⁶I am willing to follow Zbigniew Herbert's Mr Cogito, who 'will accept a supporting role / he will not dwell in history' (*Mr Cogito's Game*, in Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, London: Atlantic Books, 2014, p. 328), precisely to avoid the brutality of historiography described in Herbert's *Sequoia*: 'a cross section of a tree the copper trunk of the West / with immeasurably regular rings like circles on the water / and a cross-grained fool wrote in the dates of human history / ... The tree's Tacitus was a surveyor he had no adjectives / no syntax expressive of terror he knew no words at all / so he counted added years and centuries as if to say it's / nothing but birth and death nothing just birth and death / and inside the bloody pulp of the sequoia' (*Sequoia*, in Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, London: Atlantic Books, 2014, p. 296). In doing so, I am also willing to endorse in part the attitude expressed by Adam Zagajewski, when he writes 'One day apes made their grab for power / ... Deeply involved in our other pursuits, / we didn't notice: someone read Aristotle, / someone else was wholly in love. / ... Apes, it seems, made their grab for power' (*Apes*, in A. Zagajewski, *Without End: New and Selected Poems*, New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2003) – though of course, with a number of caveats, as discussed in the introduction.

⁷See T. Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

⁸My translation from the Italian translation of G. Bruno, *Lampas triginta statuarum*, in *Opere Magiche*, Milano: Adelphi, 2000, p. 1393.

I have also implicitly assigned a specific geography to each of the two cosmogonic forces that I discuss, although this is once again a mythological and metaphorical geography rather than a physical one. While Technic represents the spirit of a Northern force – indeed, the first two chapters will refer almost exclusively to thinkers from Northern Europe – Magic belongs to the area of the Mediterranean. This is a different Mediterranean from that which we encounter on the maps, tough, and in fact Chapters 2 and 3 (where I discuss Magic's cosmogony and Magic's world) will include references spanning from Ibn Arabi's Andalusia through Mulla Sadra's Persia, to Adi Shankara's India. Like James Hillman's conception of Greece,⁹ my Mediterranean is a place of the imagination rather than a product of cartography. Magic's Mediterranean and Technic's North resemble those sacred cities that French philosopher Henry Corbin locates at the level of the 'imaginal world' (*mundus imaginalis*), where things become forces, and ideas become models for our existence in the world. In this sense, Magic's reality-system is not an 'utopia', but rather a force that lives in *Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd*, 'the land of non-where', which Persian philosopher Suhrawardi describes as existing always alongside our material world, however invisibly.¹⁰ The Mediterranean is a form of reality, which resounds only metaphorically with the historical modes of life that have emerged along the coasts of Europe, Africa and Asia. My Mediterranean is a vast area of the spirit that, like the sea which it recalls, challenges and transcends the linguistic divisions imposed by exoteric (i.e. public, descriptive) politics and culture.¹¹

⁹'A historical and geographical psychic region, a fantasy or mythic Greece, an inner Greece of the mind that is only indirectly connected with actual geography and actual history.' J. Hillman, *An Essay on Pan*, in *Pan and the Nightmare*, Washington, DC: Spring Publications, 2015, p. 10.

¹⁰See Sheikh S. Suhrawardi, *A Tale of Occidental Exile*, in *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises*, translated by W. M. Trackston Jr, London: Octagon Press, 1982, pp. 100–8; see also H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Tome 2: Sohrawardi et les platoniciens de Perse*, Paris: Gallimard, 1991, Chapters V–VII.

¹¹My notion of the Mediterranean can also recall the figure of the Egyptian-Greek god Serapis, Ptolemy I of Egypt's great religious/poetic invention in the third century BCE. Like Serapis, my notion of the Mediterranean is a mythopoeic fiction that wishes to integrate several different strands of thought, through a form of syncretism that presents strong esoteric connotations. For a scholarly interpretation of Serapis in this direction, see P. Schmitt, *Serapis: The Universal Mystery Religion*, in J. Campbell (ed.),

It is an area of migration and contamination, where sunlight doesn't merely reveal the qualities of things and their productive categories, but primarily their ineffable dimension. Like the midday hour in summer, it is haunted by an unnameable temporality, beyond the measure of clocks and of history books.¹²

Indeed, the notion of the 'ineffable' constitutes within Magic's cosmogony the first and original principle – in specular opposition to the principle of 'absolute language' in Technic. The ineffable dimension of existence is that which cannot be captured by descriptive language, and which escapes all attempts to put it to 'work' – either in the economic series of production, or in those of citizenship, technology, science, social roles and so on. As recently noted by the Italian philosopher Massimo Donà:

Magical thinking lives wholly and always in the 'initial difference' of a process which can never be fully accomplished. 'Magical' is thus that form of thinking which is aware of the excess at the basis of any step of its un-folding.¹³

In Magic's system, the ineffable dimension of existence – which I describe as 'life' – emanates in turn a series of reality-making hypostases, at once similarly and in the opposite fashion than it happens with Technic.

The specularity, or mirror resemblance, between Magic's and Technic's reality-system runs throughout this book, and structures it. I conceived this volume as a folding mirror, so that the first and last chapters, and the two central ones, are placed like specular reflections of each other. Chapter 1 on 'Technic's world' is the negative reflection of Chapter 4 'Magic's world', in the same way

The Mysteries: papers from the Eranos Yearbook, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978, pp. 104–15.

¹²It is also somehow reminiscent of Zagajewski's Sicily: 'At night we sailed past shadowed, / enigmatic shores. Far off, the huge leaves / of hills swayed like a giant's dreams. / Waves slapped the boat's wood, / a warm wind kissed the sails, / stars rushed, helter-skelter, / to tell the history of the world. / That's Sicily, someone whispered, / three-cornered island, owl's breath, / handkerchief of the dead' (*That's Sicily*, in A. Zagajewski, *Mysticism for Beginners: Poems*, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

¹³My translation from M. Donà, *Magia e Filosofia*, Milano: Bompiani, 2004, p. 172.

that Chapter 2 ‘Technic’s cosmogony’ is the specular opposite of Chapter 3, ‘Magic’s cosmogony’. Even more in detail, the individual hypostases of Technic’s and Magic’s cosmogonies are placed in negatively specular relationship: the first principle of one system reflects and thus is the opposite of the last hypostasis of the other system, and vice versa, and so on for each level. Acting as the hinge between the two mirroring surfaces of Technic and Magic, I placed the brief intermission ‘What is reality?’, where I attempt to clarify my understanding of reality as such and of the mechanisms that regulate its workings – whether they are shaped by Technic, by Magic or by any other possible cosmogonic force. While the rest of the book wishes to serve as a therapeutic instrument of sorts, the hinge-section at its centre wishes to systematize its core methodological proposal.

Before closing this brief introduction, I would like to thank a number of people that have helped me in writing this book. First of all, I would like to thank Teodora Pasquinelli – not only for her loving patience, but also for her help in clarifying with me a number of crucial concepts and stylistic choices since the earliest stages of composition of this book. If this book has any merits, it’s in great part thanks to endless conversations with Teodora. Thanks also to Professor Gaitanidis for his decisive help to get me started on writing these pages and to my friend Anastasios for his continuous support during the writing process. Thanks to the publisher Bloomsbury for having believed in my proposal, and particularly to my editor Frankie Mace who championed it. Thanks to the peer reviewers for their comments, to my dear friends Franco Berardi, Saul Newman and Adelita Husni-Bey for their support and suggestions, and infinite thanks to my friend Timothy Morton for honouring this volume with his preface. Thanks, as always, to my family, Nellina, Luciano and Elisabetta Campagna for their closeness and even just for their presence. Finally, thanks to my son Arturo for confirming to me every day that, despite all its bleakness, the world is still host to a wonderful treasure.

CHAPTER ONE

Technic's world

Crisis of reality

To this day, when evening falls, the clanging of tin armour still echoes through a few open windows in the ancient historic centres of Sicilian cities. The Saracen army is besieging Paris, where King Charlemagne awaits the return of the envoys he sent out to seek help for his desperate resistance. Meanwhile, drunk with a love filter, Rinaldo is chasing Angelica through forests and valleys, although she, under the effect of an opposite filter, hates nobody more than him. High above them, above the clouds, Astolfo is riding Elijah's flaming chariot over the white surface of the moon, looking for Orlando's wits, which he lost to his unlucky love. Voices rise in roars, as the clashing of paper-thin swords sets the rhythm to the duels, and warriors' heads fall rumbling on the wooden floor. Children and adults stare in silence or burst out in laughter, punctuating the opening and closing of the stage curtains with rounds of applause.

Since the nineteenth century, the traditional puppet theatre *Opera dei Pupi*¹ has brought to generations of Sicilians stories from the reinterpretation of the Carolingian Cycle by Renaissance poets

¹On the history and significance of *Opera dei Pupi*, see in particular A. Pasqualino, *L'Opera dei Pupi*, Palermo: Sellerio, 2008, including Antonino Buttita's *Prefazione*.

Ariosto and Boiardo.² Each puppet is a unique piece of artisanal mastery, as the puppeteer carefully selects the perfect cloth, wood, tin and paints to recreate the dramatic versions of the characters in the saga. As the story unfolds, Angelica, Rinaldo, Orlando and their legendary companions travel through lands known and unknown, perhaps imaginary, perhaps as real as anything that is spared by disbelief. Their travelling, however, always takes place in secret. At the end of each act, the puppeteer closes the curtains and his assistants rush to remove the painted background of the previous scene to replace it with a new one, picturing a new land. As the curtains reopen, magnificent walled cities arise, only to sink again behind the red velvet, returning as empty beaches or mountain peaks, floating castles or lonely sea rocks, until the curtains close one last time and the lights go off for the night. In the *Opera dei Pupi*, certain things are allowed to move in plain sight, while others can do so only discreetly; characters can enter and leave the stage at will, but the vanishing and reappearance of the world behind them, stuck to the wooden frame that holds its painted fabric, must take place in secret.

The mix of fluidity and stillness, publicness and secrecy of Sicilian puppet theatre, returns in our experience of the way cultural values and reality-systems change throughout history. Like characters on the stage, specific notions of beauty, morality or justice seem to dance at the rhythm of history's unfolding through the centuries, engaging in duels or chasing one another, suddenly entering or vanishing from the scene. Behind them, stuck to the frame of what we call 'reality', the image of the world stands still, offering a necessary background to their adventures. As one act moves into the next, however, there is no puppeteer to manage the curtains and spare us the vision of the catastrophe. To everybody's witness, the background is removed and a glimpse of the dark void behind it adds to the shock of a sudden shift in our understanding of what constitutes reality and the world – until a new background comes, mercifully, to allow a new act to start afresh. Yet, that brief moment has revealed to us something important: that the background too,

²That is, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, L. Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, 2 volumes, London: Penguin, 1975 and Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, M. M. Boiardo, *Orlando Innamorato: Orlando in Love*, Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2004.

like a static puppet, is just another character in the story. That nothing truly stands still as a *datum*, as an unshakeable matter of fact. Reality itself is as fragile and fleeting as any cultural value, and its cyclical collapse and rebirth is the archetypal catastrophe, the *kata-strophein*, 'stepping down'³ of what we thought was the stuff of the world, followed by its descent into the darkness of chaos – as we wait expectantly for the void to be filled, once again, by a new cosmic order, a new reality.

As reality changes, the world also changes dramatically. While cultural values define our way of reading and judging specific things in the world, reality as such refers to our general understanding of what kind of entities the world is and isn't made of. Changes in the status of reality bring about a mutation in the fundamental composition of the world, and thus also in terms of the possibilities of existence, action and imagination within it. Over the course of time, humanity has repeatedly witnessed such catastrophic changes of reality: from an animistic world teeming with the endless proliferation of divine life, to the distant Platonic universe of pure ideas; from the banishment of gods and spirits away from matter, to their substitution by an invisible world of microorganisms and so on. In most cases, however, as the old background starts to crumble, a new one is ready behind it to take its place. The moment of passage between them is always disconcerting, but the shock that accompanies it, has usually more to do with the difficult adjustments that we must make to the characters, rather than with the glimpse at the empty backstage behind them. But what would happen, if such emptiness was to become a more permanent state? What if, along the chain of catastrophes leading from one form of reality to the next, at some point the substitution was frozen at its most disconcerting moment, in full view? How could the characters keep acting, and what in the world could save them from paralysis, if *the* world (and not just *their* world) had disintegrated?

The Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino devoted an important part of his work to exploring the consequences of such abyssal disintegrations of reality, within so-called primitive

³See Nasrin Qadar's interesting considerations on the connotations of *kata-strophein*, in the *Introduction* to N. Qadar, *Narratives of Catastrophe: Boris Diop, ben jelloun, Katibi*, New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2009, pp. 1–15.

and archaic societies.⁴ To societies that don't share a belief in the narrative unfolding of history, there is no guarantee that a catastrophe will be automatically followed by the emergence of a new, solid background to life in the world. Without an intervention of some sort to rescue reality and to cyclically regenerate it, it might just putrefy into endless chaos. As de Martino theorized in his 1948 book *Il Mondo Magico*, archaic societies employ magic as a crucial tool both to defend themselves from the risk of a catastrophe-without-end, and to reconstruct reality as a whole. Magic can intervene on the microcosmic reality of a single individual in peril of personal disintegration (what we catalogue today as a form of psychopathology), or on the all-encompassing reality of the macrocosm. In de Martino's words:

Necessarily connected to the magic risk of losing one's soul, is the other magic risk of losing the world. ... When a certain sensible horizon enters a crisis, the main risk is constituted by the crumbling of each and every limit: everything can become everything, that is to say: nothingness emerges. But magic ... intervenes to put a stop to the emerging chaos, and to resolve it into an order. Thus, from this angle, magic becomes a tool to restore horizons that have entered a crisis. And with the demiurgy that characterises it, it recuperates for the humans the very world that they were about to lose.⁵

As observed by de Martino, the disintegration of reality has to do with the dissolution of its limits, that is, of the internal bonds that constitute, not one specific reality, but reality as such. Variations in the arrangement of such bonds allow for the formation of different kinds of reality, but their altogether dissolution leads reality itself

⁴For an interesting discussion of de Martino's notion of the 'recurrent anthropological risk' (E. de Martino, *La Fine del Mondo*, Torino: Einaudi, 2002, pp. 14–15) of a 'crisis of presence' of apocalyptic proportions – to the point of becoming a true crisis of reality – see S. F. Berardini, *Presenza e Negazione: Ernesto de Martino tra filosofia, storia e religione*, Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2015, Chapter V, pp. 95–117.

⁵E. de Martino, *Il Mondo Magico* (1948), Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2010, p. 123 – my translation from the original Italian. de Martino's neologism 'demiurgia' in Italian is here translated as 'demiurgy'.

to disintegration. Later in this book,⁶ we shall discuss at length what the indissoluble elements are that, together, allow for reality's emersion from chaos. For now, suffice it to say that 'reality' is the name that we assign to a state in which the dimension of essence (*what* something is) and the dimension of existence (that something *is*) are inextricably bound to each other, without merging into one another.⁷ As different forms of essence and of existence alternate, and as their relationship varies over time, we witness the passage between successive forms of reality. But whenever one of the two overtakes the other, or denies its legitimacy, or severs the ties that connect them, or, even worse, when both of them vanish, then reality as such also effectively vanishes. Reality is a weave made of essence and existence, like warp and weft, and the event of its undoing requires a weaver (for de Martino, a 'magician') that is capable of interlacing the two back together, regardless of the specific forms and colours that each of them can take.

The feeling of an undoing of the fabric of reality is far from alien to our current experience of the world. Whether we interiorize it as psychopathology, or whether we attempt to detect its symptoms within contemporary culture, a ghostly presence haunts the age in which we live. It is no longer the old 'uncanny guest', the most familiar form of nihilism, that uproots and destroys specific cultural values referring to beauty or morality. Its sphere of action is no longer the stage, and its victims are not just the frail puppets of wood and cloth that traverse it. This is the age of metaphysical nihilism:⁸ the nihilism that sets the background on fire and undoes the very fabric of reality. Under its attack, 'everything can become everything, that is to say: nothingness emerges'. The growing nothingness of things, and their equivalence, emerges as two facets

⁶See chapter 'What is Reality?'.

⁷The earliest theoretical distinction of essence and existence is traditionally attributed to Ibn Sina (Avicenna). However, it has recently been argued that it might date back even earlier to the work of ninth-century Iraqi philosopher Al-Kindi – see P. Adamson, *Before Essence and Existence: Al-Kindi's Conception of Being*, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2002, pp. 297–312.

⁸For a discussion of the contemporary mindset as bound to a form of metaphysical nihilism, see in particular, E. Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, London and New York: Verso, 2016 – although Severino's diagnosis of this issue differs from mine in several important respects.

of the same phenomenon.⁹ The combined annihilation of things' full and autonomous existence, and their total transformation into sets of equivalent serial units, is at the heart of the contemporary process of transfiguration of the world into an impalpable cloud of equivalent financial units, digital data, chains of information, items of identification. Yet, it would still be insufficient to describe the effects of metaphysical nihilism as the substitution of a world of things with a world of empty names. Indeed, it is not just the case that 'of the rose of old nothing remains but the name', since names themselves have become translucent in their emptiness and equivalence: through them only shines the all-encompassing force of grammar. Once left unbound, grammar separates essences from existence, reduces the former to mere positioning within a syntactic series, and annuls the latter as unnecessary and spurious. What are 'things' nowadays, apart from signposts of the position they occupy within the productive syntax of technology, economics or societal norms? Like a novel reduced to pure grammar, the present age has shunned the question of meaning as a sign of superstition and nostalgia, while relegating reality to the status of an obsolete concept which is to be overcome if we wish to fully unleash our productive potential.

The crisis of reality that we witness today shouldn't be interpreted as the disquieting but fleeting passage between two different ages or reality-systems. On the contrary, it is in itself the symptom of an age that has come to stay, and that has made of the collapse of the background onto the stage the mark of its reign. Its metaphysical nihilism is the direct consequence of its specific cosmology, according to which the linear seriality of production, and not the

⁹These aspects of the contemporary crisis of reality are lyrically expressed by Czesław Miłosz in his poem *Oeconomia Divina*: 'Roads on concrete pillars, cities of glass and cast iron, / airfields larger than tribal dominions / suddenly ran short of their essence and disintegrated / not in a dream but really, for, subtracted from themselves, / they could only hold on as do things which should not last. / ... Materiality escaped ... / Everywhere was nowhere and nowhere, everywhere. / Letters in books turned silver-pale, wobbled, and faded / People, afflicted with an incomprehensible distress, / were throwing off their clothes on the piazzas so that nakedness might call / for judgment. / But in vain they were longing after horror, pity, and anger. / Neither work nor leisure / was justified, / nor the face, ... / nor any existence' (*Oeconomia Divina*, in C. Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, London: Penguin, 2006, p. 263).

paradoxical complexity of reality, is the necessary condition for the world to 'take place'.

If the status of reality is what defines a specific historical age, then we can interpret the disintegration of reality, and the epidemic paralysis of action and imagination that necessarily follow it, as the symptom of the 'form' of our time. Thus, it is at the level of the form of the present age that we have to lead the next step of our investigation.

Technic

To proceed with our investigation of the roots of our current crisis of reality, let us remain a little longer in southern Italy, travelling upwards from Sicily towards Rome. We shall briefly follow in the footsteps of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's famous journey, paying particular attention to one strand of his kaleidoscopic research. Goethe's quest, to grasp the primeval 'form' of plants, will help us develop a clearer sense of what we can understand as a 'form' – with a view to adopt this notion in our analysis of the structure of the current reality-system.

Seeing such a variety of new and renewed forms, my old fancy suddenly came back to mind: among this multitude might I not discover the Primal Plant [*Urpflanze*]? There certainly must be one. Otherwise, how could I recognize that this or that form was a plant if all were not built on the same basic model?¹⁰ (Botanical Gardens, Palermo, 17 April 1787)

The Primal Plant is going to be the strangest creature in the world, which Nature herself shall envy me. With this model and the key to it, it will be possible to go on forever inventing plants and know that their existence is logical; that is to say, if they do not actually exist, they could, for they are not the shadow phantoms of vain imagination, but possess an inner necessity and truth.¹¹ (Naples, 17 May 1787)

¹⁰J. W. von Goethe, *Italian Journey*, London: Penguin, 1970, pp. 258–9.

¹¹von Goethe, *Italian Journey*, pp. 310–1.

While walking in the Public Gardens of Palermo, it came to me in a flash that in the organ of the plant which we are accustomed to call the leaf lies the true Proteus who can hide or reveal himself in vegetal forms. From first to last, the plant is nothing but leaf, which is so inseparable from the future germ that one cannot think of one without the other.¹² (Rome, 31 July 1787)

These three brief entries from Goethe's diaries, offer us a glimpse into the crucial stages of development of the morphological/botanical theory that would later constitute his booklet *The Metamorphosis of Plants*.¹³ According to Goethe, in a fashion that betrays his Hellenic influences, it is possible to define a certain category of things, on the basis of their formal consistency. It is as if all the many different entities that are part of a certain category, were variations of a common archetype, like variations on the same melody. This archetype, like a Proteus, is capable of morphing into a range of different particulars, while always remaining true to itself. Thus, in the case of plants, Goethe suggests that we can consider the *leaf* as the original archetype out of which all different kinds of plant emerge, as its variations, each adapted to the potential and necessity of their respective situation. Yet, such an archetypal leaf – unlike the mythical *Urpflanze* that he sought at first, and then abandoned – is nowhere to be found; it doesn't quite exist in the same way that historical ancestors or Platonic ideas are supposed to do. Although it provides, so to say, the melodic centre around which a certain kind of entities orbit, it is itself irreducible to any specific, existing entity.

We can consider this kind of analysis to be morphological, in that it takes as the defining quality of a thing or of an aggregate of things, their participation to a particular 'form', of which the archetype constitutes the fundamental and original theme. As long as the variations on the archetype remain faithful to the range of possibilities inscribed in its theme, we encounter a representative of a certain type of entity – while as soon as the variations exceeds the internal limits of the archetype, thus betraying the form, then

¹²Ibid., p. 366.

¹³J. W. von Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

we must admit that we are facing another type of entity altogether. The morphological approach, despite its shortcomings, provides a method to create an order (and thus a name) out of extremely complex phenomena, while at the same time respecting their complexity and avoiding reducing them to mere products of such an order or name. It is at once a metaphysical and an aesthetic approach, in that it grounds the definition of the type of entities that exist, on the intuition and expansion of the harmonic sympathies between them. Its application to the various objects of analysis often echoes a biological outlook, possibly because an organism, with its paradoxical patterns of life and matter, is itself the archetype of what a coherent yet irreducibly complex 'form' is.

In fact, it was on the basis of a biological interpretation, that the German philosopher of history Oswald Spengler applied Goethe's morphological method to the analysis of human civilizations. In his magnum opus, *The Decline of the West*,¹⁴ first published in 1918, Spengler rejects the traditional idea of a linear history unfolding through different ages over the course of time. In its place, he suggests the vision of a mosaic of distinct civilizations that, like living entities, go through phases of youth, maturity, senility and eventual collapse. Each civilization, like a unique species in its own right, is centred around a fundamental archetype or 'prime symbol', whose form it actualizes in its social, economic, cultural, political and scientific endeavours. Thus, according to Spengler, we can understand Western history so far, as essentially reducible to the 'lives' of two different civilizations or 'high cultures': the Apollonian, whose prime symbol is the 'body', between 900 BCE and 100 CE; and the Faustian, whose prime symbol is 'infinity', from 1000 CE to roughly 2000 CE, as per Spengler's predictions. Likewise, we can understand the Magian civilization of the Arabic Middle East between 100 CE and 900 CE as centred around the archetype of the 'magic cave', the civilization of ancient Egypt as centred around the archetype of the 'path' connecting life and the afterlife, and so on. Each prime symbol defines the range of possibilities of a certain civilization, and influences the way in which it operates on the world; while the Apollonians structured their thought and action around the 'point-present' concern of the 'nearby', the Faustians

¹⁴O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

devoted their energies to a ‘ceilingless’ chase of infinity in all its forms, from mathematics to technology, from politics to music.

In some of his most disquieting pages, revealing his strong fascination with the underlying ideology of Nazism, and particularly in his 1931 pamphlet *Man and Technics*,¹⁵ Spengler recognizes *Technik* as the peculiar (though not exclusive) product of the Faustian civilization, and connects it with its thirst for infinite power. Understanding the essence of Technic as related to the instinct for violent appropriation and domination of the ‘beast of prey’ (which, coherently with his misinterpretation of Nietzsche, he deems as ‘noble’), Spengler unveils both the fundamental connection between Technic and Western modernity, and the former’s essential tendency to uproot and rewrite reality.

Both these aspects of Technic, and particularly its violence, were witnessed first-hand by one of the most eclectic German authors of the twentieth century, Ernst Jünger. A volunteer in the ranks of the assault Shock Troops, Jünger barely survived the ‘storms of steel’ of the First World War. In the trenches on the Western Front, he had a chance to experience the cataclysmic power with which Technic can literally uproot the reality of the world, unleashing its power like an ‘elemental force’ capable of rewriting what humans believe to be the unchangeable substance of the world. As it was immediately clear to the then young author, the First World War was the dawn not just of a new kind of ‘warfare of materials’, but of an altogether new kind of reality. From the murderous flood that had buried the reality of old, a new cosmic order was about to emerge – and the experience of this passage left Jünger at once utterly paralysed and strangely exhilarated.

Here, and really only here, I was to observe that there is a quality of dread that feels as unfamiliar as a foreign country. In moments when I felt it, I experienced no fear as such but a kind of exalted, almost demoniacal lightness. ... The ability to think logically and the feeling of gravity, both seemed to have been removed. We had the sensation of the ineluctable and the unconditionally necessary, as if we were facing an elemental force.¹⁶

¹⁵O. Spengler, *Man and Technics: a Contribution to a Philosophy of Life*, London: Arktos Media, 2015.

¹⁶E. Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, London: Penguin, 2004, pp. 93, 95.

During the interwar period, such 'demoniacal lightness' didn't abandon Jünger, as he attempted to distil his early intuitions of the new spirit of the age in his 1932 book *Der Arbeiter* (The Worker)¹⁷. In its pages, Jünger developed an exalted, apocalyptic vision of a new world reborn as a product of Technic, and centred around the totalizing principle of Work. This was no mere 'work' as we commonly understand it, but Work as a fundamental principle to which every social form and structure was to be adapted. As Technic would vanquish any previous form of reality and all remnants of the old and feeble values, Work would transform the innermost aspects of all things, and particularly of humans, as if by rewriting their whole genetic code. The actualization of the prime symbol of Work would then amount to a thorough mutation of the existent, that would be at once metaphysical, ethical and aesthetic.

One of the features of a fundamental creative energy is the ability to petrify symbols into an infinite repetition which resembles the process of nature, as in the acanthus leave, the phallus, the lingam, the scarab, the cobra, the sun circle, the resting Buddha. In worlds so constituted a foreigner doesn't feel awe but fear, and still today it is not possible to face the great pyramid at night, or the solitary temple of Segesta, sunk in the sunlight, without being scared. Evidently the human type which represents the form of the Worker is moving towards such a kind of world, clear and closed upon itself like a magic ring; and as it grows closer to it, the individual increasingly turns into the type.¹⁸

It will take the rise of Nazism, the death of his son in battle, the collapse of Germany and, most importantly to Jünger, the invention of the atomic bomb, to swerve him off the path of a heroic embrace of Technic's coming reign. We shall return to this fascinating turn in Jünger's thought towards an esoteric form of individualist anarchism, in the last part of this book.¹⁹ For now, let us continue exploring

¹⁷E. Jünger, *The Worker*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017.

¹⁸E. Jünger, *Der Arbeiter* (1932) – my translation from the Italian edition, *L'Operaio*, Parma: Guanda, 2010, p. 207–8.

¹⁹An excellent reconstruction of Jünger's changing perspective over the course of his life, can be found in his conversations with Franco Volpi and Antonio Gnoli, published in A. Gnoli and F. Volpi, *I Prossimi Titani: Conversazioni con Ernst*

the question of the essence of Technic from a less lyrical and more rigorously philosophical angle. Here, we should begin by taking into account the examination of Technic proposed by another controversial adherent to the Conservative Revolutionary Movement of the early twentieth century: Martin Heidegger. In his 1954 essay *The Question Concerning Technology*,²⁰ Heidegger develops a number of themes previously sketched by Jünger and other interwar authors, to define exactly what we can understand as the essence of technology. He articulated his answer between the notions of *Gestell* (enframing) and of instrumentality. Anything that appears to us as a 'true' element of the world (that is, anything whose truthfulness, *aletheia*, consists in the removal of the veil that hid it from us, and its emergence as an object of our experience), does so within a certain frame. Enframing is thus a necessary process for us to be able to experience the world, as it allows us to understand things as clear and distinct entities. The essence of technology consists in a specific way of enframing the world, which unveils it as a 'stock-pile of standing-reserve', that is as nothing but the accumulated instrumental value of everything and anything. A forest is no longer a forest, but a stockpile of timber ready to be sent to production; a waterfall is no longer a waterfall, but a stockpile of hydro-electrical units ready to be extracted; a person is no longer a person, but a stockpile of labour ready to be employed; and so on. Thus, Heidegger points out, the essence of technology is nothing technological in itself, but 'the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve'.²¹ Following Heidegger's hypothesis, if we understand reality as the frame within which the existent presents itself to our experience, we can observe how Technic consists primarily in a specific reality-system, and thus, in a specific way things emerge in the world. According to Heidegger, Technic's method of 'unveiling' consists fundamentally in presenting every thing as entirely reducible to its instrumental value in view of its mobilization within the productive apparatus – where such apparatus

Jünger, Milano: Adelphi, 1997. It can also be traced in Jünger's enormous biography, H. Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger: Una vita lunga un secolo*, Torino: Effata, 2013.

²⁰M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, New York: Harper, 1977.

²¹M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, New York: Harper, 1977, p. 20.

itself is in turn just another standing-reserve ready to be employed in the service of its own expansion, and so on ad infinitum, along the endless spiral that constitutes Technic's cosmological structure.

Although Heidegger focused on the question of the essence of technology, he didn't do so from a completely ahistorical perspective. On the contrary, in line with his general philosophical outlook, he understood Technic as the specific form of 'unveiling' that characterizes a certain age of the world – most dramatically, the age in which he found himself to live. This historical approach to a philosophical analysis of the form of Technic returns in the work of the Italian philosopher Emanuele Severino, whose book on *Il Destino della Tecnica*²² (The Destiny of Technic) first appeared in 1998 as a summary of some important aspects of his decades-long research.²³ According to Emanuele Severino, we can understand the nature of Technic by looking at its role within the contemporary world. Over the course of recent history, all the different political/economic/religious systems competing against each other for global supremacy, invariably invested in the expansion of their technological apparatus as their main competitive edge. Consumed by the agonistic imperative to win, they promoted such expansion to the point that this eventually became their sole (and thus, paradoxically, shared) goal. The limitless expansion of the ability to put the world to productive work took over the world as its new destiny and, in so doing, erased all other ideological differences. What else is Technic as the essence of technology, but the spirit of absolute instrumentality, according to which everything is merely a means to an end – where the only ultimate end is, once again, the limitless expansion of the accumulated productive ability?

Differently from economic, political, ethical and religious forces – each of which aims at the production of a specific *telos*, to the

²²E. Severino, *Il Destino della Tecnica*, Milano: BUR, 1998.

²³Among Severino's many published books, the following are particularly important to trace the development of his broader argument about technic and nihilism (and about a possible way out of their deadlock): E. Severino, *Essenza del Nichilismo*, Milano: Adelphi, 1995; E. Severino, *Destino della Necessità*, Milano: Adelphi, 1980; E. Severino, *La Tendenza Fondamentale del Nostro Tempo*, Milano: Adelphi, 1988; E. Severino, *Oltre il Linguaggio*, Milano: Adelphi, 1992; E. Severino, *La Gloria*, Milano: Adelphi, 2001; E. Severino, *Intorno al Senso del Nulla*, 2013.

exclusion of all other goals and forces – Technic, which they would like to use as a means, tends to constituting itself as a planetary apparatus that is increasingly free from the conflictual fractioning to which such forces attempt to reduce it; that is, Technic aims not to a specific and exclusive goal, but to the limitless increase in the ability to pursue goals, which is also the limitless ability to satisfy needs. It is thus inevitable that, in the conflictual situation in which those forces find themselves – that is, the situation where these are guided by the will to prevail on their adversaries through the strengthening of the instruments at their disposal, whose efficacy is determined by their technological and rational-scientific character – it is inevitable that such forces eventually renounce to their specific goals, exactly to avoid slowing down, limiting and weakening the limitless strengthening of their instrument – the scientific-technologic apparatus through which they intend to pursue their goal.²⁴

In Spengler we saw Technic as the Faustian drive towards infinite uprooting and predation, in Jünger it was the force capable of mutating humans into the universal ‘type’ of the Worker, in Heidegger we observed it as the enframing that reveals the world as a stockpiling of standing-reserve ready to be mobilized for production and finally in Severino we encountered Technic also as a ‘destiny’ of the world and of everything that populates it. In other words, we began to see Technic as a powerful cosmogonic force, capable of taking over the very status of reality, and transform it according to its own principles.

Yet, this conception of Technic is far from being the only one available. At the polar opposite to the intellectual approaches discussed so far, we find for example thinkers in the lineage of French philosopher Gilbert Simondon, whose understanding of the essence of technology fundamentally challenges the distinction between ‘matter’ and ‘form’. In his texts *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*²⁵ and *L'individuation psychique et collective*,²⁶

²⁴E. Severino, *Il Destino della Tecnica*, Milano: BUR, 1998, pp. 43–4. –my translation from the italian.

²⁵G. Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

²⁶In G. Simondon, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, Grenoble: Editions Jérôme Millon, 2005.

Simondon presents technology essentially as a function lying at the core of what he calls the process of 'individuation'. According to Simondon, a thing (any thing, from a crystal to a single person to large social groups) is never stably individuated as 'that' thing, but it is in a continuous process of actualization of its original, overflowing potential. As the process of individuation unfolds, we witness the procession of a long series of 'individuals', each defined by the specific limits of its interaction with what constitute its surrounding at that particular stage. Beyond the actualized series of individuals, however, a boundless wealth of potentiality always lies unrealized. Within this system, technology functions essentially as the mediator between an individual and its surroundings: it is the very process through which an individual negotiates its own limits, and thus its own form, in the context of a mutual relation with the world around it. As such, technology is both a network of relations, and the very process of defining individuals. On the basis of this notion of technology and of individuation, Simondon claims that we should overcome the traditional opposition between culture and technology (as exemplified for example by Heidegger), in favour of a more holistic conception of the two fields as fundamentally interdependent. This position also goes to influence our interpretation of the present age, where we find technology in a state of alienation which is due only to culture's reactionary rejection of its 'true' promiscuity with it. The monstrosities produced by industrial technology – for example in terms of human exploitation, total warfare and environmental devastation – are, for Simondon, just the consequence of our stubborn application of pre-industrial logics to this new, fully industrial environment. If only we were to develop our understanding of technology in accordance to Simondon's reinterpretation of it, the present situation would supposedly be overcome in favour of a reintegration of technology within culture, and of culture within technology. After all, if any individual is both its own technology and its own product, perhaps our real mistake lies in the very notion of technology as an autonomous field.

Simondon's vision thus privileges a complete reinvention of our conception of technology, over an analysis of any intrinsic specificity to the present time – which he discards as the unfortunate product of an incorrect hermeneutics of technology. In this sense, his distance from the analyses presented so far (as well as to the one proposed by

this book) is even greater than it might appear at first. Simondon's perspective suggests a blurring of all formal lines towards a field of open-ended 'becoming', thus resembling a truly Faustian impetus unleashed at a metaphysical level. Everything endlessly 'becomes' different instances of itself, in a way that embodies infinite growth at its most profound. We might be forgiven, if we consider this notion as itself consubstantial to Technic's reality-system (or more exactly, Technic's system of unreality), particularly in terms of its cosmogony as it will be presented in the next chapter. Simondon's project of merging technology and individuality, reveals a notion of existence which amounts to an endless production of 'grammatical positions', where existence itself is ultimately obliterated. In the second chapter of this book we shall discuss at length the implications of this notion. For now, our next step will depart precisely from what we can understand as a 'grammatical position', and in what way we can see it as a fundamental element in the construction of Technic's system. Firstly, we shall look at the notion of measure, tracing back the roots of its contemporary use to a particular notion of causality. Then, we shall expand on the linguistic foundations of this conception of causality, all the way to its relationship with the imperative of infinity.

Measure and infinity

The years when the debate on Technic started to develop, were the same of the rise and affirmation of techniques of modular architecture across the globe. The first prefabricated, precast, panelled apartment blocks were built in Liverpool at the beginning of the twentieth century, and by 1940 the Sears Roebuck company had sold over 500,000 prefabricated homes. Modular architecture catered to the needs of a growing population and, after the Second World War, to the demand for a fast and efficient reconstruction of the houses destroyed by aerial bombings. At the same time, it fit perfectly the potential for serial industrial production of the ever-expanding industrial apparatus, of which it became the material embodiment and a crucial symbol. Modular architecture understands the structure of a building as a series of different architectural positions, which can be fulfilled by infinitely replicable

industrial units. These units, from the single slab of concrete to a whole prefabricated roof, are designed to fit the measure of the position which they are supposed to occupy, while at the same time constituting the very incarnation of such measure. If until that point the architectural project of a building functioned as a complete narrative, readable but not reducible to its syntactic elements, then with the triumph of modular architecture the very essence of a building was reduced to an assemblage of grammatical positions. This shift of perspective saw the transformation of the relationship between human and building, from one based on meaning, to one based on a grammar of functionality. Perhaps unwittingly, the proponents of modular architecture had translated on the metaphorical level of construction, the same cosmological transformation that Technic, as the form of the age, was enforcing on the whole of reality.

We could describe the ontology that underlies modular architecture as an ontology of positions rather than of things. This ontological paradigm is the same that is at work within the regime of Technic. In both cases, the notion of measure functions as a crucial tool to produce a certain kind of world, or more exactly a certain kind of form through which a world emerges. If we consider Technic under this light, that is as a cosmogonic force imposing its own form over reality and the world, then we can appreciate the role played by measure within its inner architecture. Like every form, that imposed by Technic is determined by the structure of its inner geometry. As in the case of modular architecture, this geometry is composed by two fundamental and seemingly contradictory elements: the notions of measure and infinity. Considered as the geometric centre and the outer shape, respectively, of Technic, these two concepts can provide a useful point of reference to understand the potential reach and type of action that characterizes its reality-system.

Let us begin by looking at measure – but since this notion is so deeply embedded within Technic's geometry, we will have to trace its steps as if backwards. We shall start with the aspect of Technic that is most immediately apparent to our everyday experience – its focus on production and instrumentality – and from there we shall move backwards, all the way until we find Technic's notion of measure lying as a foundation or a kernel; from production and instrumentality to causality, then to language and finally to measure.

It is important to point out immediately that we shall observe these notions not in themselves, but rather in their particular version which is at work within Technic's world-making form.

As we discussed in the previous pages, Technic's rewriting of reality can be summed up, at least superficially, to its positing instrumentality as the only legitimate ontological stance: nothing legitimately exists otherwise than as an instrument, ready to be employed in the limitless process of production of other instruments, *ad infinitum*. Yet, the concept of instrumentality isn't completely self-sufficient; in order to stand, it needs to rely on other, more fundamental concepts. At the heart of instrumentality, and necessarily implied by it, we find the notion of causality. The close relationship between instrumentality and causality is quite straightforward; there can be such a thing as an instrument, only if that instrument is capable of producing something else as the direct effect of its activity. For production to take place, the activity of the instrument must be the direct cause of that specific effect (material or immaterial) that constitutes its product. In other words, there could be no instruments, if we didn't already have a more general concept of cause-effect relationships. Yet, the concept of causality is not as plain and unproblematic as it might appear at first. As theorized by David Hume, the idea that something can be the cause of something else is not a matter of fact, which we can easily find in our immediate experience of the world. Conversely, argues Hume, what we witness is simply the sequential order in which the activity of what we call the cause precedes the activity of what we call the effect: a flame touches a piece of paper, and then the paper takes fire. The force of causality is not a natural force, but merely something that we project over the succession of events in nature. Drawing on Hume's intuition, Kant took the problematic character of any notion of causality, and developed it further within its own philosophical system.

It is impossible ever to comprehend through reason how something could be a cause or have a force, rather these relations must be taken solely from experience. For the rule of our reason extends only to comparison in accordance with identity and contradiction. But, in so far as something is a cause, then, through something, something else is posited, and there is thus no connection in virtue of agreement to be found – just as no

contradiction will ever arise if I wish to view the former not as a cause, because there is no contradiction [in the supposition that] if something is posited, something else is cancelled. Therefore, if they are not derived from experience, the fundamental concepts of things as causes, of forces and activities, are completely arbitrary and can neither be proved nor refuted.²⁷

Causality is an arbitrary notion, yet we seem to be unable to do without it. Indeed, causality reveals more how we understand the existent, or how the existent unveils itself to us, than anything about how the existent is structured in itself. Thus, Kant inserts causality within his system of 'categories' – those pure concepts of the understanding that define the way in which the existent necessarily reveals itself to our experience. According to Kant, causality, as a category belonging to the class of relation, acts as one of the filters that we must unavoidably adopt as we open ourselves to any kind of experience.

However, our experience of the world is filtered not only by our 'naturally' inbuilt categories, but also by the specific reality-system that is hegemonic during each historical age, and through which the world emerges to us as *one* particular world. While it might be true that Kantian categories apply indistinctly to all human experience, it is equally true that such categories are themselves shaped by the various cosmogonic forces that appear throughout history. That is to say, inbuilt categories like space, time and causation, are not always the same for all individuals since the dawn of time, but they are in turn affected by the reality-settings that each cosmogonic force imposes over the historical age in which it is hegemonic. Thus, in the age of Technic, even the most fundamental categories through which we humans experience the world are themselves transformed by the norms of instrumentality and by the imperative to endlessly expand the productive apparatus. When we talk about the notion of causality today, we must consider it not only as an element within Technic's conceptual architecture of production, but also as itself a product of this very architecture

²⁷I. Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766), 2, 370, in *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, translated and edited by D. Walford and R. Meerbote, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 356.

and as subjected to its norms and imperatives. This means, for example, that causality can no longer be applied to that form of unrepeatable and unique creation that is traditionally assigned to God's miraculous intervention on the world. Instead, causality must refer to production rather than to creation, and its specific function is that of providing solid ground for the process of infinite instrumental production to unfold.

So far, in our movement towards the geometric centre of Technic, we have seen how Technic's reduction of the world to an instrument of production, in turn relies on a particular understanding of causality. Yet, we are still one step away from reaching the central notion of measure. If we consider it within Technic's perspective, causality requires a further conceptual structure to lie upon. If we are to adapt our concept of causality to the requirements of limitless production, then we must assume the presence of an underlying conceptual architecture that guarantees a perfectly predictable and orderly connection between 'cause' and 'effect'. Sustaining Technic's notion of causality in such a way, and acting as its conceptual foundation, we find the principle of language. Once again, we are considering language though Technic's eyes, that is in terms of its ability to realize Technic's form in the world. As filtered by Technic's normative form, language reveals itself as a method of production; it is the fundamental method through which it is possible to produce serial chains of units that, in turn, can entertain a productive relationship with each other. This aspect of language reveals the particular understanding of ontology that characterizes Technic's world: no longer an ontology of 'things', but an ontology of 'positions'. This passage to a 'positional ontology' is a crucial requirement to the creation of a world that is devoted to – indeed, that is nothing but – endless instrumental production. Let us see in more detail how language reveals this kind of ontology, and in what way it relates to Technic's imposition of its own form over the world. If we consider the grammatical aspect of language (that is, its internal mode of operation and production, rather than its representational relationship with non-linguistic entities), we observe a serial system, in which a set of available positions are fulfilled by a potentially infinite number of equivalent units of signification. To fulfil the position of a noun or a verb, for example, any semantic candidate is essentially indifferent and equivalent to each other – although, of course, in the practical use, some more

than others are traditionally associated with a certain position. Within language, primary existence is assigned to grammatical positions, rather than to the equivalent semantic units that can indifferently fulfil them. Within language's ontology of positions (which is also Technic's underlying ontology), the only kind of existence to which semantic units can aspire, is the participation to the full existence of the positions that they are called to fulfil. Equally, the only ontological difference or uniqueness that they can claim to themselves depends entirely on their participation in the difference and uniqueness that belongs to the various available grammatical positions. In this sense, we can consider language as the fundamental series-system: its ontology assigns existence primarily to the positions in its series, and only secondarily to the otherwise empty and equivalent semantic units that are called to activate those positions. The serial character of language allows its positions to proliferate and replicate themselves indefinitely, by mobilizing and calling to themselves the limitless supply of otherwise indifferent and equivalent semantic units. By doing so, language's series-system provides the original example of a chain of production, where the shared ontology of the positions within the series and their ontological primacy over the units that activate them, allows for the infinite productive expansion of the series itself. As such, language acts as the fundamental method of production and of 'action' tout court in the age of Technic, since its ontology of seriality is capable of sustaining that predictable and infinitely expandable notion of causality which, in turn, constitutes the underlying support of the notion of instrumentality.

Here we finally reach the geometric centre of Technic's world-making form that we have been seeking. Having considered language's role within the architecture of Technic's production, we can observe how language itself relies on one final, fundamental concept: measure. While an ontology of things relies on the notion of substance, an ontology of positions rests on the notion of measure. Measure is the necessary principle that allows the positions and serial units of the grammar of production, to emerge from the homogenous chaos of the existent. Each position acts as a secondary measure that shapes and defines the units that activate it, while in turn relying on the primary measure which is enforced by the overarching grammatical series. As a fundamental productive method, language provides the primary measure that shapes and

defines the positions that are available within it – while such positions act as secondary measures in relation to the units that are called to fulfil them. As the foundation of Technic's language, and thus of its system of serial production, the notion of measure consists in the original act of 'cutting up' the world, in a manner that makes it available to be infinitely recombined. Or, more precisely, measure is the act of creating the world *as* a catalogue of cuts – while before measure's 'cutting' no such thing as a world, or indeed anything at all, actually existed. The process of measuring, that is of 'creating-by-cutting', is infinitely replicable – in the same way that serial production in Technic's world can expand *ad infinitum*. We can at this point appreciate the fundamental importance of the notion of measure as the geometrical centre of Technic. Measure allows language to operate productively as a series-system, and in doing so it provides the ontological ground on which the notion of causality can sustain the principle of instrumentality. In this sense, measure can be considered as the geometric centre of the form that Technic imposes over the world – so that the world, becomes *its* world.

Let us now move to the second element defining the geometry of Technic's form: infinity. If the notion of measure qualifies Technic's method of 'enframing' the existent, then that of infinity delimits the scope and reach of this process. Measure refers to the internal rhythm of this cosmogonic force, while infinity to the rule of its expansion and proliferation. The combination of measure and infinity might at first seem contradictory; how can measure, that is a form of setting limits, operate limitlessly? Yet, these two geometric principles are combined – as if retrospectively – by the very force that they contribute to shape. Within Technic, as we saw, measure is assumed as a basic ontological principle, according to which it is possible to move from an ontology of unique and irreducible 'things', to an ontology of positions in a series. Through this process, 'things' are reduced to equivalent units, which are present in the world only inasmuch as they are able to activate such grammatical positions. Conversely, infinity refers to the limitless quality of a series: a new position can always be added to a series, and so on *ad infinitum*, in a way that reinforces the very principle of seriality. Within an ontology of positions, limits are no longer defined by the scarce supply of 'things' and by the range of their possible recombinations; rather, they are set by the

inexhaustible potential for expansion of positions within a series, and of series themselves understood as positions within larger series and ultimately within the very principle of seriality. The ontological emptiness of serial positions allows for their unbounded reproduction. Indeed, it is exactly the infinity of their proliferation that defines its external shape.

On top of this geometrical role played by infinity within Technic's form, we can also consider Technic's relationship with infinity in terms of the historical conditions from which Technic emerged as a hegemonic, cosmogonic force. Borrowing from Spengler's intuition, we can interpret the importance of the notion of infinity within Technic's reality-system, as the manifestation of its historical desire. Spengler traced this desire for infinity to the story of Faust, which he took as a symbol of our age: a man, dissatisfied with his life, exchanges his soul for infinite knowledge and hedonism. The story of Faust with his accent on infinite knowledge, functions well also as an allegory of the expansion of power through knowledge, and knowledge as domination, which we also encountered in Heidegger. Yet, such desire for infinity is connected today not only with infinite knowledge and material pleasure, but also with infinite life. In a fascinating section of his 1948 book *Patterns in Comparative Religion*,²⁸ the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade points out an important distinction in terms of the ultimate *desiderata*, between what he calls 'Semitic cultures' (spanning in fact from the Babylonians to Christianity, to Islam), and the cultures of Greece and India. On the one hand, we find a desire for the limitless expansion of a person's lifespan: immortality.

When, according to the legend, King Solomon asked the Queen of Sheba to give him immortality, she spoke to him of a plant to be found growing amongst rocks. Solomon met a 'white-haired' man, an old man walking with the herb in his hand, and gave it to Solomon gladly, for as long as he kept he could not die. For the herb gave immortality alone, not youth.²⁹

²⁸M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

²⁹Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 292.

On the other, there is a desire for a youth that continues until the end of a long (though not infinite) life.

[The] ideal of the Indian: not *immortality* but *rejuvenation*. ... An Indian who welcomed existence and loved life did not want to keep it indefinitely, but only have a very long youth. Immortality was not the sort of thing to tempt sages or mystics – they longed for liberation, not a permanent continuation of existence. ... We find the same with the Greeks; they did not long for immortality, but for youth and long life. In most of the legend relating to Alexander the Great, he is astonished that anyone should seek immortality.³⁰

The difference between these two approaches to mortality, leads us to a final aspect of the notion of infinity, which goes to define the sphere of action and desire in Technic's world. While a long youth merely wishes to postpone decrepitude and suffering, the wish for immortality aims at an endless suspension of death. Immortality is not eternity, but merely the absolute form of presence: both in the sense that presence in the world is no longer bound (*ab-solutus*, unbound) to the constraints imposed upon it by death, and as a signal that nothing external to it is allowed to exist. Immortality thus ceases to be a dimension of life, inasmuch as life is connected with death, while not reaching the status of a dimension of existence, since existence exceeds the very notion of time; on the contrary, it becomes a form of limitless presence. If we compare this with Technic's ontology of positions, we can see how it coincides with an approach that seeks a perpetual continuation of 'presence' (because positions don't technically exist or are alive, but rather they are forms of presence), since it is exactly presence, rather than life or existence, that provides that dimension onto which notions of instrumentality and productivity can take place. As infinity proclaims the abolishment of anything external to it (how could anything be external to its limitless proliferation, if there are no limits beyond which this outside could lie?), so Technic proposed its own ontology and its call for the total mobilization of the existent, as devoid of any possible 'outside'.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 294–5.

In the following pages, we shall continue from these latter aspects of Technic's world: namely, its lack of an 'outside', and its eradication of existence in favour of a policed form of presence. As it will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, the banishment of existence plays a crucial role in Technic's cosmogonic project. There, we will observe it through a metaphysical lens. Here, in this chapter dedicated to the impact of Technic's regime on daily life in the world, we shall continue considering the consequences of this movement from existence to (policed) presence, in terms of the existential cost that it inflicts on those who are subjected to Technic's rule.

No outside

On 26 February 2008, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault officially began its activity. Built 120 metres deep inside a sandstone mountain on Spitsbergen island, in the Arctic Svalbard Archipelago, roughly 1,300 kilometres from the North Pole, the Vault currently stores the seeds of over 4,000 plants from all over the world. While only one of the hundreds of seed banks worldwide, the Vault aims to function as the centralized backup of the entire planetary floral biodiversity. Its safe and remote location, its robust architecture, the latest technological machinery employed and the sophisticated security systems in place make it the ideal option to become the ultimate safe box from which it will be possible to retrieve any seeds that natural events or political crises have led to extinction. If the Millennium Seed Bank, the largest seed bank in the world, were ever to be destroyed by a sudden calamity or a cut in funding, the Vault would ideally be able to act as the last guardian of the preservation of the treasures of terrestrial biodiversity. Combined with the development of gene banks in general and of ever-expanding biological databases, projects like that of the Vault plan to fight the looming threat of extinction, by archiving and storing enough genetic information on each species, to allow scientists to replicate them at will. The creation of the Vault is only one of the latest responses to the apocalyptic fear that pervades much of the conscious and unconscious dreamscape of the contemporary world. Like any cultural form, millenarian anxieties have a history of their

own, spanning through centuries and adapting to the peculiarities of each age. During the decades of the Cold War, the most prominent vision of the apocalypse revolved around the scenario of a complete and sudden nuclear annihilation. In more recent years, it has found its centre in the prospect of a progressive extinction of the various life forms present on Earth.

At a superficial reading, our fear of extinction might appear merely as the product of the imbalances and unsustainability of the system of production and consumption that is in place at present. But in fact, the spread and grip of the fear of extinction over our collective minds, reveals a profound conceptual continuity with the very reality-system enforced by Technic. To appreciate the intrinsic connection between this form of apocalyptic anxiety, and the inner structure of Technic, we should observe the peculiarity of extinction as compared to a more 'traditional' type of disappearance: death. While seemingly referring to the same event of vanishing and collapse, death and extinction differ from each other on the basis of their respective subjects. Death befalls a living individual, whether understood directly ('a person dies') or metaphorically ('an ancient language dies'); death implies something ceasing to exist as that specific, individual, living thing. Extinction befalls an abstract category, typically an animal or plant species. An individual human, horse or oak tree can die, but they cannot go extinct. Inversely, the species *Homo Sapiens*, *Equus Ferus Caballus* and *Quercus Robur*, can go extinct, but they cannot die. Death applies to unique 'things'; extinction to positions in a series of linguistic classifications. While from the perspective of a struggle against death, only the actual living existence of a specific individual can be considered a success, within the logic of a struggle against extinction, what counts is the preservation of the possibility to activate a certain position. Once pandas have been fully genetically mapped, the actual disappearance of all currently living, individual pandas would not constitute an effective case of extinction: as long as the genetic position 'panda' will be still available to be reactivated (that is, potentially actualized through the creation of a living example), extinction will have been kept at bay. Even if an actual panda was never to be created again, the potential reactivation of its position would still suffice. Consistently with Technic's cosmogony, the logic of extinction (both as an object of fear and as a problem to solve), rests upon the ontological primacy of the position over the thing,

where the position allows the thing to part-take to its own existence only as its potential fulfiller or activator. In this sense, the phobic hegemony of extinction reflects the silent consensus over a reality-system that sees serial positions such as species, as more 'real', and thus worthier of protection, than individual living things. If we were to draw this logic to its extreme conclusions, we would discover that true existence can be predicated only of positions that have potential to be activated, while 'things' themselves amount merely to the (not strictly necessary) event of their activation. Potential presence takes the place of actual existence.

Such far-reaching restructuring of the categories of existence, as they shape and apply to our current understanding of the world, is only the latest stage in a much longer process of translation of the world of things into a world of positions. As it was pointed out by early critics of Technic, a crucial stage of this process took place under the reign of its Industrial form, particularly between the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. When Heidegger was referring to the impact of Technic's instrumental principle on the surrounding world, his main concrete reference for the enactment of Technic in the world had to do with the industrial form of his time. The enormous machinery, the avalanches of incandescent coal and steam, the infernos of workers exploited to the bone, so vividly described by Louis-Ferdinand Celine in the section on Chicago of his *Journey to the End of the Night*,³¹ amounted to one gargantuan translation apparatus. Its main duty, within the broader perspective of Technic's developing cosmogony, was to enact the preliminary work of translating the world of things (trees, waterfalls, humans), into a world of positions, immediately understandable as standing-reserves within the industrial series of production (timber, hydroelectric units, labour). The age of Industrial Technic had to face a world that still attempted to resist it, at least in the most basic sense of continuing to exist autonomously. Any potential object of translation must be endowed with a basic level of autonomous existence that sets it apart from the new system into which it has to be translated. Jünger correctly pointed out that the bourgeois idea of the individual was soon to capitulate to the 'type of the worker'; yet, something different from the type

³¹L.F. Celine, *Journey to the End of the Night*, London: Alma Books, 2012.

still existed, at least just enough to be able to be subjugated and overcome by Technic.

This early stage in the affirmation of Technic as a hegemonic cosmogonic force proceeded triumphantly until the end of the 1970s. The close of that decade, around the same time of the death of the poet of industrial desperation, Charlie Chaplin, witnessed a decisive turn in the development of Technic. It was the beginning of what is currently known as 'post-Fordism', as opposed to the 'Fordist' approach that characterized the maturity of the previous age of Industrial Technic. As examined by a growing number of authors in recent years – especially by 'post-operaisti' thinkers of the Italian tradition such as Franco Berardi Bifo³² and Christian Marazzi³³ – the arrival of post-Fordism coincided with dramatic shifts in the mode of capitalist production. From an economy largely based on hard material production and the exploitation of an organized labour force, to a 'liquid' and 'recombinant' form of production, largely focused on information and services and embedded into the very lives of the disintegrated working multitude. However, from the perspective of the current discussion on Technic's impact on the form of the world, such specific socio-economic changes are of lesser importance. What truly stands out as the paradigm shift between Fordism and post-Fordism, is the closure of the cycle of translation and the beginning of an age of total language. Indeed, our previous characterization of Industrial Technic as a gigantic process of translation wasn't merely metaphorical; as discussed earlier, the geometrical centre of Technic lies in the notion of measure, which informs that of instrumentality via the system of language. In order to subjugate the world of things to its own cosmos of positions, Industrial Technic proceeded by turning things into their linguistic equivalents within its own series-systems. Things weren't just generally reduced to their name; specifically, they were translated into their *technical* names. Yet, such work of translation remained possible only as long as there was something (or anything) that still survived as an autonomous entity outside of the grid of Technic's language. Once Technic's language had affirmed its role as the sole

³²See F. Berardi 'Bifo', *The Soul at Work*, Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009.

³³See C. Marazzi, *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy*, Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011.

gatekeeper to the status of legitimate existence, thus effectively taking over the entirety of the existent, the work of translation could no longer rely on the basic alterity that acted as its foundation. With the disappearance of things outside of Technic's language, the industrial age of Technic also came to a close. The passage to post-Fordism inaugurated a new stage of Technic's cosmogony, and the dawn of an age of total language.

Once the work of translation had exhausted its main aim, and nothing remained of the human and the forest and the waterfall but the linguistic sign of their value as standing-reserves (indeed, nothing of the world remained but the linguistic sign of its instrumental value), then arose Technic's cosmos in its perfection: the whole of the existent and of the possible, reduced to a closed sphere of language, absolute in the absence of any 'outside' to it. This is the moment that we described, at the beginning of this chapter, as the collapse of the background onto the stage, or the peak of a crisis of reality. Once an exclusive principle takes over the whole, and denies the legitimacy of anything outside its own architecture, then reality is in peril. In this instance, once the principle of essence annihilated that of existence (as we shall see later in the book), to the point of denying any legitimacy whatsoever to whatever is not a position in a linguistic series, then reality is finally shattered and disintegrated. Reality, as that frame which allows the world to emerge, requires a basic, silent understanding of an ontological distance between the frame and what emerges within it as a world. A condition of enframing that is so absolute as to deny any legitimacy to whatever isn't the frame itself, denies any possibility of reality. The complete closure of Technic's language onto itself, leads to such a condition, thus unleashing a crisis of reality of cataclysmic proportions.

The age of total language, rigidly selects *ab origine* what can or cannot claim any form of legitimate presence in the world. Its selection is based on the candidate's compliance with the reduction of all its dimensions to the linguistic dimension of seriality, and specifically, case by case, to one or the other historical series. We can witness this process at work today, in a number of social, political, economic and scientific fields. For example, at the basis of the contemporary obsessions with so-called 'Big Data' lies the double ontological assumption that: (1) the language of information technology is capable of grasping the whole of the existent; (2) more extremely, the whole of the existent coincides with the reach

of the language of information technology. The record-shattering investments in Big-Data systems and technology rest on the belief that there can't possibly be anything ontologically relevant that couldn't, at least potentially, be reduced (and reduced truthfully) to the serial units of the language of data. Similarly, through substituting the terms 'information technology' with 'finance', we can understand the contemporary role played by financial capitalism, not merely as a translator of the world into its own linguistic structure, but as the creator of a world that coincides exactly with such structure. Financial capital does not apply value to preexisting things, let alone merely translating them into its own linguistic system of evaluation; conversely, it is the world (or whatever is left of it, tolerated only in its most larval state) that is expected to mobilize itself according to the grid of finance, if it wishes to be allowed within the gates of presence that finance so closely guards. And again, we find the same process at work if we observe a number of hegemonic strands of contemporary science, particularly in its 'practical' articulations such as those belonging to the field of neuroscience. Neuroscientific language presents itself as valid and trustworthy, because: (1) it can at least potentially grasp in an exhaustive fashion the whole of the object of its research; (2) more extremely, there is no emotion, feeling, thought-process and so on, apart from those that are already contained, however potentially, within the linguistic system of neuroscience itself. Functioning as a form of scientific sentimentalism, neuroscientific metaphysics claims that mental processes that can't even potentially fit within its language are nothing but mere fantasies or superstitions. Equally, this same process applies to the ontological discourse of citizenship: in the current post/anti-humanist age, citizenship isn't predicated of a person, but rather personhood becomes an implicit benefit of citizenship status. Following Technic's rejection of the very notions of life and death, as discussed above, the already abysmal 'bare life' that used to apply to stateless people, now resolves into a vanishing of presence towards absolute ontological nothingness. As the recent debate on migration and asylum amply demonstrates, whatever falls out of citizenship's linguistic series falls entirely out of the world. And again, the same is true of identity more generally, as suggested by the recent, obsessive proliferation of categories of identity, most noticeably in the fields of gender and sexuality. Whatever aspect of a living person refuses or is unable to be totally reduced to a set

of serial units of language (a case of ontological refusal), or into the specific linguistic series that are at work in a particular society (a case of historical refusal), is instantly stripped of any legitimate claim to presence in the world. While absolute existence lies beyond the grasp of any form of societal control, presence in the world in the age of Technic becomes the prime object of production and of policing.

This small variety of examples, which could be expanded by several others, displays the workings of one same principle across the horizon of contemporary cultural forms. According to it, there is no possible presence outside the infinite horizon of serial language, as there is no legitimate presence outside the specific linguistic series that act as the historical gatekeepers of an ontology of positions. Such strict policing of the borders of presence, and the ultimate punishment inflicted onto anything that still holds on to its irreducibility to absolute serial language, accounts for the devastating consequences that such a regime has on the lives of those hundreds of millions who currently live under Technic's direct domain. Alongside the suffering and devastation produced by the system of exploitation that characterizes capitalism, the total closure of language onto itself as a border fencing off existence, has caused in recent years a true epidemic of psychopathologies, including anxiety, depression, panic and increased suicide rates and cases of mass murders. In the course of his long career, and particularly since the early 1990s, the Italian philosopher Franco 'Bifo' Berardi has relentlessly described the existential toll exacted by Technic's hegemony, both as a cosmogonic force and as a regulatory principle of daily life on most of the planet. In books like *The Soul at Work*³⁴ and *Heroes*,³⁵ Berardi paints an accurately crude depiction of the current state of disintegration of mental health, investigating its origin in the structure of contemporary society and, more profoundly, in its reality-system. Although never directly mentioning Technic, and preferring instead to employ more traditional Marxist categories, Berardi sees the roots of our present predicament springing out of a number of the same conceptual structures that we have analysed so far, with particular reference to

³⁴F. Berardi 'Bifo', *The Soul at Work*, Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009.

³⁵F. Berardi 'Bifo', *Heroes*, London and New York: Verso, 2015.

the role played by absolute language. Interestingly, he has recently pointed to this connection in one of the early chapters of his book dedicated to the phenomenon of mass murder and suicide:

The fact that human beings learn more vocabulary from a machine than from their mothers is undeniably leading to the development of a new kind of sensibility. The new forms of mass psychopathology of our time cannot be investigated without due consideration of the effects of this new environment, in particular the new process of language learning. Two main developments demand consideration: the first is the dissociation of language learning from the bodily affective experience; the second is the virtualization of the experience of the other.³⁶

For Berardi, as for Severino and many other critics of Technic's regime, the ontological and epistemological foundations of our contemporary experience of the world have a direct relationship with the unleashing of annihilating violence at all levels. In reference to the experience of human life under the present conditions, we can detect a parallel between the surge in a psychopathological desire of violent annihilation, and the general risk run by everybody to be ontologically annihilated and to be altogether expelled from the world, becoming extinct before their physical death. When the stakes are so high, and any failure to comply with the demands of the historical linguistic series is punished with 'death by extinction', violent forms of acting-out on a mass scale become an unavoidable feature of the landscape of the world. Yet, an even more frequent and much more widespread tendency is that of a mass conformism, trumping by comparison those sought by the totalitarian regimes of the past century. As Pier Paolo Pasolini repeatedly pointed out in the last years of his life,³⁷ traditional totalitarian regimes never managed to produce that 'anthropological mutation' that seems to be the near destiny of our age. Traditional political repression demands obedience, both that which is publicly displayed and, as much as possible, even that which is performed in private out of fear of being

³⁶Berardi 'Bifo', p. 48.

³⁷See P. P. Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters*, translated by S. Hood, Carcanet Press, 1983; P. P. Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, Garzanti, Milano, 2008.

found out. Conversely, Technic demands no obedience – indeed, it doesn't demand anything. Technic's cosmology sets a filter that allows access to a status of legitimate presence in the world, only to those who have undergone a fundamental mutation in their ontological structure, and thus also in their position as ethical subjects. In this sense, the metaphysical policing enacted by Technic is always a form of border control, enforcing the most profound kind of discrimination.

In the following pages, we shall look in particular at this aspect, considering how different conceptions of the shape and borders of a world lead to entirely different existential experiences within it. What is more, we shall observe how indisputable notions of contemporary geography, such as the roundedness of the Earth, can also be seen as metaphors hiding within themselves deep-seated, unmentionable convictions of the contrary.

Crisis of action, crisis of imagination

Everybody knows the story of Cristoforo Colombo; against the universally held belief that the Earth was flat, this brave Genoese sailor dared to prove that our planet was in fact a sphere. The year 1492 CE, so the story goes, marks a fundamental threshold between the age of ignorant superstition and that of enlightened, scientific modernity. This version of Columbus' story enjoys today widespread acceptance among the less educated and the educated alike, to the point of featuring in most school books from primary to secondary education. Yet, as numerous scholars have repeatedly attempted to point out, this story is inaccurate to say the least. Ever since the dawn of classical antiquity, philosophers like Pythagoras, Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle not only held a belief in the sphericity of the Earth, but assumed in their writings that their readers shared their same knowledge. Already in the third century BCE, the Libyan polymath Eratosthenes calculated with a minimum range of error the exact circumference of the Earth, relying on the assumed notion of its sphericity. Even during the twilight of late antiquity and the growing darkness of the high Middle Ages, the large majority of scholars, religious and secular alike, understood our planet as a spherical object. While arguing against the existence

of the Antichtones (people inhabiting the antipodes, on the opposite side the Earth), both in his book *De Civitate Dei*³⁸ and in his biblical commentary *De Genesis ad Literam*,³⁹ Saint Augustine assumes the Earth to be a 'globe'. Likewise, Saint Thomas Aquinas, at the opening of his *Summa Theologiae*,⁴⁰ employs the notion of a spherical Earth (which he takes as widely accepted among his readers) to explain how the various branches of knowledge can differ in their specific approach to one same fact or notion. Illustrious Doctors of the Church like Isidore of Seville (sixth/seventh century, particularly in his *De Natura Rerum*⁴¹) and Venerable Bede (seventh/eighth century, especially in his *De Temporum Ratione*⁴²), held the same belief, as did the beatified polymath Hermann of Reichenau⁴³ (eleventh century), who was the first Christian scholar to recalculate the circumference of the Earth using Erathostenes's method. As demonstrated for example by Ioannis de Sacro Bosco's influential 1230 compendium of astronomic knowledge *De Sphaera Mundi*⁴⁴ ('On the Sphere of the World'), no respectable scholar in the Middle Ages took the theory of a Flat Earth as worthy of any serious attention.

How is it possible, then, that today's popular understanding of pre-modern science is so distant from the truth? As historian Jeffrey B. Russell points out:

The question is where the illusion – 'The Flat Error' – came from and why educated people continue to believe it. The Error is not the alleged medieval belief that the earth was flat, but rather the modern error that such a belief ever prevailed.⁴⁵

³⁸St Augustine, *City of God*, London: Penguin, 2003.

³⁹St Augustine, *On Genesis*, New York, NY: New City Press, 2004.

⁴⁰T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 5, Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2000.

⁴¹Isidore of Seville, *On the Nature of Things*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016.

⁴²Bede, *The Reckoning of Time*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999.

⁴³Hermann of Reichenau, *De Temporum Ratione*, Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2006.

⁴⁴Johannes de Sacrobosco, *The Sphere of Sacrobosco and Its Commentators*, edited by L. Thorndike, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1949.

⁴⁵J. B. Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians*, New York, NY: Praeger, 1991.

According to Russell, it is possible to trace the origin of the 'flat error', to Washington Irving's fanciful reconstruction of medieval science in his 1828 best-selling book *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*.⁴⁶ In this text, Irving presents Columbus as that pioneer of modern scientific knowledge, whom children today still learn to appreciate. Despite its demonstrable falsity, Irving's literary reconstruction still enjoys broad recognition, for reasons that possibly have little to do with problems of historical accuracy. Following the thesis suggested by Anthony Kemp in his provocative 1991 book *The Estrangement of the Past*,⁴⁷ we could attribute this stubborn misinterpretation of an uncontroversial historical fact, to ideological rather than historiographical motivations. Ever since the time of the Reformation, argues Kemp, the perception of a strong discontinuity with the past has been the object of a relentless work of cultural propaganda. Following its break with Rome, the Reformation had to challenge the unitary conception of time that had characterized antiquity and the Middle Ages. In its place, a new model of history-as-progress was proposed as the general framework within which to understand changes in attitude and belief across the ages. In this sense, the currently held opinion on the alleged medieval belief in a flat Earth, and the consequent role of Columbus as a pioneer of modern science, effectively reinforces the picture of the pre-modern past as constitutively different, and obviously worse than the time of modernity.

Yet, an alternative interpretation of this phenomenon could be provided by a symbolic understanding of a flat Earth, as opposed to a spherical Earth. As famously pictured in the so-called Flammarion Engraving, where a traveller who has reached the edge of a flat Earth stretches his head through the firmament to contemplate the outer heavens, the idea of the inhabitable world as a limited, flat disc offers rich symbolic material to understand the peculiarity of the human condition in the universe. Understood symbolically, the image of a flat Earth points to two intuitive objects of human experience: that the inhabitable world of each of us is at once

⁴⁶W. Irving, *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, New York, NY: The Co-Operative Publication Society, 1920.

⁴⁷A. Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past: A Study in the Origins of Modern Historical Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

shaped and enhanced by its limits, and that beyond these limits lies, not 'nothing' but something at once altogether different and yet contiguous. Conversely, the symbol of a spherical Earth hints at a different ontological vision, according to which the world stretches without boundaries, seamlessly closed onto itself, while outside of its smooth surface it is possible to find either nothing at all, or other equivalent spheres, that is repetitions of the same form of existence. It is not just coincidence that the sphere was adopted by Parmenides⁴⁸ as an immediate symbol of its vision of existence as at once boundless, unitary, seamless and also safe from the impending presence of anything radically different from it.

On this basis, we can interpret the contemporary fantasy of a world of antiquity stuck in the belief of a Flat Earth, as the case of a 'subject supposed to believe', Slavoj Žižek's own reinterpretation and expansion of Lacan's concept of a 'subject supposed to know'.

There are some beliefs, the most fundamental ones, which are from the very outset 'decentered' beliefs of the Other; the phenomenon of the 'subject supposed to believe' is thus universal and structurally necessary. From the very outset, the speaking subject displaces his or her belief onto the big Other qua the order of pure semblance, so that the subject never 'really believed in it'; from the very beginning, the subject refers to some decentered other to whom he or she imputes this belief.⁴⁹

Our contemporaries attribute the belief in a flat Earth to pre-modern ignoramuses, because we all believe, hope and indeed know very well that the Earth *is* flat. The symbol of a flat Earth, that is, of a world that is at once shaped and enhanced by its limits, and which is not surrounded merely by nothingness or sameness but that also allows radical alterity, speaks more profoundly and truthfully to our experience than that of a spherical Earth. Whatever in us still resists Technic's call for absolute ontological conformity, for a 'final

⁴⁸Parmenides, *The Fragments of Parmenides*, introduced and translated by A. H. Coxon, Las Vegas/Zurich/Athens: Parmenides Publishing, 2009, fragment 8, 44–5, p. 78.

⁴⁹S. Žižek, *The Interpassive Subject*, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1998, online at <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-pompidou.htm> (accessed 21 August 2017).

solution' into nothingness of anything that isn't reducible to serial language, whatever in us still resists this knows, hopes and believes in an alternative cosmology to the claustrophobic sphere of Technic. Yet, such dangerous hope and knowledge shouldn't be displayed too publicly; better to attribute it to somebody else, somebody distant enough to be unable to find us out – like the ancients.

Our enduring attachment to a flat Earth mentality, via its attribution to 'subjects supposed to believe', and consequently our refusal of the totalitarianism of a 'spherical' ontology, reflects our immediate and everyday experience of the existential consequences of moving, symbolically, from a disc to a sphere. The former type of ontology allows for a plurality of types and levels of existence, while recognizing the specificity of each one within their constitutive limits. Not only does the ontology symbolized by a disc-world allow for each thing to exist in its own place, in a mosaic of myriad ontological alterities, it also understands that a thing can be expected to exist and to act only on the basis of its particular accesses to the levels of existence, and of its own particular form and limits. Conversely, the ontology symbolized by a spherical world, which is typical of Technic's cosmology, denies any ontological plurality both within its own cosmos (all positions are ontologically equivalent to each other, as sections of the same all-encompassing series-system), and also between its cosmos and anything outside of it (since no existence or presence is envisaged outside of the series-system itself, then no fundamental ontological alterity is possible). An existential adherence to Technic's cosmology, as symbolized by a totalizing sphere, would imply us renouncing both to the possibility of anything being constitutively different from anything else, and also to any claim to our own uniqueness and autonomous existence. To truly believe in a world that is a sphere, is the mark of one who has lost any perception of an irreducible existence animating the world from within. Yet, every time we look around ourselves and see things, mysterious in their uniqueness and wonderful in their difference, majestic just in their 'being there', and any time that we look at them and somehow fall in love with them – we realize that the disc of our world is itself an archipelago made of myriad discs. A world open to a radical 'elsewhere' both within and without. A world that we know in our heart of hearts, yet are told by Technic's regime to be impossible and mere superstition.

Thus, the structure of Technic's cosmology has serious consequences that go well beyond the realm of pure metaphysics. As we mentioned at the beginning of this text, the regime that it imposes over the world produces not only an abstract collapse of the notion of reality, but a very concrete experience of the annihilation of our ability to act and to imagine. We can trace this particular catastrophe, to the crisis undergone by the notions of subject and subject under Technic's paradigm. Let us observe how it unfolds, and on what grounds. Central to the notion of a subject, however one wishes to interpret it, are the basic elements of uniqueness and discernment. A subject, any subject as such, has to enjoy a certain degree of uniqueness and ontological autonomy that allows it to exist as itself, that is, as coincident with itself and constitutively different from what isn't itself. At the same time, a subject's mode of relationship with its surroundings is always, necessarily, based on its ability (at least potentially) to discern between different entities that do not coincide with it. In order to be able to act upon an object, say, or to select among possible alternative courses of action, a subject needs what isn't coincident with itself to have, in turn, at least a basic degree of uniqueness and autonomy of its own. If all external entities were equivalent to each other, the subject wouldn't have any possible range of action or decision, since any form of interaction would ultimately amount to the same interaction, as any possible choice would ultimately be the same choice. In the absence of external, discernibly different and ontologically unique objects, subjectivity is reduced merely to the event of a 'yes-no' to action/inaction against a completely homogeneous background. In fact, Technic's cosmology doesn't only produce a disintegration of the objects, but of the subject itself. Within an ontology of positions, no uniqueness or autonomous existence is ever allowed. On the one hand, things are reduced to mere activators of positions, thus becoming entirely equivalent to each other in their fundamental ontological emptiness. On the other, all positions are little more than guardians to the ultimate principle of the series-system itself: each position is ontologically equivalent to any other position and, thus, it is equally devoid of any autonomous existence. Within Technic, what is truly present is only the series-system itself, and, through participation to it, the specific series through which it actualizes itself; positions only act as gatekeepers to the series, and specific units activating those positions are, even more remotely

from existence, simply mere occurrences. Such a system does not allow for any of the necessary, basic conditions that would allow subjects or objects to exist, and thus, to unfold their existence in the world through action of any kind. It is on this basis that the crisis of reality, unleashed by Technic, ultimately translates into a crisis of action and imagination.

The crumbling of subjectivity under Technic is accompanied by the emergence of a new existential figure: the abstract general entity (AGE). This new arrival on the scene of the world should be understood here, more as a description of our contemporary human experience than as an ontological category in itself. Once a human is stripped of any unique and autonomous existence of their own, while also being robbed of an autonomously existing world to which they can relate – this human finds him/herself in the position of an ‘abstract general entity’. Despite Technic’s stern denial of any claims to legitimate individual existence, a contemporary human is still endowed with the direct experience of their own existence. A person still knows, hopes and believes to be ‘something’ rather than ‘nothing’. But such awareness has to face a reality-system (or better a system of unreality) in which autonomous existence as a subject is no longer possible. How can a human individual understand and place themselves within this double-bind? The AGE is a new existential figure that emerges like a monster (a ‘warning’, from the Latin *monere*), from the clash of these contradictory phenomena. To the eye of the AGE, like to those of a distant god, the world presents itself in its indiscernibly homogeneous ontology. Not only do all things appear equivalent to each other and equally empty, but also all possible courses of action reveal themselves as ultimately indifferent. Such equivalence between all possibilities is both ontological (they are indeed identical, not just equal to each other), and ethical (they have the same value both in themselves and in reference to the AGE). This state of ethical equivalence of all possibilities, which in turn produces and justifies a crisis of action and imagination, has little to do with the supposed ‘crisis of values’ that is usually ascribed to ‘cultural nihilism’. Rather, it is just the necessary conclusion that we must reach if we, as humans, adopt the viewpoint of the AGE and identify with it. Indeed, we couldn’t even properly talk about a state of crisis of reality, action and imagination; the disintegration of the first and the paralysis of the

latter two are in fact just their normal state under Technic. Like an idle god, the AGE is not compelled to choose one way or the other by any pressure due to scarcity or internal urgency. Since it is not properly existing, the AGE has no needs of its own – and in any case, there is no autonomously existing object with which it could satisfy any needs. Indeed, the AGE is ‘operative’ while not being ‘alive’. And consequently, it is subject to extinction rather than to death. Lacking any specific internal drive or compulsion, the AGE can find guidance to its operating, only in the innermost structure of the serial reality-system in which it is included. Its only motivation and direction, coincides with the structural imperative of Technic’s form to infinitely expand the instrumental apparatus that constitutes Technic’s implementation in the world.

The figure of the AGE includes some of the most dramatic aspects of a human existential experience today. Ultimately, it is the result of the mutation that humans are expected to undergo, if they wish to claim any (however feeble) presence in the world created by Technic’s cosmogony. The contemporary epidemics of psychopathology, both in its catatonic and manic declinations (as symbolized in a unitary way by the self-resolving acting-out of cases of suicide-murder), simply reflects the friction that still takes place between an as-yet imperfectly mutated humanity, and its expected form. Together with the perception of a crisis of reality, of action and of imagination, the psychopathological epidemics is the symptom of our enduring perception that Technic’s recoding of reality is a mortal threat; specifically, the threat of losing both one’s own presence in the world and the presence of the world itself. Likewise, the problematic relationship with power that characterizes our present time – as personal and political powerlessness is complemented by the resurgence of fascist tendencies among a large strata of the population, and by popular calls to order and violent repression – signals to a confused resistance to surrendering entirely to Technic’s ontology. It is not just a question of attempting to narrow again the global horizon, as re-territorialization follows de-territorialization. By clinging desperately to power, even in its most abhorrent and self-defeating forms, humans attempt to resist their seemingly unstoppable mutation into AGEs. Yet, as long as their attempt doesn’t challenge the metaphysical architecture of Technic’s (un)reality, the hope of a successful ‘revolution’ or of an ‘emancipation’ from Technic is certainly none.

What until recently was uncontroversially characterized as psychopathology, is now presented as a normal condition for a large part of contemporary humanity. This normalization of psychic distress and mental illness reflects the parallel strengthening of Technic's pathogenic grip over reality and the world. As we read Ernesto de Martino's early work on magic, for example, we can't avoid noting frequent signals of the increased hegemony achieved by Technic over the course of the past few decades. In 1948, to clarify the different condition of the archaic/magic world and the world of his age, de Martino could still write (as if from a world far distant from ours today):

In a society such as ours, in which the definition of one's own self and of the world are no longer a dominant and characterising cultural problem, we are given to ourselves without any substantial risk, and things and events in the world present themselves to our empirical consciousness as a 'given' that is removed from the drama of human production. ... Our 'presence in the world' and 'the world as presence' are constituted as a defined and guaranteed duality. Conversely, within a magic [i.e. archaic] mentality, this very experience is still questioned, in the sense that the duality presence-world constitutes a dominant and characterising problem. Within magic, 'presence' is still busy gathering itself as a unity in a relationship with the world, holding and limiting itself, and correlatively the world is not yet removed from presence, thrown in front of it and received as independent.⁵⁰

de Martino's world was the industrial world, in which existence and reality still survived, though already hopelessly defeated. The process of translation was inexorably proceeding, but the last courses of its banquets still lay on the table. Yet, even from his place in time, de Martino could already catch glimpses of the world to come. In those same pages, in a footnote, he presciently added:

[Yet,] also in our civilisation there are still 'marginal' situations in which such magic forms are maintained. ... For example: the

⁵⁰E. de Martino, *Il Mondo Magico* (1948), Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2010, p. 128 – my translation.

magic traditions that are still alive among our rural populations, the magic of spiritist circles, and that which is connected to specific states of psychopathology, such as psychasthenia, schizophrenia and paranoia. In all such cases, there is a persistence and reproduction, in a more or less authentic form, of the modes of magic reality and of its correlative existential drama, whose model is found in the magic age. After all, also a 'normal' and educated person [today] can be more or less temporarily touched, in their daily life, by this archaic reality. The possible reproduction of a magic reality also for an educated Westerner, indicates that a defined and guaranteed presence is a historical achievement and, as such, it is revocable under certain conditions. Everything, in the life of the spirit, can be questioned, also those conquests that appeared to be safe from all risks, and thus also the fundamental conquest of being in world.⁵¹

Facing the disintegration of reality produced by Technic, its destruction of any possibility of autonomous presence, its reduction of world and self, subject and object, to an empty and paralysed whole – facing all this, a contemporary person finds him/herself in a position that uncannily resembles that which was common to archaic/primitive people of magic societies. Both their realities, their worlds and their presences are under constant threat of merging into one same nothingness. Both a person living today under the regime of Technic, and one living in an archaic magic society, have to fight to reconstruct a reality and a presence for themselves and for the world. Their recognition of their own suffering as an illness (magical or psychopathological as it may be), is a symptom of their resistance, and of their desire to seek a state of 'health' that has more to do with the *cosmos* (as the world that emerges out of chaos) than with the statistical balance of their clinical indicators. Yet, while for an archaic person the survival of a widespread magic and esoteric tradition provided figures like that of the shaman or medicine-man as guides into this work of cosmic reconstruction, for a contemporary human it is necessary to start the whole process afresh from the very beginning. To start, they will have to

⁵¹E. de Martino, *Il Mondo Magico* (1948), Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2010, p. 129 – my translation.

understand what the fundamental structure of the reality-system is in which they are confined, what is the kind of architecture of their productive prison. Then, complementing their inquiring and critical spirit with the energy of world-makers, they will have to engage in the reconstruction of the architecture of reality. The next chapter will deal with the first task, and the following two, with the latter.

CHAPTER TWO

Technic's cosmogony

Defining terms

In the previous chapter, we introduced a number of notions and figures that characterize how Technic acts upon the contemporary historical context as a reality-making force. We employed ideas of measure and seriality, notions of metaphysical nihilism and absolute language, and figures like the abstract general entity (AGE), to sketch out a general outline of how Technic has shaped our world and our present lives in it. By analysing the effects of Technic's reign that are most apparent to our experience, we wished to draw a symptomatic depiction of Technic – in the same way that one would describe an illness by looking at its symptoms and at the clinical history of a patient affected by it. But however important, this historical outlook is not sufficient to provide a complete idea of what Technic is, and of how it operates as a cosmogonic force. Having already looked at its external effects, in the present chapter we shall shift our attention towards an analysis of Technic's internal structure. This new course of analysis will recuperate some of the conceptual figures that we already encountered in their historical manifestations, though this time we will look at them in terms of their position within Technic's inner architecture. These two approaches should be seen as complementary in any analysis of a cosmogonic force acting as the form both of reality and of a specific historical age.

We could liken this combined approach to that proposed by Sufi thinkers in reference to the different stages of the path to knowledge. According to Sufi doctrine, a correct approach to understanding reality as consubstantial with the principles that define it, should move from the initial stage of *Shariat* (jurisprudence) to that of *Marifat* (perfect knowledge through a mystical union) via the intermediate passages of *Tariqat* ('path' as spiritual brotherhood between Sufis) and *Haqiqat* (authentic truth). The movement from *Shariat* to *Marifat*, is one from what is most external, to what is most internal to reality and to its principles.¹ Of course, any similarities between the Sufi path to knowledge and our investigation of the cosmogonic principles underlying contemporary reality should be taken very much *mutatis mutandis*. What makes them similar, in spite of their obvious differences, is a shared awareness that the historical symptom of a cosmogonic force (for the Sufis, the eternal force of God as revealed by the Quran, for us in this context, *Technic* as a historical force capable of shaping reality) should always be considered together with the internal architecture of said force or principle. Far from wishing to proceed all the way to a mystical union with *Technic*, we shall limit ourselves to sketching an analysis of its cosmogonic architecture that could be loosely comparable with the *Haqiqat* stage of Sufi esotericism. In other words, while the first chapter looked at our existential experience of the *Gestalt* or 'form' that *Technic* imposes over the world, this second chapter will look at *Technic*'s own, internal form. Indeed, the former is a direct consequence of the latter, and the analysis that will be developed in the following pages is aimed at clarifying the logic and origin of the historical elements discussed so far.

This passage from a symptomatic analysis of cosmology, to an analysis of the internal architecture of a cosmogonic force, comes with its own peculiar difficulties. Our initial reference to Sufism shouldn't be taken as entirely off topic here; many of the

¹Interestingly, the earliest recorded theorization of the *Marifat* stage of (gnostic) knowledge is attributed to the Neoplatonist-leaning, ninth-century CE Egyptian Muslim mystic Dhu'n Nun – who opposed it to *ilm*, discursive learning and knowledge. See A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 43.

challenges that we shall face have traditionally been discussed in theological circles, in reference to the problem of passing from an analysis of God's creation, to knowledge of God's own internal 'structure'. From a perspective that considers reality as immediately shaped by God, acting as the ultimate principle of everything in existence, an enquiry into the 'form' of reality inevitably boils down to a theological examination of God's own nature. Conversely, in an analysis like ours, that considers reality's varying forms as contingent on the cosmogonic principles that characterize a certain historical age, such theological elements should be taken primarily in their methodological dimension. Regardless of their differences, our morphological approach to reality-systems and that of theology share a similar set of fundamental questions, and revolve around similar sets of possible answers.

In particular, the theological debate between 'creationism' and 'emanationism' will resonate with our attempt to investigate how an abstract principle can at once precede reality, while also informing and shaping it. The creationist side of the argument can be epitomized by the theory of eleventh/twelfth-century Iranian thinker Al-Ghazali,² who advocated God's complete control over reality-making, and reality's absolute reliance on God's will. According to Ghazali, we have to understand all forms of existence as the product of a deliberate decision by God Himself: the very unfolding of time amounts to nothing less than the constant re-creation, instant by instant, of the whole universe by God. Such is reality's dependence on God's merciful will, that, according to Ghazali's vision, if God was ever to decide to interrupt His constant re-creation of the universe, this would suddenly vanish entirely. On the other side of this debate, we find what has been called the 'emanationist' approach, dating back to third-century Egyptian/Roman philosopher Plotinus. According to Plotinus's philosophical theology, we have to understand the whole of the existent as the product of an original principle, exceeding any possible form of definition: the One. Although itself technically outside reality (as it precedes and originates it) and irreducible to it, the One interacts

²See al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-falasifa*), Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002.

with reality via its successive ‘emanations’, in turn shaping the lower and more specific dimensions of existence. Unlike the creationist vision, the emanations that ‘flow out’ of the One, are not the product of its volition: rather, the One produces them necessarily, in accordance to its own nature. In the words of Plotinus, as related by his disciple Porphyry:

Given this immobility in the Supreme, it can neither have yielded assent nor uttered decree not stirred in any way towards the existence of a secondary.

What happened, then? What are we to conceive as rising in the neighbourhood of that immobility?

It must be a circumradiation – produced from the Supreme but from the Supreme unfaltering and may be compared to the brilliant light encircling the sun and ceaselessly generated from that unchanging substance.³

This process of emanation, which Plotinus compares to the sun’s radiation of light, allows a fundamental principle of reality to unfold along a series of successive sub-principles, each shaping a dimension of existence. Thus, the chain of emanations amounts to a chain of different ‘hypostases’, proceeding from the original principle or first hypostasis, to the point where its cosmogonic force exhausts itself.

All existences, as long as they retain their character, produce – about themselves, from their essence, in virtue of the power which must be in them – some necessary, outward-facing hypostasis continuously attached to them and representing in image the engendering archetypes: thus fire gives out its heat; snow is cold not merely to itself; fragrant substances are a notable instance; for, as long as they last, something is diffused from them and perceived wherever they are present.

Again, all that is fully achieved engenders: therefore the eternally achieved engenders eternally an eternal being. At the same time, the offspring is always minor: what then are we to think of

³Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.1.6, Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992, p. 428.

the All-Perfect but that it can produce nothing less than the very greatest that is later than itself.⁴

Each hypostasis is an increasingly degraded version of the first one or first principle, and it looks back to the immediately preceding one with an 'amorous longing', as if seeking guidance.

The offspring must seek and love the begetter; and especially so when begetter and begotten are alone in their sphere; when, in addition, the begetter is the highest good, the offspring [inevitably seeking its Good] is attached by a bond of sheer necessity, separated only in being distinct.⁵

In the course of our discussion of the internal architecture of Technic's cosmogonic force, we shall adopt many aspects derived from Plotinus's emanationist theory. However, our morphological outlook will also present some important differences from Plotinus's philosophical theology. While for Plotinus the One can be understood as the only true principle of reality, we shall consider Technic as merely one specific form of reality. To us, Technic and its principles constitute just one cosmogonic force among the many that are possible and that indeed have created several different *realities* throughout history. In the following pages we will look at Technic as a cosmogonic force or form, which is constituted by a chain of emanations proceeding from a first hypostasis or first principle (absolute language) through a succession of lower hypostases (measure, the unit, the AGE, life as vulnerability), until its original force is finally exhausted. As in Plotinus's system, each hypostasis will be an increasingly degraded version of the preceding one, some of the crucial aspects of which it will take, while betraying some of the others.

Our borrowing from Neoplatonic philosophy will continue also as we will pair each hypostasis with its own 'archetypal incarnation'. In later developments of Neoplatonic doctrine, from

⁴Plotinus, *Enneads*, pp. 428–9.

⁵Ibid., p. 429.

late antiquity⁶ all the way to the Italian Renaissance⁷ and to the ongoing tradition of Islamic mysticism,⁸ each hypostasis was associated with a celestial body or with one of the 'heavens'. In the intentions of many Neoplatonists, this was also a way to make clear immediately how seemingly abstract concepts had an actual effect in shaping reality, just like the planets and the heavens supposedly influenced the character and movements of whatever lay below them. In our architectural reading of Technic's form, we will pair each hypostasis with a specific 'archetypal incarnation', as it can be found in our experience of reality. As with the Neoplatonists, this will allow us to make more apparent the connection between each layer of Technic's internal architecture, and the layers that constitute the architecture of our experienced reality, as it is shaped by Technic. Thus, the first hypostasis 'absolute language' will have as its archetypal incarnation the equivalence stating that 'truth is representation and representation is truth'. To the second hypostasis 'measure' we shall associate the 'mathematical number'; to the third hypostasis 'the unit' we shall associate 'information/data'; to the fourth hypostasis 'the abstract general entity' we will associate 'the processor'. Finally, we will pair the fifth and last hypostasis 'life as vulnerability' with its archetypal incarnation, 'possibility'.

We could also present our pairing of each hypostasis with an archetypal incarnation, in the terms suggested by the twelfth-thirteenth-century Andalusian Sufi thinker Ibn Arabi, in the course of his discussion of the relationship between astrology and theology.

⁶Such as Porphyry's lost book *Introduction to Astronomy in Three Books*, largely inspired by the work of second-century CE astrologer Antiochus of Athens, and his *Letter to Anebo*, in Porphyry, *Letters to Marcella and Anebo*, translated by A. Zimmern, London: The Priory Press, 1910; but particularly Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Atlanta, GE: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003. Also see Proclus, *Hypotyposis*; and fourth-century CE Sicilian astrologer Julius Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*, translated by J. H. Holden, Tempe, AZ: American Federation of Astrologers, 2011.

⁷See for example, M. Ficino, *De Vita Coelitus Comparanda*, in M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, edited and translated by C. V. Kaske and John R. Clark, Tempe, AZ: MRTS, 1998, book 3.

⁸For an overview of the debate on astrology in the Islamic Neoplatonic milieu, see N. Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religion*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2012, pp. 173–87. See also Burckhardt, T., *Mystical Astrology According to Ibn Arabi*, Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2001.

According to Ibn Arabi, the divine unity of God unfolds and manifests itself through the Divine Names that convey to the universe the effect of His cosmogonic attributes. However innumerable they may be, such divine qualities or Names can be grouped in a number of general categories, each determining an aspect of the architecture of the universe – that is, an aspect of reality. According to Ibn Arabi, it is possible to build a symbolic relationship between each group of Divine Names and each sphere or heaven in the traditional vision of the architecture of the universe. This relationship between the inscrutable essence of the Divine Names as cosmogonic principles, and the visible manifestation of the heavens, is well explained by Perennialist philosopher, Titus Burckhardt:

The Master [Ibn Arabi] makes the 28 mansions of the Moon correspond to as many Divine Names. On the other hand, these, which all have an active or creative character, have as complements or as direct objects the same number of cosmic degrees, so that their connection forms a second analogous cycle. The series of these cosmic degrees produced by the series of the Divine Names go from the first manifestation of the Intellect down to the creation of man. In its hierarchy it also comprises the cosmic degrees which correspond to the different heavens, that is to say to the heavens of the zodiac, to the heavens of the fixed stars, and to the seven planetary skies. ... The Divine Names represent the determining essences of the corresponding cosmic domains.⁹

Once again, this mention of Ibn Arabi's use of astrology to explain divine cosmology is meant to make explicit the theological quality of any attempt to analyse a cosmology through its founding and underlying principles. Indeed, as we begin to look at Technic's internal cosmogonic architecture and at its ensuing cosmology, we are considering Technic as a unitary principle of reality (or, in this case, unreality), which is akin to a certain conception of God. This aspect is central, not only to our analysis of Technic's cosmogony, but also to our understanding of what Technic is to our contemporary

⁹T. Burckhardt, *Mystical Astrology According to Ibn Arabi*, Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2001, p. 37.

world – and, more generally, of what a cosmogonic force represents to the age in which it is hegemonic. To our contemporary world, *Technic is God*, in that it acts as the overall form encompassing all the various principles that structure our world. In this sense, any attempt at analysing the spirit of an age, understood as the structure of a specific reality-system, cannot do without the conceptual toolkit of theology – in particular, of the branch of theology that looks at the process of cosmogony and at cosmological architecture. Among the different theological and philosophical traditions that have tackled this issue, we have chosen in particular the variegated school of Neoplatonism, with its emanationist conception of reality-making.

Emanationism will function here as a method to interpret the architecture of a cosmogonic force, considered as a form with its own internal structure. Like any architecture and any form, and differently from Plotinus's all-exceeding One, the chain of emanations that constitutes *Technic* is also shaped externally by all that exceeds it. The limits to the form of *Technic* will be described in reference to another concept borrowed from Islamic philosophy: *hadd* (plur. *hudud*).¹⁰ Primarily used in Islamic jurisprudence to indicate the restrictions derived from Quranic law, the notion of *hadd* is also adopted by Shia theosophy (a more apt term than 'philosophy', to define the prophetic philosophy of Shiism) to indicate the 'limit' of each layer of reality, and, consequently, of each type of knowledge that is appropriate to understand it. As shaped by its superior and inferior *hudud*, the form of *Technic* will thus require a further discussion to what exceeds and escapes it – like the analysis of an architectural object requires a discussion of the terrain on which it lies and of the neighbouring objects that negatively shape it by limiting it. Acting as the limits of *Technic*'s cosmogonic force and form, these *hudud* also go to define the limits of its reality and of its world. As it will become apparent in the next chapter on Magic, the limits to *Technic*'s cosmogony open the door to other alternative cosmogonies. We will refer to the limits of the chain of emanations of *Technic*, as the superior limit of the '*Ego Absconditus*', and the inferior limit of the 'Double Negation'. All

¹⁰For a discussion of the notion of *hadd* in Shia philosophy, see H. Corbyn, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 80–4.

these terms, mysterious as they may sound at first, will hopefully be fully elucidated in the course of our discussion.

First hypostasis: Absolute language

At the heart of Technic's form, radiating like a merciless sun, stands the first principle and first hypostasis: absolute language. While in the first chapter we mentioned the historical manifestations of this figure, now we shall observe it in its own right as a constitutive element of Technic's cosmogonic architecture. As seen through this perspective, absolute language acquires the role of first principle in Technic's creation of the world and of its particular type of (un)reality. It is the emanating source of Technic's entire creation, which it shapes according to its own rhythm and normative metaphysics.

Let us begin by considering separately the two elements of this first hypostasis: language, and its character when taken absolutely.

Since we are investigating the underlying principles that give rise to a specific kind of world, we shall look at language through the lens of what language 'does', that is, what it produces when it is used. Any time we put forward a linguistic statement, every time we express a linguistic unit, we are suggesting to our interlocutors that a certain figure (an object, property or relation) be admitted as legitimately present in the world. The interlocutors' acceptance of our linguistic utterance as meaningful, grants legitimate presence in the world to the suggested figure – thus making it available to be employed in the larger game of linguistic exchange and recombination. The same happens in a soliloquy or at the level of one's conscious thinking – though the rapidity with which we accept our own linguistic proposal as plausibly present in the world, tends to obfuscate this questioning process. And of course, the same also applies to cases in which the utterer or interlocutor is not a human, but a machine.

In this sense, language's production is fundamentally ontological, consisting in a continuous negotiation on which figures could or should be included in the catalogue of the world. Every linguistic unit thus takes on the form of a candidature and of a proposition. Equally, the world becomes the negotiating table onto which the

figures of our daily experience are alternatively granted or denied legitimate ontological status as 'present'. In this sense, language functions as a way to manage what entities make it onto the catalogue of the communicable and operable layer of reality.

However, when language is taken absolutely, that is when it is unbound (*ab-solutus*) from any external constraint or from any other principle outside itself, the world that it creates suddenly becomes the only possible ontological field. When language becomes absolute language, its cosmogony ceases to be just one possible way of looking at the world (namely, in terms of which figures have a legitimate presence in it, as communicable and operable items) becoming instead an all-encompassing terrain. Outside of it, nothing is permitted; outside of negotiated linguistic 'presence', nothing is allowed, not even existence as it stands ineffably in itself. Existence is substituted by presence, and its stability is taken over by the negotiating process of language. Language creates the world in its own image, and when it becomes absolute, suddenly there is no longer anything outside the world.

The process of ontological negotiation that normally takes place at the level of language, now becomes fully internal to language itself; it is no longer an extra-linguistic interlocutor that accepts or rejects candidates to presence in the world, but it is the very fabric of language that absorbs or rejects possible figures as they emerge from language itself. In the state in which it becomes absolute, language presents itself as supposedly uttered by no mouth; rather, it claims to be at once its own creator and creation. "*I suo fattore non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura.*"¹¹ Equally, absolute language presents itself as unrestrained by any specific extra-linguistic localization; a linguistic figure can take place anywhere within the field of language, and, what is more, can do so simultaneously in multiple instances. Taken in its absolute form, language thus condenses that principle of seriality which we observed in its symptomatic manifestations in the first chapter, during our discussion of measure as the geometric centre of Technic's historical force.

¹¹'Its great Maker did not scorn, Himself, in his own work enclos'd to dwell!
D. Aligheri, *Divine Comedy*, Paradise XXXIII, 5–6, Translated by the Rev. H. F. Cary,
London: Wordsworth, 2009.

To better elucidate the quality of language as understood absolutely, let us bring in our first example of an archetypal incarnation of a hypostasis. The archetypal incarnation of the first hypostasis in Technic's chain of emanations, consists in a suggested equivalence between truth and representation, according to which: *truth is representation and representation is truth*.¹² We can find this equivalence at work in countless aspects of our contemporary experience of the world, in all fields of human activity. Let us unpick it piece by piece, starting with its first element: truth.

For the sake of brevity, and being aware of endorsing one possible definition over others, we can say that predicating the truthfulness of something, means claiming that something is 'the case'. If I say that it is true that a brick's colour is red, for example, what I mean is that 'it is the case' that red is the brick's colour. If I say that it is true that something happened, I mean that it 'is the case' that it happened, and so on. This might appear at first as merely a matter of plain description; yet, if we consider truth as a mechanism within a cosmogonic force, the extent of its influence will soon become apparent. Considered ontologically, truth's reference to something 'being the case', takes the place of something simply 'being'. By assuming the truth-mechanism as a crucial element in the architecture of a cosmogonic force, we witness a shift from a condition in which 'existence' was the basic attribute for something to be able to enter reality, to a condition in which this attribute becomes its 'being the case'. In metaphysical terms, we can say that this is a passage from a world of 'things', to one made up of 'states of affairs'. This passage is pregnant with consequences on several levels. While something can 'be' or 'not be' just in itself, the fact of its 'being the case' or 'not being the case' relies entirely on an external sanction. For something to 'be or not the case', we require both a context within which their 'being or not the case' takes place, and an enunciation of their truthfulness or falsehood as states of affairs. Whatever 'is or not the case', relies entirely on the enunciation that sanctions its claim, and on the context within

¹²For a fascinating and in-depth discussion of the ontological problem of representation and truth (though from a perspective much closer to Magic than to Technic), see *The Problem of Representation*, in M. Cacciari, *The Necessary Angel*, translated by M. E. Vatter, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994, Chapter 3, pp. 39–53.

which such claim to truthfulness or falsehood is meaningful. Thus, while ‘things’ can exist fully and autonomously, states of affairs are present only precariously and subordinately. Namely, they are subordinate to the sanction bestowed upon them by the linguistic context within which they are suggested as taking place. This aspect of truth, adopted as an ontological principle, refers to the way in which, within language taken absolutely, things are reduced merely to the ‘being the case’ (or, as we called it in Chapter 1, ‘activation’) of a grammatical position. Within absolute language, things are reduced to states of affairs that require the series in which they are inserted, both to acquire signification and to be enunciated. In themselves, before the series ‘speaks’ them and makes them present within itself, they are nothing at all, since they don’t even reach the stage in which they can be discussed in terms of existence and non-existence. We have seen in the previous chapter how this abstract mechanism translates in the daily functioning of historical series such as those of finance, big data, neuroscience, citizenship and so on.

But the role played by the notion of truthfulness within absolute language doesn’t end here. Another crucial aspect has to do with the semantic difference between existence, and the ‘being or not the case’ of states of affairs. While ‘being or not being’ are definitions that fall short of fully conveying their object, and thus are symbolic utterances (as it will be discussed at length in the next chapter), ‘being or not the case’ is a definition that entirely captures and conveys the object of its signification. While the very fact of existence is, in itself, an ultra-metaphysical category (as legions of philosophers, from the Eleatic school to the post-Nietzscheans have tirelessly repeated), that of ‘being or not the case’ does not exceed the process of descriptive signification. A good example of how the definition of ‘being or not the case’ can convey fully and functionally the object of its signification, is provided by the basic computing series 1–0, where 1 stands for ‘being the case’ and 0 for ‘not being the case’. Indeed, the digital series 1–0 can be taken as archetypal in reference to series in general. A series, understood in the context of an ontology of positions, is always fundamentally an articulation of the 1–0, ‘being or not the case’ sequence.

Within Technic’s equivalence between truth and representation, truth stands for the essence of language’s fundamental process of signification; what used to be the autonomous existence of things,

is here degraded to a state of affairs that is entirely dependent on the sanction given to it by the series in which it is inserted. At the same time, truth indicates how the precarious and subordinate state of things reduced to states of affairs, is nonetheless the only possible form of presence in Technic's world; the 1-0 series is a functional series, on the basis of the metaphysical axiom that there is indeed nothing else apart from that which can be reduced to its 'being the case' or 'not being the case'. In brief, truth refers to the ontological transformation undergone by the existent as it is subsumed within absolute language, and thus within Technic's cosmology.

The second element in the equivalence outlined above, is the notion of representation. With 'representation' we don't indicate merely the production of a copy of an original, where the original and the copy stand in a relationship of uniqueness and similarity. Rather, the essence of representation is to be found in the process of replication and reproduction, raised in turn to the status of an ontological principle. To briefly introduce this notion: whereas truth acts upon the autonomous existence of things, wiping it out entirely in favour of their 'being or not the case', representation acts upon their localization. This passage becomes clearer if we consider the difference between a 'thing' and a state of affairs. A thing (inasmuch as it is an existent, rather than a purely linguistic construct or a state of affairs) exists not only in itself, but also in a specific 'localization'. A thing, anything, is always both autonomous in its existence, and also 'that' specific thing, in 'that' unique time and/or place, within 'those' specific limits and so on. For example, it is on the basis of a thing being 'that' unique thing, that the principle of non-contradiction can become operative. Even ideas, considered as immaterial 'things', exist autonomously not only in themselves, but also in a specific relationship with their emergence within reality as 'that and that' idea. It is this combination between autonomous existence in itself, on the one hand, and the specific localization of an existent as 'that' existent, on the other, that makes things possible objects for subjects and vice versa. Conversely, once things have been turned into states of affairs, they are no longer endowed with existence in themselves, nor are they constrained by any other localization but their belonging to a series. They have neither existence 'in themselves', nor any unique 'that-ness'. This means that they can appear simultaneously in different locations, at the same time as part of different historical series referring to

culture, economics and so on. In fact, they *are* merely their own simultaneous presence within multiple series, that is, they are nothing more than the simultaneous activation of positions in different series. The availability of the object of truth (i.e. a state of affairs that 'is or not the case') to feature simultaneously in several different locations or series, amounts to its ability to be re-presented infinitely. This form of infinite replicability, raised to the level of an ontological principle, does not refer to the case of an original being copied countless times, but rather to something being simultaneously present in a potentially infinite number of locations.

Since this ability to be limitlessly re-presented is a specific and constitutive aspect of state of affairs within absolute language, we can take it as one of their defining ontological qualities. Understood as such, representation has to do at the same time with the non-specificity and non-substantiality of the 'stuff' that makes up Technic's cosmology, and with its availability to be replicated indefinitely, that is to be the object of production. This notion of representation can be immediately found at work in the field of contemporary finance, particularly in the derivatives market; there, 'things' that are valourized as (i.e. mutated into) states of affairs, are made to be simultaneously present in several locations, potentially limitlessly, since the only constraint to their reproducibility is that imposed by their belonging to the general linguistic series of finance.

Having observed separately the notions of truth and representation, as they take place within the hypostasis of absolute language, we can now attempt to bring them together into Technic's original equation. Truth as representation and representation as truth, indicates an ontological scenario in which the 'stuff' that makes up the world is merely a 'state of affairs', at once devoid of autonomous existence, uniqueness and substantiality, and so radically un-situated at an ontological level as to be available for limitless reproduction – better, corresponding exactly to its own reproduction. Assumed as the archetypal incarnation of absolute language, this equivalence addresses the way in which the first hypostasis in Technic's chain of emanations constitutes the fundamental dimension of Technic's cosmogony, and thus Technic's very essence. As the first principle in the chain of emanations that make up the internal structure of Technic's cosmogonic force, absolute language sets the parameters and the rhythm that will apply to all subsequent hypostases. Its

structuring energy, at its purest here, will progressively degrade in the following hypostases, until it will reach its exhaustion.

Needless to say, since we are talking about the architecture of a cosmogonic principle, our description of it in successive steps has to be considered conceptually rather than chronologically. The first hypostasis precedes the last one only in terms of hierarchy, while in fact they are all simultaneous and co-present as principles within Technic's cosmogony.

Second hypostasis: Measure

From the first hypostasis, like rays out of a sun, the second hypostasis emanates. The first structuring principle of Technic's cosmogonic force produces out of itself a second principle, which is more specific and less powerful, but still largely faithful to the same conceptual paradigm. This second hypostasis is at once grounded in the previous one, while acting as the ground for the hypostases that will follow. We can imagine this passage of 'genetic information' between hypostases, as a game of Chinese whispers, in which a message is transferred until its original meaning is finally lost. But we shouldn't be too concerned with the issue of distortion at the level of the second hypostasis. The hypostasis 'measure' looks back towards 'absolute language', as if seeking instructions, both for itself and to pass them on.¹³ As it receives absolute language's crucial cosmogonic settings, however, measure reinterprets them as methodological instructions rather than as self-contained principles. Thus, measure takes up absolute language's fundamental series, the 1–0 digital series, and by applying it, allows it to proliferate in specific cultural/historical/economic/political series, among others. What was the essence of language as an absolute cosmogonic principle, here becomes a general method running through countless instantiations; it is as if from the essence of fire, countless individual blazes had had their origin. The second hypostasis of measure is thus responsible for the fragmentation of the self-contained

¹³For a discussion of the different notions of 'measure' in 'Technic' and 'Magic', see *Measure and Manifestation* in R. Guenon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Sign of the Times*, Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001, pp. 23–30.

abstraction of absolute language, into a proliferation of particular cases in which the principle of seriality is taken up as a structuring method: from the principle of the series, to the plurality of possible series; from reproduction as a principle, to the actual emergence of series of production.

The level of the second hypostasis in Technic's chain of emanations also emphasizes a particular aspect of the interaction between the series and the items that compose them. While absolute language insisted on the fact that anything wishing to claim legitimate presence in the world has to rely on its belonging to the structure of a series, measure adds that it also has to consider the series as its ultimate goal. It is not enough that the 'stuff' of the world under Technic, has to mutate in order to be suitable to enter a series: it also has to understand the ever-expansion of its series as its overarching ethical goal. Measure, thus, inserts an ethical dimension within Technic's cosmogony, setting the general direction for action in all subsequent hypostases. While absolute language defined the general ontological coordinates of Technic's cosmogony, measure allows for a proliferation of particulars to emerge and to proceed in the direction of an 'ultimate good' – the infinite expansion of seriality as such, that is, the limitless triumph of the essence of absolute language.

In the course of the first chapter, we looked at measure in reference to its function both towards language, for which it acts as an operative principle, and towards the notion of instrumentality, to which it provides the necessary foundations. Since we already outlined there many of the fundamental characters of measure, as one of Technic's constitutive principles, let us now proceed directly to summoning its archetypal incarnation: the *mathematical number*.

Talking about mathematical numbers might be misleading at first. If we look at the etymology of the word mathematics, from *mathēmatikē tekhnē*, the art of knowing, in turn deriving from *manthanein*, to learn, we might be induced to consider mathematics as the purest form of knowledge, and, consequently, mathematical numbers as neutral conceptual items. However, like all cultural forms, mathematics also is subject to be moulded by history.¹⁴ Thus,

¹⁴For a detailed examination of the ever-changing relationship between philosophy, theology, culture and mathematics throughout history, see P. Zellini, *La Matematica degli Dei e gli Algoritmi degli Uomini*, Milano: Adelphi, 2016.

only some aspects of the pre-modern understanding of the term mathematics have been retained in our modern and contemporary use, while several others have been discarded entirely. In the context of our present analysis, when we refer to 'mathematical numbers', we do so in the contemporary sense and use of the term, in opposition to a certain pre-modern understanding that is today generally described as 'numerological'. Indeed, the archetypal importance of mathematical numbers to incarnate Technic's principle of measure appears all the more evident if we consider it in opposition to the notion of numbers as understood numerologically.

At its most fundamental level, the series of mathematical numbers, as it is currently understood, presents itself as a pattern of infinite positions. Each number corresponds to a position in the infinite pattern, and each position differs from the others only within the mathematical series (i.e. they are not unique or different in themselves). The ontological weight of each number, however large or small, is exactly identical. The numbers one and ten, for example, refer to different positions in the series, but do not carry any essentially different ontological characters. Once again, it is a matter of positional ontology, in which the activation of a possible position is ontologically equivalent to the activation of any other position. We already observed this phenomenon in Chapter 1, when we looked at the way in which existents that are reduced to serial entities, ultimately become nothing more than activators of one or the other position. The 'thing' that activates a position in a series, is no longer a thing, but, as we saw in the first hypostasis, it becomes merely the 'being the case' of a state of affairs. For example, within a financial series, it is of little or no importance whether one dollar comes from child slave labour or from the increase in the estimated value of a property; the 'thing' that occupies the position of a dollar is ontologically void, and in any case entirely equivalent in each of its infinite possible manifestations. Likewise, within such an ontology, the death of one soldier and that of one thousand civilians are just a matter of positions within a series, while the 'thing' that went lost in either case is ontologically equivalent and, ultimately, void. Or again, considering citizenship and migration within such a perspective, the positions of citizen and illegal migrant remain fixed, while the 'things' that activate them case by case, regardless of their quantity, remain in themselves ontologically equivalent and ultimately

devoid of autonomous existence. Only the position exists, and yet it too doesn't truly exist in itself.

In themselves, mathematical numbers are nothing but empty positions, and as they emerge meaningfully within Technic's world (1 citizen, 2,000 civilians, 7 drowned migrants, 3 tonnes of timber, 10 billion dollars), the thing that activates them is in every case ontologically equivalent and ultimately empty. Mathematical numbers thus exemplify a fundamental ontological principle that is operative in each and every series within Technic's cosmology. It is not a matter, as many well-meaning humanists have often repeated, that in our contemporary world things have been turned into numbers, rather both things and numbers have been reduced to one same type of annihilating ontology.¹⁵

Yet, numbers have not always been like we know them today. The nature of what we know as mathematics has itself progressively changed as reality-systems have taken over the stage of history.¹⁶ If we observe the mathematical tradition of the Eastern Mediterranean (though also in China and in India, and later in Western Europe), up until the onset of early modernity, we find a form of arithmetics that would be more precise to describe as arithmology or, as it is called today, numerology.¹⁷ The relationship between numerology and philosophy is a well-documented albeit often overlooked historical fact; the first philosopher to claim this appellative, Pythagoras,

¹⁵As beautifully and lapidarily put by Tadeusz Rozewicz, 'The extinction of the Absolute destroys / the sphere of its manifestations' (in *Kredowe Kolo* (The Chalk Circle) – my translation from the Italian edition, T. Rozewicz, *Bassorilievo*, Milano: Libri Scheiwiller, 2004, p. 65).

¹⁶See *Varieties of Mathematical Experience*, in P. J. Davis and R. Hersh, *The Mathematical Experience*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981, pp. 31–65.

¹⁷The numerological approach has profoundly influenced other fields of thought outside mathematics. Examples of the impact of its symbolism span from ornaments and architecture (particularly in the Islamic world; see, for example, K. Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) all the way to music (see, for example, the remarkably visionary work on musical architecture, M. Schneider, *Singende Steine: Rhythmus-Studien an drei romanischen Kreuzgängen*, Munich: Heimeran, 1978 – which I consulted in the Italian edition, M. Schneider, *Pietre Che Cantano*, Milano: SE, 2005 – or Gurdjeff's work on the connection between numerology, cosmology and music, as summarized and recounted in P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, San Diego and London: Harvest Books, 2001).

was at the same time a philosopher, a magician, a theologian and a numerologist. As René Guénon pointed out at the beginning of his programmatic volume *The Reign of Quantity and the Sign of the Times*:

The Pythagorean numbers, envisaged as the principles of things, are by no means numbers as understood by the moderns, whether mathematicians or physicists, just as principal immutability is by no means the immobility of a stone, nor true unity the uniformity of beings denuded of all their qualities.¹⁸

Central to Pythagoras' philosophy, and indeed to the pre-modern mathematical tradition, was a notion of numbers, not as mere positions in a series, but as *things* in themselves. So powerful were the unique essence and existence of each number, particularly of those in the first decade, that these encompassed fundamental aspects of the way in which reality was thought to be built. If we consider the number one, for example, we don't simply encounter a signpost for one indifferent unit, but a thing which is in itself a principle of reality. One doesn't just mean unity, but, as the monad, it *is* the principle of unity personified. Indeed, strictly speaking, 'one' isn't even a number, but the origin of all numbers. Likewise, two doesn't simply stand for the duplication of one, but, as the dyad, it is the personification of the principle of multiplicity. And so on. On this basis, Pythagorean mathematicians could see a network of affinities or sympathies connecting all numbers. In his *Placita Philosophorum*, the Hellenistic doxographer Aetius of Antioch clearly outlines these aspects of ancient mathematics, as they were expressed in Pythagoreanism:

Pythagoras the Samian, the son of Mnesarchus, from another origin deduces the principles of all things; it was he who first gave philosophy its name. He assigns the first principles to be numbers, and those symmetries resulting from them which he styles harmonies; and the result of both combined he terms elements, called geometrical. Again, he enumerates unity and the

¹⁸R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Sign of the Times*, Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001, p. 5.

indefinite binary number amongst the principles. ... Moreover the nature of number (he saith) consists in the ten. ... Further he avers the virtue of ten consists in the quaternion; the reason whereof is this, – if any person reckon from one, and by addition place his numbers so as to take in the quaternary, he shall complete the number ten; if he exceed the four, he shall go beyond the ten; for one, two, three, and four being cast up together make up ten. The nature of numbers, therefore, if we regard the units, resteth in the ten; but if we regard its power, in the four. Therefore the Pythagoreans say that their most sacred oath is by that God who delivered to them the quaternary.

By th' founder of the sacred number four,
Eternal Nature's font and root, they swore.¹⁹

Several aspects of this brief description of Pythagorean mathematics (and generally of most pre-modern conceptions of mathematics), are of interest here, especially if we compare them with what we said in reference to our contemporary notions of mathematical numbers. Numerological numbers are 'things' so steeped in their unique existence, to have a power of their own, corresponding to a certain power to structure the world. They have a relationship to each other as things, and their symmetries and harmonies are the concrete particulars that we encounter daily through our senses. As the fundamental existents, they are the building blocks of reality, though each retaining its own unique character, as if they were divinities in an atomic pantheon of the world.²⁰

What interests us here, however, is not so much Pythagoras's metaphysical vision, but the metaphorical echo that his notion of numbers has in reference to our question of how things can exist in the world and thus, of how different realities can take place. While mathematical numbers, as the archetypal offspring of measure, exemplify a form of cosmology where nothing exists autonomously

¹⁹Aetius of Antioch (Pseudo-Plutarch), *Placita Philosophorum*, Book I, Chapter 3 – in Plutarch, *Plutarch's Morals*, translated from Greek by several hands, corrected and revised by William W. Goodwin. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1874, Vol. 3, pp. 109–10.

²⁰For a comprehensive anthology of later Pythagorean writings on numerological numbers and their cosmological significance, see D. Fideler and K. S. Guthrie (ed.), *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1988.

and in itself, numerological numbers act as the counter-example of an alternative cosmology in which things exist uniquely and powerfully. What is more, Pythagorean numbers are also capable of pointing towards a dimension that exceeds their immediate linguistic definition. Following the fragments of what Aristotle called the 'unwritten doctrines' of his teacher Plato, we can see how entities like the one-monad, two-dyad, three-triad and so on, are at the same time things, principles and *symbols* of something beyond language. Numerological numbers present to us an immediate and tangible case of an alternative reality-system, in which reality allows the existents to emerge as autonomous and unique, while being at the same time open to a dimension that we can only define as 'ineffable'. But we shouldn't move too far ahead of ourselves. We will have time to discuss all this at length in the next chapter on Magic.

For now, we shall conclude our considerations on the second hypostasis by pointing to another crucial difference between mathematical and numerological numbers, which brings to the fore the 'ethical' aspect of the hypostasis 'measure'. As we said in our introduction to this level of Technic's internal chain of emanations, measure sets the ever-expansion of the series as the ultimate goal of whatever activates its positions. We could of course bring in examples that refer to our contemporary experience of exploitation within the capitalist system of production, where humans, as the activators of positions referring to work/consumption/citizenship/repression/etc., are made to consider the infinite growth of the productive series to which they belong, as the ultimate goal of their activity and existence. But it might be more poignant at this point to refrain from exceeding in historical examples, and to remain on the level of cosmogonic mechanisms and of their archetypal incarnations. If we consider the series of mathematical numbers, as it is understood in our contemporary age, we see a limitless pattern of positions, an infinite radiation of series spanning in every direction. As we suggested in the earlier pages of this book, within Technic's cosmology infinity and measure go hand in hand as sibling principles. Yet, a more specific aspect of their brotherhood should be emphasized here: the infinite expanse of series of mathematical numbers, rests upon the orderly succession of numerical positions, one after the other. In order for such infinity to function, we should always assume that there is no constitutive interruption in a series,

like a wire stretching continuously or a line of soldiers perfectly contiguous to each other. If we consider it from this geometrical perspective (i.e. considering the spatial dimension of measure, as it expands indefinitely), we can see that the very function of each position is ultimately to allow the following one to take place. No position has any ontological weight in itself, as they are all mere guardians to the treasure of 'presence in the world', which is hoarded by the dragon-like principle of seriality. What truly justifies their presence, however subordinate and feeble, is their function as implementers of infinity within measure. The imperative of limitless production is their *only* possible ethics.

Conversely, in the numerological conception of numbers, we don't have either measure as their ontological principle, nor the infinity of series as their ultimate goal. Every number is incommensurable or irreducible to any other, thus defying the very possibility of applying measure as their defining ontological principle. Rather, they themselves act as the measuring principle for whatever is the product of their combination. More importantly, their succession doesn't take place in series, but in cycles. Ancient treatises on numerology, such as Iamblichus's *Theology of Arithmetics*,²¹ tend to focus on the first decade, with the addition of a few relevant numbers outside of it. The reason for their specific attention to numbers from one to ten lies in the numerological idea that all other numbers are simply composite forms of the original cycle of ten, of which they take up and combine the characters. It is on the basis of this conception, for example, that numerology has been applied to the alphabet, as the sum of the numerical value of letters (which in ancient Greece were often used to symbolize numbers) can be reduced via a 'theosophic sum' or 'reduction', to a number-value between one and ten.²² The contained horizon of numerology immediately points, however metaphorically, to a conception of reality as a finite space. Indeed, as Spengler acutely (though disparagingly) noted, a fundamental character of what he called the 'Apollonian' civilization is the idea that existence can take place within reality, only if reality banishes from itself any attempts at a practical implementation of infinity. While infinity is not denied legitimacy altogether – for example in

²¹Iamblichus, *Theology of Arithmetics*, Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1988.

²²See A. Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Anaximander's cosmological vision of the *apeiron*, or infinity, as the genealogical origin of all things²³ – yet it is kept away from the field of reality, in which existence emerges as a world. Like Pythagorean numbers, 'Apollonian' humans are aware of the possibility for infinite proliferation (after all, the dyad was the principle of infinity as multiplicity), but they reject it as their geometrical and ethical horizon. If Technic sets infinite expansion as the goal of its inner workings, numerical numbers point to a form of absoluteness which escapes the notion of infinite repetition.

Third hypostasis: Unit

Out of the second hypostasis, like a gleam from the reflecting surface of the moon, the third one emanates: the unit. Once again, it is a game of Chinese whispers, in which the message of absolute language, as received by measure, is passed on to the unit in a degraded form. Considering abstract language as the first principle of Technic's cosmogony, and measure as its implementation in the multiplicity of the possible, the third hypostasis of the unit functions as the level where such infinite proliferation is observed in the detail of its constituent steps. So far, we have discussed the general principle of seriality in its infinite replication of individual series, positions and activations of position; now, we shall move on to consider the single instance of activation of a position in a series. From the infinite expanse of a beeping noise, to the brief moment of a single beep.

This hypostasis is particularly significant within Technic's chain of emanations, also because it is here that the notion of radical unsituatedness, discussed in reference to absolute language, slowly begins to wither. While unique 'that-ness' is entirely banished at the level of absolute language, it begins to resurface as we reach the unit. Despite absolute language's efforts to enforce a state of perfect equivalence, and to completely eradicate any uniqueness to the 'stuff' of the world, the event of a single activation of a serial position

²³For a critical anthology of the extant sources on Anaximander's philosophy, see *Anaximander*, in G. S. Kirk et al. (eds.), *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 100–42.

silently brings in something that begins to resist this fundamental uprooting. Whenever a single tree activates the position of 'timber', or a single human being activates that of 'migrant', something emerges as if mysteriously, timidly reclaiming a 'this-ness' to itself. Nonetheless, it would be premature to consider this point as the Waterloo of Technic's cosmogony. Approaching the third hypostasis is still part of our sailing through the open sea of Technic, though to a keen eye the shape of the clouds up above might suggest that a land somewhere far away might still resist the all-encompassing embrace of the waters.

The cosmogonic energy of absolute language, as mediated by measure, is still very much in place at the level of the unit. After all, this is the place where Technic finds the rough material for the creation of its world. The unit, as the single activation of a position in a series, is the minimum building block of all historical series, whether referring to culture, politics, economics, etc. It is the single instance of the 'being the case' of a position within a series, or, negatively, of its 'not being the case'. Hence, the unit has a double dimension, in accordance with its double role as the inheritor to measure's message, and the messenger to the hypostasis that will follow. On the one hand, the unit is shaped by the specific positions which it goes to activate in particular historical series, and in this sense, it can vary from case to case; a ton of timber is not the same exact form as a particular human emotion leading to impulse-buy. On the other hand, however, at an ontological level each unit is perfectly equivalent to any other. One activation is the same as another, because they are all merely instances of the event of activation; the 'stuff' that activates the position of a ton of timber, and the stuff that activates that of a desire to buy a snack at the till, are perfectly ontologically equivalent within Technic's cosmology. Precisely, neither of them exists in themselves as unique, autonomous 'things'. To bring back a concept that we discussed during our brief summary of philosophical takes on Technic in the twentieth century, the unit is the cosmogonic model of an instrument, and as such it embodies the fundamental aspects of Technic, both in its abstract and in its historical configurations.

All the main characteristics of the unit, as the third hypostasis in Technic's emanationist architecture, can be found also in its archetypal incarnation: *the piece of information*, or *data*. Talking about information or data inevitably brings to mind a prominent

aspect of the contemporary world, as it presents itself to our everyday experience. Virtually every field of knowledge and activity today, appears to be structured around the basic unit of the piece of information. From information technology to the industrial spreadsheet-farming developed by the cognitariat, from the American style of education and testing to the hypertrophy of databases, every type of contemporary activity seems to have information as the 'stuff' on which it operates. In fact, this impression couldn't be more correct. The information is the format in which the 'stuff' of the world makes itself available to be employed as an instrument and thus, within Technic's cosmology, it is the format in which the world actually emerges. The universe of Technic, as a stockpiling of 'standing-reserve', is a boundless mosaic of pieces of information. We can consider this deep relationship between information and Technic, if we look at how information relates both to what it is supposed to rely upon, and to the productive system to which it ultimately refers. Coherently with its status of offspring to measure, a piece of information actually refers only extremely tenuously (if at all) to the 'thing', which it is supposed to describe. Indeed, the contemporary interest in their supposed referential relationship between information and things is ultimately a nostalgic form of superstition. In no way, the format of the piece of information can relate to anything which would supposedly preexist it. Exactly as with the mathematical number, the piece of information has no room to convey existence – and in any case, according to absolute language, there can be no existence before it. The piece of information is the beginning and the end of the world. As it doesn't rely on any preexisting 'thing', so the piece of information doesn't feed into any higher form of knowledge. Every composition of pieces of information, however elaborate or gigantic, is always, in itself, just another piece of information, ready to be fed as an instrument into a further stage of production of a larger compound and so on ad libitum. The recent political debate on notions on 'post-truth' should also be considered in light of the ontological status of information within Technic. The disassociation between 'facts' and 'news' is not just the outcome of contemporary political struggle, but it is made possible (or inevitable) exactly by the (un) reality-system that has shaped our world in past decades.

If we are to consider the piece of information as the archetypal incarnation of the unit, itself the minimum building block of

reality, we must take into account a further process that necessarily accompanies it. As positions in a series are activated, each such activation, as a piece of information, needs to be duly observed, recorded and declared. If we consider this aspect at a cosmogonic level, we can understand how the 'spectacular' character of our contemporary society, has more to do with an ontological requirement than with reasons of cultural or political propaganda. Hand in hand with the unit-as-information, goes the spectacle that observes, records and broadcasts it. In the absence of such broadcast, even if only targeted to an imaginary audience or to the intranet of a police department, the single activation of a position wouldn't count as information and thus, ultimately, would not take place at all. Information relies on a series which is, at once, a series of production and one of recording and broadcast. Within this perspective, we can also interpret the multitude of meanings contained in the currently ubiquitous term, 'data'. Data, as the plural of *datum*, refers to something which is 'given', stable and true. A *datum* is guaranteed, both because nothing before it can exist, and because it takes place as something 'given' to someone, that is, passed on to a further entity that can collect it, record it and pass it on in turn. Yet, today we talk about these 'givens' in a plural form: data. This is because a piece of information is never alone, and it cannot possibly exist in isolation. To explain it with a metaphor: while in ancient mathematics pebbles were used to act as numbers, contemporary mathematics adopts the information-technology format of the bit – unlike a pebble that exists in isolation as well as in a mathematical pattern, a bit can never truly stand on its own. Likewise, the world turned into a stockpiling of information necessarily tends to the structure of an ever-expanding network of production and distribution. Infinite growth is at the same time an ethical imperative imposed by the hypostasis of measure, and, at the level of this third hypostasis, a requirement for information to be able to stand at all. If the process of expansion was to suddenly stop, and the universal archive of information that we call 'world' was to find a closed and permanent form as the greatest possible piece of information, its already feeble presence would immediately sink into complete darkness. In terms of its cosmogonic function, infinite growth is Technic's version of soteriology, since it is the only, anxious way it knows to save the world-as-information from vanishing entirely.

The archetypal incarnation of this hypostasis as the piece of information, makes apparent the relationship of enmity between two terminological false friends: unit and unity. Unity, as represented for example by the Pythagorean monad or by the Neoplatonic One, is a principle that presents completeness and a state of self-containment, as the pinnacle both of the perfection of a thing and of its existence. The unitary One exists above all else, because nothing else is as stable and self-sufficient. Conversely, the unit indicates a state of necessary disintegration of the world. It is not just that a unit can never be complete, but that it shouldn't; was it ever to exit the endless chain of production and of limitless growth, it would suddenly lose any possibility to reclaim citizenship in the world. In the face of this imperative to be reduced to the level of pure instrumentality, we begin to sense that subtle, silent form of resistance to which we referred at the beginning of this paragraph on the third hypostasis.

Within Technic's cosmogony, any existent (or, better, anything 'previously known as existent') is reduced to the number of activations which it can simultaneously operate – the greater their number, and the more inducing to further activations in the interest of expanding each series, the more legitimate its presence in the world. Thus, a human being is all the more legitimate in his/her presence within the world, the more s/he is able to be the simultaneous activator of several positions at once in various different series. The trite model of capitalist femininity, proposing a superwoman-like person who is capable of multitasking tirelessly to the point of near ubiquity, functions as a good example of this kind of ontological demand. The same applies to any other thing to which we assign an individual name: plants, animals, minerals, meteorological events and so on. The moment they slow down in their process of activation, or if they ever begin to limit themselves to a few or even just to one series, their legitimacy in the world begins to wane. If they were to exit all available historical series, their presence in the world would suddenly end.

Yet, a human being who is reduced to a pure assemblage of pieces of information, that is, of instrumental units, finds him/herself stuck under such a level of pressure and exploitation, to challenge the weight of any boulder in the Tartarus. At once mutated, torn apart and chained to the mill of the information-process, a human being, like every other existent, cannot but scream in pain. This might be a silent scream, like that of depression or of the stoic suicide of animals

in captivity, but the pain which it conveys remains all the more authentic. Indeed, this pain is the first symptom of that ‘something’ which we saw mysteriously emerging as a form of resistance. It is the pain of the existent, as it goes through the torture wheel of Technic, that here begins to remind us that Technic’s cosmogony, after all, is bound to remain incomplete. Something alien still survives within it, although, at this point in the implementation of absolute language’s principle over the world, it is just a murmuring pain.

Fourth hypostasis: Abstract general entity

The fourth hypostasis emanated from the third, like a beam of light filtered through a cloud. Once again, here we encounter a figure that featured in the first chapter of this book. This time, however, we see it under a different light, as a different kind of entity. No longer an existential figure, as seen through human eyes living within history, but a supra-historical hypostasis in the internal architecture of Technic’s cosmogonic force. Within this perspective, the AGE is the fourth hypostasis in a chain of emanations, begotten by the unit, in the lineage of measure and absolute language, and in turn begetting of the fifth and final hypostasis that will follow. Thus, the AGE has to be considered consistently with the spirit of increasing specification that so far has led us from the general principle of absolute language, through the multiplicity of actual series of measure, to the unit’s single instance of activation of a position in a series. The AGE maintains the same cosmogonic geography of the unit, remaining at the level of the single activation of a position in a series. Yet, it considers this instance not in its generality, but in its particular cases: the AGE doesn’t refer to the phenomenon of activation in itself, but specifically to actual activations as they take place in specific patterns. Like at the level of the unit, here too we find ‘something’ that further intensifies its protest and resurgence. How could we even talk of a specific pattern of activations, if we weren’t at least doubting, at this point, that some other presence, outside of the series, contributes to determine the form of such emerging patterns? As the light of absolute language progressively runs out of its cosmogonic energy, an alien shadow begins to grow.

While the unit referred to the phenomenon of activation of a position in a series, and the AGE as seen historically pointed to the existential experience of Technic's world, the AGE as the fourth cosmogonic hypostasis defines the appearance of patterns of activation in Technic's world. It is to these patterns that still, with superstitious and nostalgic spirit, we often attribute the name of individual things: this tree and this horse, this human being and this pebble, this idea and this cloud. Within Technic's cosmology, each of these individual names corresponds to a specific pattern of activations – and to nothing else. For example, inasmuch as I claim any legitimacy as this specific individual human being that 'I' supposedly 'am' within Technic's world, I coincide with a certain pattern of activations: the specific gender-position, citizenship-position, work-position, set of desire-positions, skill-positions, health-indicators, etc. that I activate – or better, whose activation constitutes 'me'. But what is this 'me', within Technic's cosmology? What place is assigned to it, and to all individual names, in this cosmogonic architecture? Considered ontologically, the nothingness that 'I' am, and my complete reduction to a set of instrumental units in a number of historical series of production, is here slightly mitigated by the provision of a category into which 'my' nothingness can find a place, however fictitious. Within Technic's cosmology, in accordance to the form of Technic's cosmogonic architecture, I can claim my individuality only as an AGE. The same goes for any other pattern of activations that wishes to claim its own individuality, or to which anybody wishes to assign a level of specificity and individuality: plants, rocks, climate, ideas and so on. Of course, the AGE is a purely nominalistic construct, in that it is little more than a name defining a specific pattern. Indeed, within Technic's cosmology, nothing makes the specific pattern that I call 'myself', more essentially appropriate than, say, another pattern that includes parts of myself, aspects of a cup, the level of ozone in the atmosphere and a number of moments from the Battle of Verdun.²⁴ What, however, makes certain patterns more eligible for an individual name that is to be elevated to the status of AGEs, is their specific functionality to the expansion of

²⁴A defence of this claim for a 'nonconventional ontology' about objects, defined as 'the fusion principle', can be found in M. Heller, *The Ontology of Physical Objects*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 49–51.

the series in which their activations take place. The specific pattern of activations which we commonly define as 'this tree' is easier to include simultaneously in different historical series (environmental/economic/touristic/etc.), than one composed, say, by the rhythm of the oscillation of its leaves and the fluctuation in the GDP of Mongolia. 'This tree', as a purely nominalistic entity, is particularly suited to enter a number of different systems of production, while creating a certain synergy between them. Thus, rather than looking at the AGE just as an ontological figure, we should see it as a functional construct, the same way in which we would consider a specific department or job position in a sprawling corporation; its presence, however empty and arbitrary, is justified by its role in the overall process of growing production.

It is in reference to these aspects, that we can find the archetypal incarnation of this hypostasis in the figure of *the processor*. The processor can be considered here as the peculiar evolution of the traditional notion of subject, of which it retains the 'subjecthood', while doing without the aspect of autonomous existence and volition. The subject, as the centre of activity, becomes here the nominalistic figure to which are assigned certain moments in the progression of several processes. The responsibility for such activities (i.e. activations of positions in the interest of the expansion of the series) also befalls the processor, as if it could have decided to do otherwise. In fact, neither the processor has any autonomous will to decide to act one way or another, nor can it decide to stop its activity. The processor *is* the pattern of its activity, and were it ever to give up some of them, that is to exit certain series, it would do so either to enter new ones (i.e. from 'worker' to 'unemployed aka benefit scrounger', or from 'citizen' to 'migrant aka criminal', etc., all equally legitimate in the eye of Technic, and functional to it in their own way), or as part of a process of vanishing that would affect its very presence in the world. Stripped of its autonomy and volition, the processor cannot even be said to be part of a deterministic mechanism, since for determinism to take place there should be at least a theoretical possibility for things to be different than they actually are; on the contrary, within Technic's cosmogony, the only thing that can be truly said to exist is the ever-expanding 'being the case' of the series-system, the alternative to which would be absolute nothingness. The processor is the archetypal figure that takes up the fundamental paradigm of the system in which it is

inserted (in the case of Technic, the ever-expansion of the series-system through the relentless activation of serial positions), and implements it in practice. It is the centre of activity, since, in truth, it is nothing else but the name assigned to a specific pattern of activity.

The figure of the processor, if applied to our everyday experience of Technic's world, helps to clarify certain aspects of our current, seemingly gratuitous enslavement to total-work. Humans (or farmed animals, or waterfalls, etc.) are subjected to a condition of hyper-exploitation, stretching from traditional forms of work to the exploitation of our emotions, because our very ontological position in the world is merely that of specific patterns of activities. We seem to have become nothing else but workers, because in Technic's cosmology we *are* nothing but work. Needless to say, within this perspective, the widespread tendency to attribute other names to this process, in particular when we blame our exploitation onto supposedly existing 'capitalists' or to a particular economic system, should be taken once again as a form of nostalgic superstition. Considering work merely in its specific historical dimension, as economic/social/political/etc. activity, means remaining oblivious to the cosmogonic quality which it has acquired under the current unreality-system. There is no ghostly 1 per cent of the population that authentically enjoys all this, or truly benefits from it, or specifically wills for us to be enslaved – because technically there is nothing at all, except the ever-expansion of the series that composes Technic's cosmology. This is not to say that nobody can ever be considered responsible for any action, but rather that, within the present structure of the world as an unreal entity which is entirely comprised by absolute language, the very notion of responsibility doesn't make sense. Nor does it make sense to attribute desires to anybody, since within the present world as ruled by Technic there is no distinction between desire, activity, people and things; none of these things exist, but they are all merely present as instances of activations of positions in series.

On this basis, we can also attempt to understand our contemporary crisis of action and imagination, which we mentioned at the very beginning of this book. The present paralysis – which we experience both at an individual level as psychopathology, and collectively as that form of *akrasia* due to which we are unable to tackle even unambiguously lethal threats such as global warming – is in fact just our arbitrary attribution of a pejorative name to a normal

state of the world under Technic. We are unable to act differently, or to think and imagine differently, because of the absence, within the present system of unreality, of the basic requirements to implement any alternative course of action and imagination. Who could act differently, if the only method to affirm our legitimate presence in the world, as abstract general entities, is to coincide with our very actions, which we undertake as processors within series, and in the exclusive interest of their expansion? How could we think differently, if the seemingly endless horizon of possible alternative courses of action is in fact reducible to their function as productive series in Technic's own cosmogony? How could we approach action and imagination with a renewed spirit and desire, as long as we, AGEs, are constitutively unable to function as centres of volition? The very notion of desire, which in common parlance we still continue to attribute to ourselves, has to be interpreted in the light of Technic's cosmogonic project. Since AGEs are not distinct from their productive activity, they are not different from what we usually call their 'desire'. Desire for something, within Technic, is just the passage to a new activation in a different series. As I desire to buy a product, for example, I merely activate a new position in the consumer-series, specifically in the sub-series related to that product or service. This ever-growing expansion in the number of simultaneous activations, which we could call 'infinite desire', is, in fact, the very process through which Technic's cosmogony unfolds. Within this perspective, all types of desire are equal and equally legitimate, since they all ultimately boil down to the same process, fulfilling the same, fundamental, cosmogonic function.

The only type of desire that finds no legitimacy here is, of course, that which is entirely negative – a form of total anhedonia that seeks no redemption or supplement. And indeed, we find this form of disobedience rapidly expanding throughout the world ruled by Technic. The contemporary epidemic of depression, the radical emptying of all pleasure that is still desperately covered by the enforcement of ever-stricter injunctions to enjoy, is a signal of this terrifying form of resistance. Once again, that which manages to escape Technic's cosmology does so as pain and suffering, as a slow form of stoic suicide. Life, constricted into the vaporization chamber of the AGE, finds in its own sabotage the only possible form of resistance against its oppressor. Unless, of course, it was to

challenge the very metaphysical foundations on which our world currently rests.

Fifth hypostasis: Life as vulnerability

Out of the fourth hypostasis, like a sinking light reflected by the surface of the sea, shines out the fifth and last one: life as vulnerability. At this level, the energy of the first principle of absolute language finally extinguishes itself, but not without a last shimmer – which announces the possibility for Technic's cosmogonic chain to restart anew. As it ends, Technic's cosmogony also reaches its own perfection, and goes back to its roots.

What marks the closing of Technic's chain of emanation is its progressive entanglement, its fading absoluteness. The principle of language, originally self-sufficient to the point of acting as its own ground and of denying any form of ulterior localization, now finds itself constrained by new, emerging limits. It is here, at the level of this final hypostasis, that Technic encounters a dimension of time which isn't entirely its own.

Considered serially, time doesn't quite exist, neither linearly nor cyclically. Within the ever-expanding movement of purely abstract, linguistic series, time is just the rhythm of their expansion; it runs after itself, and its only mode of presence is that of 'lateness'. At the heart of Technic there is neither present, past nor future, as they all coexist simultaneously within a chain of production that runs uninterrupted. What we encounter instead, is each moment of production repeating itself obsessively, in increasing acceleration. Any such instant, that is any instance of activation of a position in a series, has to be repeated again and again to maintain or to accelerate the pace of expansion. Technic's time – as ceaseless repetition – doesn't quite flow, but beeps at a paroxysmic pace. Its dimension is geometrical, as it coincides with the terrain on which production takes place – better, it coincides with production itself. Within Technic, moments and events are never temporally 'present', since their presence is only retrospectively confirmed by the act of their recording and broadcasting within the series of production. Nor are they ever truly 'future', since their potential presence is already, in itself, productive. Equally, they can never be said to be 'past', since their past activation of a position in a series remains always

active as the foundation on which later instances of expansion take place. Rather, every moment and event within Technic is defined temporally only as 'late', that is as 'not fast enough'. Time is infused by Technic's ethical dimension, and accordingly it can't be said to simply 'pass': following its cosmological imperatives, it always accelerates – though never fast enough.

Yet, this dimension of lateness as the rhythm of Technic's time in its accelerating expansion, encounters at the level of the last hypostasis, a source of unbreakable opposition. 'Something' else, another temporal dimension, appears to place fetters on the galloping pace of production. As it grounds production on the integrated functional units of the AGEs, the diktats of Technic's cosmogonic force finally break against the resurgence of 'something' that affects time itself. An individual living being, however metaphysically reduced to the nominalist entity of the AGE, still brings in, almost mysteriously, a different temporality. To use a metaphor from IT, as the software meets the hardware and gets entangled in it, it also encounters the specific temporality that befalls material objects. This is particularly evident whenever Technic attempts to impose its absolute domain on living creatures, such as animals and plants. At this level, the ontological mutation operated by Technic, and its project to eradicate existence from the world, encounters an obstacle that appears to be insurmountable. Living creatures (both as traditionally understood, and as understood more fundamentally and broadly, as we will discuss at great length in the next chapter) have a temporality of their own; they have a kernel of existence and a 'this-ness' that resists all attempts at annihilation.

Unable to break it, Technic thus attempts to recuperate this obstacle by including it, however partially and negatively, within its own cosmogony. From the perspective of the cosmogonic force springing out of absolute language, 'life' is presented as mere 'vulnerability'. The mysterious emergence of a new set of rhythms and limits, of a new temporality that is connected to life, is included within this cosmology as the obstacle that has to be overcome, the problem that has to be fixed. In recent years, such 'problematization' of life has practically unfolded along two main, parallel directions: on the one hand through an attempt to overcome materiality; on the other by integrating Technic at the very heart of materiality itself, thus planning to overtake this emerging otherness through hostile mimesis. We can find examples of the first strategy particularly in

the organization of industrial production and in certain branches of information technology – as the productive software is progressively emancipated from the hardware, despite the fact that a clean cut from the material support is as yet practically impossible. Examples of the second strategy of a hostile takeover are found especially in the field of biotechnology, where the mixing of vulnerable living material and pure linguistic sequences of production is pursued to the utmost limit.²⁵ In either case, the result is that the emergence of life within Technic's world (and more generally, of anything depending on a different form of temporality), is presented in the form of a problem, an obstacle and a vulnerability. As it is included within Technic's cosmology, the living dimension of the existent (better, the existent in its living dimension, as we will see in the next chapter) is assigned the role of that which needs to be redeemed. Despite its apparent secularism, Technic has retained and enforced a number of categories deriving from the religious tradition – among them, that of sin, which re-emerges here with particular strength.²⁶ Life as vulnerability is the ontological sin that needs to be purged, the impurity that demands to be cleansed. As long as it remains available to be 'saved', however partially (and thus, infinitely), the living dimension of the existent is granted citizenship in the world. But whatever remains totally impenetrable to Technic's attempt to redeem it – that is, to mutate it into a stockpiling of units ready for the infinite proliferation of productive series – is discarded as absolutely implausible, as radical non-presence.

Although it comes at the end of the chain of emanations, and at the setting of the sun of absolute language, this fifth and last hypostasis plays a fundamental role in the economy of the whole chain. We can better appreciate the importance of this cosmogonic level, if we approach it via its archetypal incarnation as *possibility*.

²⁵During the twentieth century, this tendency has found its early philosophical and aesthetic foundations in the work of the Russian Cosmists, whose influence is still felt today in the so-called 'Transhumanist' currents of thought. For an overview on Cosmism, see G. M. Young, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

²⁶For a discussion of the religiosity of Technic, in particular with reference to the cult of work, see my F. Campagna, *The Last Night: Anti-work, Atheism, Adventure*, Hants: Zero Books, 2013.

If the ever-expansion of Technic's productive chain is limited only by the obstacle of life, understood as problematic vulnerability, then it is also enhanced and made possible by this challenge. Within the limitless expansion that constitutes Technic's very form of presence, life's unbreakable resistance is resolved in the figure of an ever-receding horizon that the productive apparatus is made to chase endlessly. Every instance of the obstacle is a problem that needs to be fixed, that is, it's a possibility for Technic's further expansion. This method of resolution of a structural failure could be described as 'resolution through simulation'.²⁷ What is impossible to resolve in its totality, is considered in its parts as a cluster of individual possibilities of resolution. By selecting increasingly minute portions of the impossible, and by turning them into small possible victories, Technic denies its own limits while progressing indefinitely in its infinite chase after itself. In this perspective, we can also appreciate the role played by incremental innovations in all fields of contemporary activity, and the conspicuous absence of any authentic instance of groundbreaking innovation in recent decades.

A possibility is thus to be understood, not as a radical form of indeterminacy, but rather as a gap that exists only inasmuch as it is possible to fill it. A possibility is a 'not-as-yet' that, in Technic's own conception of time, is always-already resolved, since its presence is exactly as 'that which can be resolved'. The problem that can be fixed is always-already resolved exactly in its being resolvable, that is, in its being reducible to the productive discourse of seriality. On the contrary, what escapes entirely the discourse of productive resolution, that is, of ontological mutation and annihilation, is not even allowed a negative form of presence. Nothing is impossible, because the impossible, by claiming to be irreducible in its nature, also claims a nature of its own, that is, a nature which isn't reducible to the linear seriality of Technic's cosmogony – and to anything advancing such claims, no form of presence whatsoever is allowed.

The irreducible mystery of life, stubbornly escaping Technic's capture, is converted into a theme park for Technic's triumph. By resolving its resistance into a case of vulnerability – that is as endless possibility for resolution – life is turned into the stage for

²⁷I am indebted to the late Mark Fisher for this expression – characteristically poignant and brilliant, as it was always in his style.

Technic's denial of its own limits. Resolution by simulation indicates exactly this condition of ceaseless postponement of the end. This is what happens, for example, when we consider most contemporary discourses over health and illness, and particularly mental health and mental illness. That which most stubbornly resists the process of reduction-to-work operated by Technic, is turned into a medical problem, that is, into a problem that functions as a not-as-yet-accomplished possibility of resolution. From this angle, we can understand more generally the contemporary focus over illness, diseases, catastrophes, even pseudo-apocalypses (as in most contemporary cultural productions), as a further case of possibility. The crumbling support that life as vulnerability offers to Technic's unfolding, and which would eventually lead to Technic's own demise, is frozen in the very instant of its crumbling; it is never a resolved situation, or a complete defeat. The permanent state of crisis that characterizes most contemporary discourses in virtually every field, from politics to economics, from medicine to culture, embodies exactly this aspect. By maintaining its relationship with its own limit as a state of endless crisis, Technic is able to freeze it into a suspended condition. For example, the current epidemic of mental illness is not presented as a symptom of Technic's own limit, as it encounters the resistance of life, but rather as a problem of life itself that Technic has to tackle and fix through socio-medical means. Like Saint Augustin denied the existence of evil, defining it instead as the contingent absence of good, so Technic denies the existence of anything that would authentically escape it, defining it instead as a possibility that hasn't as yet been fulfilled. For example, life's mortality is included within Technic's cosmology as an as-yet-unreached (but by no means unreachable) state of immortality; medicine and medical technologies are working on it, and it is only a matter of time – or so the discourse goes – before we can achieve it. Of course, the notion of immortality as infinite presence is not in the slightest a discourse over life as such, but merely an application to life of the very temporal structure of Technic itself.

It is here, just when it fades, that Technic's cosmogony hits back and recoils, returning to its first principle as a new beginning for a repetition of its cosmogony. A possibility, considered in itself is the most primordial measure of absolute language; it is the pure virtuality of that which, in the end, cannot be but abstract language. It is a question with only one possible solution, since it is drawn

negatively according to the solution itself. As it reaches life, and encounters it as an obstacle, Technic is capable of regenerating its own cosmology by declaring life as a mere vulnerability, a problem awaiting a solution: pure possibility. And what other solution can there be to such a problem, what other form of health can function as the resolution of this illness, but the re-establishment of Technic's own original cosmogonic principles? If we understand mental illness merely as a lack of mental health, and if we consider health simply as a state of functional presence within the serial system of production, then we imply that it is exactly in the form of absolute language that we seek our redemption. We shall be healthy, we shall be immortal, only in that dimension of our presence in the world that perfectly carries the energy of absolute language. If the whole world is a stockpiling of standing-reserves, it is only in its integration into Technic, in its digestion by Technic, that its incomplete presence shall find redemption. Likewise, digestibility and functionality to the consuming organism, is what determines the difference between food and inedible waste. By painstakingly selecting the digestible portions of life as vulnerability, that is, by circling around its unbreakable and irreducible core, which always escapes reduction to the unfolding of serial production, Technic at once reaffirms its infinity by simulating its limitlessness, and reinforces its own central principle.²⁸

Yet, despite all efforts, an indigestible kernel continues to remain at the heart of the world. Something irreducible to absolute language, something constitutively unfit for serial production, always lingers, not at the periphery, but at the very centre of Technic's own world. Although unwilling and unable to be granted citizenship within it, and despite being permanently banned from the catalogue of what is legitimately present, this mysterious something remains there. Something so mysterious, at the heart of life itself, that even calling

²⁸This same process of 'digestion' can be found lyrically described in Zbigniew Herbert's poem *Preliminary Investigation of an Angel*, in which an ineffable angel, who first arrives still 'composed of light of the aeons', is progressively turned by its 'interrogators' (or it might be better to say, translators) into something linguistically graspable and exploitable, until 'the leather throat of the angel is full of gluey agreement / how beautiful is the moment / when he falls on his knees / incarnate into guilt / saturated with contents' (*Preliminary Investigation of an Angel*, in Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, London: Atlantic Books, 2014).

it 'something' would be misleading. Indeed, it belongs to the field of what is ineffable. But once again, we're racing ahead of ourselves. Just about, this time. The ineffable will be the elusive protagonist of our next chapter. A few more pages, exploring the periphery of Technic's cosmogony, where the limits to its systems draw the contours of its shape, and we shall venture into another possible form of reality-system.

Upper and lower limits: *Ego absconditus* and double affirmation

Every form is defined both by its internal principles, and by the external constraints that limit it. Already at the beginning of this chapter, during our discussion of the emanationist form of cosmogony, we briefly hinted at how the general form of Technic's cosmology finds its outer shape in its relationship with what exceeds it. The *hadud* (sing. *hadd*), the limits that befall each layer of its chain of emanations, also befall the chain as a whole. While the internal architecture of Technic is structured in accordance to the character of its own principles, its outer shape is defined by their specific negation. Since Technic's principles act through a process of absolute reduction to a common language of seriality, capable of being perfectly transparent and conveniently smooth for production, then their outer limits are shaped around the irreconcilable case of the paradoxical form. While the alternative reality-system of Magic, which we shall begin discussing in a few pages, takes the paradoxical form as the accomplishment of its cosmogony, here this represents exactly its insurmountable limit. We can find such cosmogonic paradoxes surrounding Technic's system from all sides, and particularly at its uppermost and lowermost borders.

As the uppermost limit to Technic's chain of emanations, we find a form of paradox that could be defined as the *Ego Absconditus*, the 'hidden I'. We noticed how the first hypostasis and first principle of absolute language shuns any notion of situatedness or of external enunciation; absolute language presents itself as a language spoken by no mouth, in no place or time. By abolishing the very possibility of anything existing outside of its own terrain, absolute language wishes to deny also its own origin as deriving from anywhere

outside of itself. Yet, the serial linearity of its discourse cannot but sink into that very evident paradox which it wished to avoid. How can there be a language that is not spoken? How can we have something absolute without any preceding figure or principle that 'absolves' it? Once again, we can find a similar question at the centre of a theological debate, of which, *mutatis mutandis*, we can here endorse the spirit and the method. The eighteenth-century Iranian Shi'i philosopher Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i, posed a similar question in particularly poignant terms. Quoting from a rare piece of Western scholarship on him, by the excellent Henry Corbin:

Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i and his successors have strictly adhered to the consequences of Shiite apophatic theology. The idea of 'absolute' being, as it is commonly employed by philosophers, is not even an initial idea for them, for the passive participle 'absolute' presupposes an *absolvens*, an 'absolution' of being, liberating being by putting it not in the infinitive (*esse*), nor in the substantival participle (*ens*), but in the imperative (*esto*).²⁹

In order to function, absolute language must deny any possibility of anything preceding or even just existing outside of itself. Yet, in order to take place and to be at all possible, such an external figure has to be present. Regardless of how categorically absolute language states to be the product of its own enunciation, as language it still requires a non-linguistic source in order to be able to emerge as a phenomenon. And as an absolute, it still requires a preceding *absolvens*. Of course, both these aspects of Technic's cosmogony are equally and simultaneously valid, despite the fact of this being impossible; absolute language is its own source of enunciation, yet at the same time it can't be. This paradox marks the uppermost limit of the chain of emanations, fencing off the desire for the roots of the first hypostasis to stretch indefinitely into the absolute origin, to the point of becoming their own ground.

An equally unsolvable challenge awaits Technic's chain of emanations at its lowermost point, at the southern border of the fifth hypostasis, where its original energy exhausts itself and then bounces

²⁹H. Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993, p. 354.

back to its source. There, we found Technic's attempt to resolve the unbreakable resistance offered by something ineffable lying at the heart of life, through its congealment in the form of problematic possibility. Despite its spectacular attempts at deflection and resolution through simulation, this mysterious 'presence-exceeding-presence', still remains. Indeed, if the obstacle encountered by the fading energy of absolute language was reducible to mere presence, it would have been possible to subsume it back within Technic's cosmology, and to turn it into an object of ontological mutation and blackmail like everything else. Conversely, its presence is at once present enough to allow Technic to draw from it aspects of possibility and to play its game of postponement through simulation, while also exceeding presence altogether and escaping any attempt at capture by Technic's cosmogonic force. As we shall see in the next chapter, this ineffable obstacle lying at the heart of life is characterized by this double aspect, at once metaphysical (and as such in part available to be discussed linguistically), and ultra-metaphysical, thus exceeding language and defusing any threat of capture. We could try to sum up its paradoxical nature by defining it as a case of Double Affirmation, a 'yes-yes'. The first 'yes', stands for its available level of presence, that allows for its possibility and its inclusion within Technic. The second 'yes', clearly redundant and bewilderingly paradoxical, hints at its ultra-metaphysical ultra-presence, which is so intense that it escapes presence and thus capture. As it will become clearer at the end of the next chapter on Magic, this definition of 'double affirmation' borrows from that of 'double negation', as developed by twelfth-century Persian philosopher Suhrawardi, who applied it to the issue of how to define God in relation to its attributes.

This paradoxical entity, apparently pushed to the furthestmost periphery of Technic's cosmology, is nonetheless indispensable for it to take place and to endlessly regenerate itself. Although the principle of absolute language wishes to eradicate any possibility of autonomous presence, and to convert any 'thing' into a mere instance of activation of a serial position, it nonetheless requires exactly what it denies, to be able to function. The ineffable dimension, so prominent in what we traditionally understand as life, can be found also in places that we don't usually consider as living (although as we shall see in the next chapter, such traditional distinctions could be rethought in the perspective of an alternative

reality-system). In fact, the ineffable dimension is constitutively part of existence altogether, even when existence is seemingly crushed into mere 'presence' by the principle of seriality, as it happens in Technic's unreality-system. The treasure guarded by the principle of seriality is at the same time the poison that will be able to sabotage its guardian. Once again, both these aspects are present in the scheme of Technic's cosmogony: existence has to be negated in its ineffable dimension, but its ineffability has to remain in force. If indeed the principle of seriality was able to fully annihilate ineffable existence, the racing pace of its production would immediately run out of ground on which to unfold. Its suspension, functioning through postponement and simulation, still requires the solid bedrock of the possibility (and thus of what escapes it) in order to continue to regenerate itself.

This ineffable dimension, that at once exceeds and necessarily grounds Technic's cosmogony, can be also considered in its own right as the first principle of an alternative reality-system. Of course, if we are to choose exactly what denies Technic's cosmogony, our alternative cosmology should have characters that are specular to those examined so far. Regardless of the desirability of this alternative reality-system, such specularity alone would be sufficient reason to explore this alternative at length, since it would be the perfect example of how we can think of a system of reality, that is alternative to the current state of radical unreality. And in fact, the next chapter will be dedicated to an alternative form of cosmogony that is centred around the principle of ineffability, which so far we have encountered only negatively as the nemesis of absolute language. Accordingly, the chain of emanations that we shall observe in the next chapter will be specular to that which we have explored in this one. Yet, the cosmogonic experiment that will soon follow shouldn't be considered purely as a philosophical exercise. Like the peculiarity of Technic's internal architecture have produced dramatic consequences on the world around us, so an alternative reality-system would have an equally profound impact on life in the world, according to its own peculiar structure. Seeking an alternative to the contemporary condition of metaphysical nihilism, epidemics of mental illness, hyper-exploitation and environmental devastation, has to pass first and foremost through a fundamental rethinking of the reality-conditions that allow such processes to take place. Imagining a cosmology that is truly and

starkly alternative to that which rules our world today is a matter of necessity rather than of philosophical solipsism. Like everything dictated by urgency and by necessity, its edges might be rough and its character worryingly experimental, yet the spirit that animates it infuses it with its own intensity. Whether the end result will be able to match the expectations, and the urgency that originated it, is for the readers to judge.

Conclusion

We have reached the end of the first part of this book, which has focused on exploring the mark impressed by the reign of Technic on history and on our everyday experience in the world (Chapter 1), and the internal architecture of Technic as a cosmogonic force (Chapter 2). Before moving on to the next section, which will be dedicated to the alternative cosmogony of Magic, it might be worth-while to quickly recapitulate some of the main aspects of our discussion so far.

We began by looking at the ‘symptoms’ of the reign of Technic over our contemporary world. Similarly to the ‘hyperobjects’ described by American philosopher Timothy Morton³⁰ – of which we can only see the traces, rather than ever them in their entirety – a cosmogonic force such as Technic can only be detected through the traces that it leaves on the world, which its own peculiar form of reality has allowed to the emerge. In the case of Technic, we have observed how the paralysis of action and imagination that characterizes our contemporary Westernized world, points to a form of radical unreality rather than to any form of reality as such. The present condition of metaphysical nihilism, that strips all things of their essence and existence, turning them into mere instances of an ontology of positions, signals towards a complete disintegration of reality – a collapse of the background that allows the characters to act on stage, as per the metaphor that opened this book. When the frame of reality refuses to act as a frame, thus preventing the

³⁰T. Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

existent from emerging within it as a 'world', reality's disintegration begins. In the course of the first chapter we have looked both at the history of this disintegration, which is the history of Technic's triumph as a hegemonic cosmogonic force, and at the way such process has at once reinforced and expanded its own historical justifications. In doing so, we suggested a cosmogonic reading of that seemingly unstoppable expansion of the productive apparatus, which is usually the object of socio-economic and political analyses. This was not to deny the importance of looking at the world using tools from the social and economic disciplines, but rather to suggest that such tools should be complemented with those from other fields, typically closer to theology and mythology. This initial discussion of Technic's traces on history has been punctuated with frequent examples taken from our contemporary world, so as to make more apparent what might have otherwise seemed merely abstract and obscure speculations. Conversely, the second chapter on the internal architecture of Technic as a cosmogonic force has not shied away from such risk of obscurity and seeming abstraction.

While the beginning and end of this book are meant to act, respectively, as entry and exit points to our analysis of cosmogonies via examples that can be found in the world, the central part of this volume focuses on the very cosmogonic structures that allow certain types of world to emerge. We have thus dedicated the whole of the second chapter to an experimental use of typically Neoplatonic concepts and language, in the service of our philosophical reconstruction of the elements and processes that constitute Technic's cosmogonic force – and thus, via their creation of a specific form of (un)reality, that also define the type of world in which we find ourselves living in today. In the course of our examination, we have often used the metaphor of a cosmogonic architecture as a means to provide a visual support through which the reader might better follow the unfolding of our discussion. However, this was also paying homage to the symbolic language usually employed in the philosophical traditions to which our project looks back, particularly to the 'memory palaces' created in antiquity and in the Renaissance through the so-called 'method of loci'.³¹ Like a house

³¹Of which Frances A. Yates offers a comprehensive exposition in her 1966 book *The Art of Memory* – F. A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London: The Bodley Head, 2014.

develops in height as far as its foundations can hold the weight, so the architecture of Technic's cosmogonic force unfolds through successive stages, until the point when the sustaining energy of the original principle finally exhausts itself. Yet, we wished to present such an original principle not only as a support to the unfolding of its architecture, but also as a powerful normative element, shaping and directing all successive stages or hypostases. Thus, we saw how the principle of absolute language gives origin to the unfolding of four successive hypostases that progressively actualize its founding directives, while at the same time also inevitably betraying them. Two parallel processes appeared to be running through Technic's whole cosmogonic building, like ogival ribs through an arch; the progressive monopolizing of existence by the principle of seriality, on the one hand, and the expulsion from the world of anything that would in any way attempt to resist this destiny, on the other. While this annihilation of the existent echoed our previous examination of the consequences of Technic's reign over the present world, towards the end of the second chapter we also introduced the 'pain' of the existent as a constitutive symptom of the exhaustion of Technic's own internal cosmogonic energy. This mysterious 'something', emerging as a form of painful resistance to Technic's regime, refers at the same time both to the beginning of our discussion and to its continuation in the next part of this book. However horrible it might be to our existential experience, this fundamental symptom of Technic's reign also silently points towards an alternative cosmogony, that could give rise to a different reality-system and thus to a different world. An alternative that is already present today, at the heart of Technic's own cosmogony, however disguised as a danger whose call we are supposed to flee rather than follow.³²

³²'Wherever there is a ruin, there is hope for treasure / why do you not seek the treasure of God in the wasted heart?' Jalaluddin Rumi, in J. Rumi, *Diwan-i kabir ya Kulliyat-I Shams* (7 vols.), edited by Badi'uz-Zaman Furuzanfar, Tharan: Tharan University, 1957, poem n. 141.

Intermission: What is reality?

The project of this book is grounded on the conviction that the current reality-system, which I defined as Technic, is leading to the destruction of ‘reality’ as such – and that this disappearance bears dramatic consequences. For this reason, the next part of this book will be dedicated to exploring Magic, the alternative reality-system which I wish to propose as a possible path towards the reconstruction of reality. But what does this mean, exactly? And why would this destruction of reality, if at all occurring, be something we should try to avoid? Here, as a hinge between Technic and Magic, we shall consider in further detail what we can understand as ‘reality’, and how and why it carries such great significance.

At the beginning of the first chapter, I briefly stated that ‘reality’ is ‘the name that we assign to a state in which the dimensions of essence (*what* something is) and of existence (that something *is*) are inextricably bound to each other, without merging into one another’. Let us now be more specific about the meaning that we can attribute to terms such as reality, existence and essence. We could begin this exploration by exhaustively mapping the complex ramifications of the centuries-old philosophical diatribes around this semantic triad. However this would be an enormous undertaking – and one far outside the scope of this investigation. Instead, it might be more advisable instead to delve straight into the specific interpretation of these terms proposed by this volume, while referring only laterally to examples of their discussion throughout the history of philosophy.

We can understand ‘existence’ and ‘essence’ as two limit-concepts, that is, as the two opposite extremes of one same continuum. We can define this continuum in several different ways: for example, as the continuum between ineffability and language, or between direct apprehension and rational categorization, or again as the continuum between the unthinkable and the thinkable, or between

the unmeasurable substratum and the measure of specific limits and so on. In each of these oppositions, we can position 'existence' as the limit-concept that tends towards the former pole, while 'essence' as the limit-concept that tends towards the latter pole. I refer to existence and essence as limit-concepts, since both absolute poles towards which they tend (for example, absolute ineffability or absolute language), exceed the possibility of precise conceptualization, subsisting instead as tendencies towards which concepts can only point. In other words, we can define existence as the limit-concept that points towards the tendency of pure ineffability, measurelessness, 'in itself-ness' as absolute solidity (that which *is*, as it is in itself before its reduction to semantics) and towards all that can be approached only through direct apprehension. Conversely, we can define essence as the limit-concept pointing towards the tendency of pure language, measure, presence as contextually defined (*what* is, as defined by its difference from other existents – like words in a dictionary), and towards all that can be approached only through rational categorization. As it is immediately apparent, such definition of existence and essence carries an explicitly experiential bias, in that it is considered primarily from the perspective of an individual's experience of the world. It is only on the basis of our lived experience that we can point to opposing notions of ineffability and language, direct apprehension and rational categorization and so on. Indeed, such bias should be considered as a constitutive part of the project of this book.

This becomes even more apparent if we add the third concept of the triad: reality. If we consider existence and essence as the limit-concepts pointing towards opposite directions of a continuum-line, then we can understand reality as the space stretching between these two limit-concepts. Reality is the space that opens up between existence and essence, that is, between ineffability and language, in itself-ness and contextual presence, solid measureless substratum and the flickering catalogue of measures and so on. To say it otherwise: we can consider the notions of existence and essence as the opposite boundaries of the fundamental frame through which the world (and ourselves as part of the world) emerges to our experience. What emerges between them – 'the world' as such, regardless of its specific and historically determined qualifications – is 'reality' in its most general and most fundamental sense. Reality is the space that is available to our existential experience of life in the

world, oscillating between pure contemplation and pure activity, while never truly reaching either extreme pole.

Between India and the West

The question of existence and essence has animated the philosophical and theological debate since time immemorial – arguably, though using a different vocabulary, since the composition of the Upanishads around the eighth century BCE, all the way to the latest developments in Anglo-American analytic philosophy. For the greatest part, the Western approach to this issue has orbited around purely metaphysical concerns, that is, around the attempt to discover the ‘truth’ about the matter – however one is to understand the notion of ‘truth’ as such. Even when it entered an eminently theological realm (as for example in the medieval dispute between the positions of Thomas Aquinas and of Duns Scotus), the Western line of enquiry sought a notion of ‘objectivity’ that wished to purify as much as possible philosophical enquiry from the distortions produced by an all-too-human, existential framework. This focus persisted even after Kant, since the new centrality attributed to the specific human experience of truth, remained nonetheless based on an underlying claim to (transcendental) objectivity.¹ Conversely, the Indian tradition of philosophy, both in its Hindu and Buddhist declinations, has typically submitted logical and metaphysical enquiry to the ethical primacy of the subjective and existential concern of liberation from suffering.² Even ignorance (*avidya*), as it is understood in most Indian philosophical traditions, ultimately owes not only its negative connotations, but also its metaphysical status to the experience of suffering that it inflicts on the individual. To generalize, we could characterize the Western

¹For an interesting overview of the history of the notion of objectivity since the nineteenth century, see L. Daston and P. Galison, *Objectivity*, New York: Zone Books, 2007.

²This particular reading is broadly based on Giuseppe Tucci’s interpretation of the general trends in Indian philosophy. For a comparative analysis of the various schools of Indian philosophy, see his G. Tucci, *La Filosofia Indiana*, Roma and Bari: Laterza, 2005.

analysis of essence, existence and reality, as broadly geared towards a notion of ‘objective’ truth that supposedly underlies and founds the existential experience of the individual, also in reference to its ethical dimension – whose fundamental legitimacy and direction is expected to be rooted in the ‘facts’. Conversely, and again generally, we could characterize the Indian philosophical debate around these notions as originating primarily from the existential experience of the individual person, particularly the experience of suffering. On the basis of this, so to say ‘subjective’ basis, the Indian tradition moved towards metaphysical analysis, which found its fundamental *raison d’être* and propellant force in the existential experience of the individual – while striving to move beyond it in the interest of liberation.

In between these two seemingly opposite approaches, we could locate a particular strand of Islamic philosophy, as it is exemplified by both Shia and Sufi ‘theosophies’ (to use Henry Corbin’s definition, and his linking of these two distinct traditions). In the work of thinkers such as the twelfth–thirteenth-century Andalusia-born Sufi master Ibn Arabi, the twelfth-century Iranian ‘Illuminationist’ Suhrawardi, the thirteenth-century Turkish philosophical mystic Al-Qunawi³ or the seventeenth-century Iranian philosopher and theologian Mulla Sadra, we find a peculiar and fertile mix of Greek and Indian attitudes towards philosophical enquiry. While resting on a solid basis of Islamic theology – thus attributing ‘objective’ truth to the existence of God and to the words of the Quran – such thinkers developed their own investigation through a complex balancing exercise between objective and subjective tendencies, metaphysics and soteriology. In their work, as in that of many other Shia and Sufi thinkers, the existential concern and the quest for objective truth seem to go hand in hand, alternatively borrowing from the tradition of strict philosophical logic, as developed in the schools of *Kalam*,⁴ or from their own direct mystical experience

³Unlike the other thinkers just mentioned, Al-Qunawi’s thought won’t be investigated in the following pages. Unfortunately, there is a lack of literature on him available in English, and most of his writing is also not easily available in English. For an introduction to his thought, see R. Todd, *The Sufi Doctrine of Man: Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi’s Metaphysical Anthropology*, Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2014.

⁴*Ilm al-Kalam*, ‘the science of discourse’, usually indicates an approach to the study of Islamic theology that has a certain ‘scholastic’ attitude: *Mutakallimun* who engage

as well as from mystical traditions well beyond the borders of the Islamic world. An early example of this particular attitude – though by a figure who was neither Shia nor a Sufi – is eleventh-century Iranian philosopher Ibn Sina's 'floating man argument', especially if contrasted with its later Western equivalent, Descartes's *cogito*. According to Ibn Sina's argument, if we were to remove all sensorial perceptions or transmitted knowledge from a person, s/he would still be able to have a direct apprehension of his/her own very existence. Existence as such, in its pure form, is thus the primary object of our knowledge, while at the same time exceeding the boundaries of both empirical and conceptual knowledge. As the original object of knowledge, existence is also, importantly, the authentic subject of knowledge: *sum, ergo cogito*. The floating man's direct and ineffable experience of his own existence (a fact beyond factuality, so to say), doesn't go to deny the possibility of a rational understanding: on the contrary, it is meant to underpin and complement it. There is direct apprehension and there is empirical and rational knowledge, in the same way that there is the binomial of existence and essence. After all, it was precisely Ibn Sina who first clearly theorized the distinction between these two concepts.

The strand of Islamic philosophy mentioned above, has been broadly characterized as the 'esoteric' branch of Islamic thought. Being defined as 'esoteric', a certain philosophical perspective is invested not only with certain general qualities, but also with an implicit belonging to a broader 'esoteric tradition'. Indeed, this combination between an objective method and a subjective framework resounds with equal strength in other philosophical schools, belonging to different geographical areas. As well as in esoteric Islam, we find it playing a central role also within the Hermetic end of the Alchemical tradition. In his studies on alchemy, Carl Gustav Jung came to theorize the peculiarity of the Hermetic/alchemical approach, as opposed to the typical Western striving for pure objectivity. Of course, he did so within his own parameters, that assigned a quintessentially psychic nature to that field of ineffability which we previously described as the limit-concept of existence.

in *kalam* defend the tenets of Islam through the use of mostly dialectical means. Over the centuries, several schools of *Kalam* have evolved, particularly the 'extreme rationalist' *Mu'tazilah* and the more moderately 'rationalist' *Ash'ariyah*.

But despite a central dissimilarity between the metaphysical approach developed in this volume, and that of Jung – where we call existence/ineffable, what he sees instead as a function of the deepest psychic realm – his characterization is nonetheless revealing of the peculiarities of the esoteric approach.

Whereas the scientific attitude seeks, on the basis of careful empiricism, to explain nature in her own terms, Hermetic philosophy had for its goal an explanation that included the psyche in a total description of nature. The empiricist tries, more or less successfully, to forget his archetypal explanatory principles, that is, the psychic premises that are a *sine qua non* of the cognitive process, or to repress them in the interest of ‘scientific objectivity.’ The Hermetic philosopher regarded these psychic premises, the archetypes, as inalienable components of the empirical world-picture. He was not yet so dominated by the object that he could ignore the palpable presence of psychic premises in the form of eternal ideas which he felt to be real. The empirical nominalist, on the other hand, already had the modern attitude towards the psyche, namely, that it had to be eliminated as something ‘subjective’, and that its contents were nothing but ideas formulated *a posteriori*, mere *flatus vocis*. His hope was to be able to produce a picture of the world that was entirely independent of the observer. This hope has been fulfilled only in part, as the findings of modern physics show: the observer cannot be finally eliminated, which means that the psychic premises remain operative.⁵

In the second part of this book, and consistently with our definition of ‘reality’, we shall borrow a number of methodological elements from the esoteric tradition, particularly as it takes place within Islamic philosophy. This is indeed due to its ability to hold together the fundamental tendencies of both Western and Indian philosophy, while also creating a unique and original position of

⁵C. G. Jung, *The Philosophical Tree*, in *The Collected Works*, vol. XIII, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 288–9.

its own.⁶ Our propensity towards the Shia and Sufi philosophical attitude can also be explained metaphorically, employing once again the notions of existence, essence and reality. At the risk of pushing too far our generalizations, but in the interest of offering an evocative simplification of the approaches discussed in this book, we could characterize the general Western attitude as eminently geared towards ‘essence’ (although, of course, with a number of exceptions, characteristically singled out under the label of ‘existentialism’), while the general Indian attitude can be broadly characterized as eminently geared towards ‘existence’ (again, with notable exceptions). In between them, Shia and Sufi traditions broadly appear to move towards that synthesis which we defined before as ‘reality’.⁷ It is with this in mind, that we shall borrow from that tradition – as well as from that of Hermetic Alchemy – in our quest to define a possible path towards the reconstruction of reality.

Why seek reality?

The crucial connection between the possibility of reality, on the one hand, and the coexistence of limit-concepts of existence (towards ineffability) and of essence (towards absolute language) on the other, should be clear by now. What is still unclear, however, is why one should desire to reconstruct reality. What is reality for, anyway? What are the consequences of losing it? And how can reality be lost in the first place?

⁶Much has been written on the influence of Greek philosophy on Islamic philosophy. On possible Indian influences on Islamic esotericism, see in particular R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, London: Oneworld, 1995.

⁷The idea of a philosophical/theological synthesis between Western and Eastern attitudes is a recurring tension in so-called Perennial Philosophy – see for example A. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, New York, NY: Dover, 2011. A particularly poignant case for esoteric Islam to act as a catalyst in this direction can be found in A. Ventura, *L'Esoterismo Islamico*, Milano: Adelphi, 2017 – in which the reader can also find a summary of René Guénon's understanding of the role of Islam in terms of a universal gnosis. Another ‘perennialist’ attempt in this direction can be found in F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2011.

Let's start again from our early notes on this issue, from the first chapter of this book. There, we find:

As different forms of essence and of existence alternate, and as their relationship varies overtime, we witness the passage between successive forms of reality. But whenever one of the two overtakes the other, or denies its legitimacy, or severs the ties that connect them, or, even worse, when both of them vanish, then reality as such also effectively vanishes. Reality is a weave made of essence and existence, like warp and weft, and the event of its undoing requires a weaver (for de Martino, a 'magician') that is capable of interlacing the two back together, regardless of the specific forms and colours that each of them can take.

We can understand the disappearance of reality, on the basis of our definition of reality as the space which is opened and framed by the opposing limit-concepts of existence and essence. As we observed in the previous section on *Technic*, the present reality-system and its cosmological structure move towards a disintegration of reality, through the annihilation of existence (by denying the very principle of existence in itself, as it stands ineffably beyond linguistic categorization) and the hypertrophy of essence (pushed to its limit, to coincide as much as possible with the very principle of absolute language). What used to be the segment stretching between the fuzzy boundaries of existence and essence – that is, reality as such – is now reduced to a mere point, at once entirely coincident with pure essence and devoid of any existence. The frame collapses, and reality vanishes with it.

Again, from an eminently human, existential position, this disintegration of reality bears significant and dramatic consequences. As we have seen, the cosmology of *Technic* brings human action and imagination to a state of paralysis: a condition of constant and severe existential anxiety that forces every existent to consider themselves illegitimate impostors inasmuch as they exist. The annihilation of existence and the compression of the space of reality to the non-spatial point of high-pure essence (according to the cosmogonic wishes of absolute language), entails a dramatic mutilation of the world and of our existential experience of/within it. Yet, such mutilation is a curse that runs through generations,

and what is existentially and metaphysically mutilated is expected, due to its very nature, to re-enact the same mutilation on its surroundings. We observed this spiral-chain of violent reduction and exploitation in our discussion of the cosmology of Technic, where the abstract general entity, as a processor, was bound to perpetuate on its surroundings the very mutilation from which it itself had originated in the first place.

Conversely, reinstating the limit-concept of existence (as geared towards the pole of ineffability) alongside that of essence (as pointing towards the pole of language) constitutes the first and necessary step to reopen the space of reality, as a space for existential flourishing within and together with the world. The next two chapters will be dedicated to outlining a possible movement towards this aim, which we shall define as the cosmological architecture of the reality-system of Magic.

CHAPTER THREE

Magic's cosmogony

Defining terms

There is little doubt that choosing 'Magic' as the overall term to define one's philosophical proposal, sounds immediately like a foolish idea. Nowadays, anything called 'Magic' has a cheap ring to it, bringing to mind the misuse of this word in TV series and perfume commercials, or the confused notion of witchcraft entertained by some teenage subcultures. Nonetheless, there are important elements to the term 'Magic' that perhaps no other word can convey in such an evocative form. Before starting our exploration of a system of reality that I wish to present as a possible alternative to that of Technic, we should begin by casting a closer look at the term that defines it. What does 'magic' stand for in the context of this volume? And how is its meaning, here, different from its general understanding?

Throughout Western history, magic has acted as the silent shadow of most hegemonic cultural forms, from philosophy to theology to modern science. Yet, any attempt to provide a complete and detailed history of magic is necessarily destined to fail. This is partly because magic doesn't recognize 'history' as its own temporal category,¹ and partly because this branch of practical

¹For a critical appraisal of the common notions of history and of temporality, from a perspective that is largely close to that adopted in the present volume, see A. Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2014.

knowledge has always veiled itself in mystery and secrecy – both on account of the peculiarity of its horizon, and due to its marginal place within society. Unsurprisingly, then, the prevailing Western understanding of magic throughout the centuries has been plagued by gross inaccuracies, that have at times entirely distorted not only the factual history, but also the meaning and the spirit of magic's work. As it is usually presented today – most notably in films and literature – magic amounts to little more than a set of spectacular technical skills, reducible to the equivalent of as-yet undiscovered scientific advancements in the field of technology. Magic is thus considered as merely another, possibly more exotic way to exploit the world as a stockpiling of standing-reserves, which the magician is able to mobilize through his/her individual powers. As we shall see in the next and final chapter of this book, this understanding of magic is exactly opposite to that which characterized the late ancient practice of theurgy and, more generally, the tradition of 'true magic' spanning from late antiquity to the end of the Renaissance era.² The present conception of magic is the shadow of its own time; like medieval 'black magic' was often presented as the demonic equivalent of then prevailing forms of orthodox Christian theology, magic today is seen as the phantasmagorical equivalent of the currently prevailing techno-scientific forms. And indeed, since its earliest definition as such, magic has been bound to be understood as the shadow of whatever society knows and calls its own.

The very origin of the word magic, points towards a form of 'otherness' that is constructed purely through a negative relation to what is already known and familiar. The first instance in which the word appears in its present meaning is in Greek language as *Magike Technē*, which refers to the art (*technē*) of the Persian Magi. In his *Histories*,³ Herodotus explains how the term 'Magi', originally the name of one of the six tribes of the Medes, had come to indicate the members of the priestly cast of the Zoroastrian religion throughout the Persian Empire. Perhaps few other cases of enmity

²For an interesting introduction to this particular notion of magic in the Renaissance era, and an overview of the main (Anglophone) scholarship on the topic, see J. S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992.

³See Herodotus, *The Histories*, London: Penguin, 2003, pp. 48–9.

are as notorious as that between the Greeks before Alexander, and Zoroastrian Persia at the time of the Magi. Even more than the barbarians to Rome, the Persians were truly, for the classical Greeks, their own troubling shadow. And if we consider how in non-modern societies, religion synthesizes in ritualistic forms the specific ways in which a social group deals with the world – acting as a vessel for their cultural identity – we can understand why the Magi were considered by the Greeks to embody the most peculiar characters of their people. To the Greeks, the Magi represented that very ‘shadowy otherness’ that was the quintessence of the Persians and of their power. Yet at the same time, the otherness of the Persians was understood only in terms of a relative alterity to the Greeks’ own identity. *Magike techne* was literally the art of the Greeks’ own shadow, that is, the art of shadows themselves. For those who see themselves as external to it, magic appears, since the earliest use of the terms, as the embodiment of what can be defined only in relation to the identity of ‘our’ power and of ‘our normal’ way of dealing with things and with the world.

The notion of magic that is proposed in this volume goes against this conception, stretching from the times of Herodotus to this very day. When we talk of magic in this book, we don’t mean anything to do with a dark, exotic equivalent of the very same technical regime that rules over our present age. In fact, by this term we mean a reality-system that is fundamentally alternative to that of Technic: an alternative cosmology originating from an alternative cosmogonic force. A different reality, based on a different fundamental metaphysics – though still following the rules of metaphysics and of cosmogony. The specular opposite of Technic, rather than its shadow. Nonetheless, an aspect of the common notion of magic still colours this book. Magic has always been something disquieting to the hegemonic community of a certain age. Even in the case of our cosmogonic experiment, proposing a reality-system based on Magic means pushing forward a proposal that might seem troubling (if not downright ridiculous) to those who hold dear the cosmology derived from Technic’s principles. In this sense, the troubling otherness that has always characterized the usual understanding of ‘magic’ remains relevant also to our own interpretation of this term as the name of a cosmogonic project.

Yet, the relationship between Magic and Technic, isn’t just one of fundamental alterity. From a certain perspective, Magic can also be considered as a form of therapy to Technic’s brutal regime

over that world, which it built in its own image. When we began looking at Technic, our earliest observations concerned the present paralysis of our ability to act and to imagine, and the crisis of our very sense of reality. To explain this condition, we borrowed the words of Ernesto de Martino, who defined such a state of crisis as a situation in which everything turns into everything and nothingness emerges. However, when we quoted de Martino we didn't mention the original context of his original definition of a crisis of reality. For de Martino, this disintegration of reality, and particularly of the presence of the individual and of his/her world, is a recurrent state of 'crisis', that is, etymologically, a moment which calls for prompt judgement (*krisis*, from the Greek *krinein*, to judge) and intervention. The essence of magic, concludes de Martino, consists exactly in this form of intervention, aiming to restore the conditions in which both the individual and his/her world can regain their presence, and thus can continue in their mutually active and imaginative relationship.

Under certain circumstances, the loss of horizon undergone by presence reaches the point where it becomes an echo of the world, that is, one becomes possessed, prey to uncontrolled impulses. There is a dangerous 'beyond' to presence, an anguishing crumbling of its horizon in-the-making; correlatively, also the world enters continuous crises of horizon, and endlessly exceeds into such anguishing 'beyond'. At its peak, this situation entails that every relationship between [individual] presence and the world becomes a source of risk, a loss of horizon ... akin to the situation that forces a schizophrenic person to a state of statuary immobility and catatonic stupor. ... Magic attempts to move back towards the top of this edge, while resolutely opposing this process of disintegration. Magic sets up a system of institutions through which this risk is signalled and fought against ... so as to make possible a ransoming of presence. Thanks to this cultural moulding and to the creation of such institutions, the existential tragedy undergone by each person ceases to be isolated and unresolved; rather, it enters a tradition and becomes capable of using to its own advantage the experiences that such tradition preserves and hands down.⁴

⁴E. de Martino, *Il Mondo Magico* (1948), Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2010, p. 165 – my translation from the original Italian.

Shamans or magicians employ their magic powers with the primary aim of overcoming this state of crisis. While tracing back the symptoms of the malaise to their originating cause, they seek to offer an immediately workable alternative to the reality-conditions that produced them in the first place. In other words, a magician can be understood as a reality-therapist,⁵ acting not merely on the symptoms of an individual's illness, but also on the reality-conditions that allowed the state of illness to take place. Similar to de Martino's interpretation, this section of the book wishes to propose Magic not just as alternative to Technic, but specifically as that cosmogonic system that is capable of tackling therapeutically the state of annihilation in which Technic has reduced the contemporary individual, their world and their claim to a liveable reality. As we shall see in the following pages, Magic's first principle can be traced back to that pain which we found at the bottom of Technic's chain of emanations, and which in turn Magic assumes as the symptom of its own cosmogonic beginning.

In this sense Magic, as the name of our experimental cosmogonic architecture of reality, takes up another typical element of the mainstream understanding of the term. As it is usually connoted, magic has to do with that realm of forces that fall into the category of the mysterious and the invisible. Superficially, we could read this association just as an easy metaphor for that relatively 'dark' otherness that is moulded on the cast of the same: the mysterious and invisible forces that populate, say, Harry Potter's world, as the weird equivalent of the microscopic forces of a scientist's lab.

⁵With particular reference to shamans in the Amazon forest, it is interesting to follow Eduardo Viveiro de Castro's analysis of their function as 'reality-therapists' also in reference to the relationship between humans and non-humans. 'On account of their capacity to see other species as the humans that these species see themselves as, Amazonian shamans play the role of cosmopolitical diplomats in an arena where diverse socionatural interests are forced to confront each other. In this sense, the function of the shaman is not entirely different from that of a warrior. Both are "commuters" or conductors of perspective, the first operating in a zone of interspecificity and the second in an interhuman or intersocietal one. ... Amazonian shamanism, as is often remarked, is the continuation of war by other means. This has nothing to do, however, with violence as such but with communication, a transversal communication between incommunicables, a dangerous, delicate comparison between perspectives in which the position of the human is in constant dispute.' In E. V. de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2014, p. 151.

But in fact, this element of mystery and invisibility is not lost to the understanding of the term ‘magic’ that is proposed by this book. As we saw in earlier pages, *Technic*’s founding movement consists in making a thing’s legitimate claim to existence entirely dependent on its detectability and classification by the system of seriality and by absolute language – to the point that a thing is liquefied into its very classification. Conversely, *Magic*’s cosmogonic process originates precisely from that dimension of existence which can never be reduced to any linguistic classification. In the perspective of *Technic*, we identified this dimension as that ‘something’ whose resistance to annihilation gave rise to the symptom of pain. Within the perspective of *Magic*, we shall define this dimension as that of the Ineffable.

Proposing *Magic* as a cosmogonic system that proceeds from the Ineffable, immediately positions our projects in the line of a very long tradition of magical thinking and practice, stretching into the mist of pre-classical antiquity. Although several forms of magic (let us think of the Kabbalah, for example), saw in the ‘word’ the prime object both of their practice and of cosmogony at large, we should not assume that their understanding of the term ‘word’ coincides with the common notion nowadays. In an age such as ours, governed as it is by the principle of total language, any semantic sign denotes merely a position in a series. Their function is allegorical, in that they are deemed capable of conveying precisely and entirely the object of their signification – which ultimately coincides with the position itself. This allegorical exhaustion and precision is a fundamental aspect of *Technic*’s cosmology, and it has seeped into our everyday experience since the times of modernity – or, to say it with the philosopher of science Alexander Koyré:⁶ since the passage from the world of the ‘more-or-less’ to the universe of ‘precision’. Conversely, the language of magic is that of symbols, where a symbol stands for a semiotic sign which in no way attempts to fully convey and exhaust the object of its signification. As Henry Corbin, pointed out:

⁶See A. Koyré, *Etudes sur l’histoire de la pensée philosophiques en Russie*, J. Vrin, 1950 – particularly the section published in Italian as a separate volume, A. Koyré, *Dal mondo del pressappoco all’universo della precisione*, Torino: Einaudi, 2000.

Every allegorical interpretation is harmless; the allegory is a sheathing, or, rather, a disguising, of something that is already known or knowable otherwise, while the appearance of an Image having the quality of a symbol is a primary phenomenon (*Urphanomen*), unconditional and irreducible, the appearance of something that cannot manifest itself otherwise to the world where we are.⁷

We shall soon look in further depth at the difference between the allegorical and the symbolic notion of language, particularly through their differentiation operated by Goethe. For now, let us limit ourselves to observe how the 'word', understood symbolically, is compatible with magic's focus on the ineffable dimension of existence. This notion of words as symbols, and of magic as a theory and practice that deals with the ineffable, has informed virtually every instance of what we called 'true magic' – following Marsilio Ficino's distinction – in the Mediterranean world and beyond. We can find it as a tradition running uninterrupted from the religion of the Old Kingdom Egypt, through Greek Orphism and Pythagoreanism, to Ramon Lull and the Islamic and Hebrew alchemists of his age, to the Neoplatonic circles of the Italian Renaissance, through the Iranian cultural Renaissance of the seventeenth century, all the way to the more recent magical theories of thinkers like Pavel Florensky, René Guénon aka 'Abd al-Wāḥid Yaḥyá and Elemire Zolla.⁸ A number of references to this tradition will be made explicit in the following chapters, although the remainder of this volume doesn't wish to be a scholarly recollection of past theories and writings on magic. The focus of what will follow is as experimental in its nature, as it is practical in its aims. By suggesting a cosmologic architecture built according to the form of Magic, instead than to that of Technic, we would like to show how it is possible (if not

⁷H. Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis or The Imaginary and the Imaginal*, Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1976, p. 10.

⁸While Florensky and Guénon will return in the following pages, Elemire Zolla's thought could not be investigated in further depth within the scope of this volume. His work, however, remains of great relevance for anybody interested in the philosophy and aesthetics of Magic. The interested reader might want to see in particular: E. Zolla, *Che Cos'è la Tradizione*, Milano: Adelphi, 2011; and E. Zolla, *Uscite dal Mondo*, Venezia: Marsilio, 2012.

opportune, or even necessary) to think of reality-systems that are alternative to the current system of unreality, whose metaphysical nihilism we call today 'our world'.

Our examination of the structures and workings of Magic's cosmogony, will follow a similar path to that employed during our discussion of Technic in the previous chapter. Magic's internal architecture will be divided into five hypostatic levels, each acting as a principle of Magic's cosmogony and a dimension of its cosmology – that is, of Magic's accomplished reality-system. We shall proceed from the first principle of 'The Ineffable as Life', to the second hypostasis 'Person', the third 'Symbol', the fourth 'Meaning' and finally the fifth hypostasis 'Paradox', where the original force of the first principle is exhausted or, as we shall see, where it is resolved and relaunched. As with Technic, each hypostatic level will be paired up with an archetypal incarnation, so that the first hypostasis will have the 'Miracle' as its archetypal incarnation, the second will have 'Apollo and the Imam', the third the 'Mythologem', the fourth the 'Centre' and the fifth the 'Self'. As shown in the diagram that accompanies and precedes this text, Magic's hypostases are placed in exact specular opposition to those of Technic. Equally, the lower and upper limits that shape and define the cosmogonic architecture of Magic, are in specular opposition to those of Technic, as it is evident in their very definitions as 'Double negation' (opposed to Technic's 'Double affirmation') and '*Deus absconditus*' (opposed to Technic's '*Ego absconditus*').

First hypostasis: The ineffable as life

At the end of the chain of emanations that constitutes Technic's cosmologic architecture, we encountered 'something', an obstacle to the unfolding of the principle of absolute language. That something, as we saw, obstinately refused to be translated into any form of grammatical measure, or to be reduced to an instrument in a serial chain of production.⁹ With an acrobatic twist, which

⁹'The name moves further away, / grows pale, / poor white nothingness / I look at you, / snow of nothing / now.' Francesco Scarabocchi, *Congedo* (Farewell), in

we defined as 'resolution through simulation', we witnessed how Technic attempted to bypass this obstacle by turning it into an opportunity for the renewal of its own cosmogonic process. Like the 'enemy' in Carl Schmitt's antagonistic conception of politics,¹⁰ this irreducible obstacle was integrated by Technic as the hostile 'other', which implicitly justifies Technic's regime and its endless war on the world.

In the context of Magic's alternative reality-system, we encounter again this 'something' – though this time under a new light and in a completely different perspective. No longer a marginal residue or a scapegoat, it is here suddenly ennobled to the position of first principle – and first hypostasis – of Magic's entire reality-system. As such, that stubborn obstacle to Technic deserves now a new and positive name – a name that is capable of presenting it in its productive aspect. But even this seemingly basic task is made extremely difficult by the very nature of the 'thing-beyond-thingness' in question. As the unbreakable residue of any attempt at linguistic translation, this 'thing' still escapes any form of definition that attempts to capture its essence. If we still wish to somehow define it, we can only do so negatively, while remaining mindful to the insufficiency of any definition, however negative. We can name it only as 'the ineffable' – that which cannot be captured by language in any form. However, this humbly negative definition should not lead us to think that negation is the only productive mode of the ineffable. While unavailable to take part as a tidy cog in the great machinery of absolute language, the ineffable is still capable of acting productively as the emanating centre of Magic's alternative reality-system.

Before considering its productive dimension – that is, as a first principle emanating a new cosmogonic chain – we shall observe the ineffable in its own right, as it stands in itself. Indeed, this exploration will be plagued by the impossibility of exhaustively describing and categorizing its object. But even within such constraints, we

F. Scarabocchi, *Il Prato Bianco*, Torino: Einaudi, 2017, p. 42 – my translation from the Italian original.

¹⁰See in particular his analysis of the distinction between 'friend' and 'enemy' and of its role in the construction of the political field, in C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp. 26–43.

can manage to approach the ineffable as it is 'in itself' by moving towards its location within our world. What is invisible to the cartographer might be revealed to the traveller. The path towards the ineffable will be a form of walking while asking questions, in a typically philosophical fashion. This won't be just a general, abstract questioning, though. Since we are at the level of the very ground on which an entire reality-system is built, we shall address our questions to the most fundamental level of enquiry. Here, in this most philosophical of tasks, we can start by seeking help from what would be commonly considered as a religious, if not downright mythological, text: the story of Indra's apprenticeship with Prajapati, as recounted in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, one of the oldest in the Upanishadic section of the Vedas.

'When someone discovers that *atman* (true self) and perceives it, he obtains all the worlds, and all his desires are fulfilled,' so said Prajapati.

Both the gods and the demons became aware of this and, and each talked it over: 'Come, let's discover that *atman* by discovering which one obtains all the worlds.' ... Then Indra set out from among the gods, and Virocana, from among the demons. ... The two arrived in the presence of Prajapati carrying firewood in their hands. They lived the life of celibate students for thirty-two years. Then Prajapati asked them: 'Why have you lived here? What do you want?'¹¹

So the story begins, proceeding to cover a temporal arch of 101 years, during which Indra is repeatedly given false answers by his teacher Prajapati over the nature of this *atman* which, alone, constitutes the true self of a person and the key to obtaining 'all the worlds'. Initially, Prajapati tries to trick Indra into believing that his true self was 'the one that's seen here in the water and here in a mirror' that is the physical body. Then, following Indra's relentless questioning, Prajapati proposes alternative, fraudulent definitions of the *atman* as 'the one that goes happily about in a dream', then again as the state of one who is 'fast asleep, totally collected and

¹¹*Chandogya Upanishad*, 8.7.1-3, translated by Patrick Olivelle, *Upanisads*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 171.

serene and sees no dreams'. Finally, over a century after Indra's initial attempt at learning the true nature of the *atman*, that is of the true self, Prajapati agrees to provide a final, truthful answer.

The one who is aware: 'Let me smell this' – that is the *atman*; the faculty of smell enables him to smell. The one who is aware: 'let me say this' – that is the *atman*; the faculty of speech enables him to speak. The one who is aware: 'Let me listen to this' – that is the *atman*; the faculty of hearing enables him to hear. The one who is aware: 'Let me think about this' – that is the *atman*; the mind is his divine faculty of sight. This very *atman* rejoices as it perceives with his mind, with that divine sight, these objects of desire found in the world of *brahman*.¹²

There have been many commentaries on this section of the Upanishad over the course of the millennia – we must not forget that these lines date back to a time between the eighth and the sixth centuries BCE. Without delving too deep into the various interpretations of this story, we can understand, however superficially, the *atman* to be somehow 'located' behind any form of individual subjectivity that depends on a physical, sensorial, linguistic and even rational dimension. The *atman* – the kernel of one's self which truly is, which truly exists in itself – stands before all possibilities of objectification. When I call myself 'I', it is not 'I', but something before my 'I' that does so. If I think of myself, it is not my thinking but something before that thinking – something behind and beyond it – that does so. That is the *atman*, at once the greatest secret and the most blatant reality. That is, according to Prajapati and to a great part of the religious and philosophical schools of Hinduism, your true self.¹³

Thus, we find a kernel of ineffability at the heart of our own individual existence; an undetectable yet powerful 'thing-beyond-thingness', constituting the very existence which ultimately animates

¹²*Chandogya Upanishad*, 8.12.4-5, translated by Patrick Olivelle, *Upanishads*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 175.

¹³On the notion of self in Hindu philosophy, and particularly on the meaning of the story of Indra's apprenticeship with Prajapati, see J. Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories Of The Self And Practices Of Truth In Indian Ethics And Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 13–38.

every aspect of our life. But should we limit the localization of the ineffable to the realm of our individual selves? Looking at the world, we can attempt to embark on a similar questioning walk as that heroically undertaken by Indra. What is the heart of a thing, of everything? Is it its name, its qualities, its physical body? Once again, if we strip a thing of all its disposable dimensions, we reach a state of ineffability. It is as if we could detect – albeit only intuitively, as words eventually fail us – at the very heart of existence, something ineffable that does the job of ‘being that thing’; the receptacle of each and every name, itself standing before names. It is as if, at the centre of every existing thing, there was an *atman* of sorts, undetectable by our sensorial and rational apparatus, yet detectable *more negativo*, through a relentless questioning that seeps through the cracks of every ontological definition. Existence cannot be reduced to any of its dimensions, not even to the mere sum of its dimensions – yet, somehow existents still exist! The manifest mystery of existence, glares like a blinding light within each and every existent.

One particular strand of Hindu theology and philosophy, the so-called Advaita (non-dualistic, or monistic) Vedanta¹⁴ school proceeded to identify the *atman*, as the ultimate being of a person, with the *brahman*, as the ultimate existing dimension of the entire world. According to thinkers in the lineage of the eighth–ninth-century philosopher and theologian Adi Shankara,¹⁵ we can’t truly speak of anything actually existing, unless we refer to the binomial *atman/brahman*, where the two terms are in fact to be understood as one undividable unit. For Shankara and his followers, only the *atman/brahman* truly exists, while the appearances of individual existents – whether material or immaterial – are but illusions (*maya*)

¹⁴For an overview of the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, see A. Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity*, Albany, NY: SUNY, 2006.

¹⁵The unsurpassed ‘perennialist’ exposition of Vedantic theories is R. Guenon, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004. For a more academic discussion of Shankara’s philosophical and religious message, see N. Isayeva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy*, Albany, NY: SUNY, 1992; and J. G. Suthren-Hirst, *Samkara’s Advaita Vedanta: A Way of Teaching*, London: Routledge, 2005. A fascinating parallel reading of Adi Shankara’s and Meister Eckhart’s metaphysics can be found in R. Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism*, translated by B. L. Bracey and R. C. Payne, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016.

produced by ignorance (*avidya*). Such ultimate reality escapes all attempts at linguistic definition, while at the same time constituting the necessary substance sustaining all appearing existents, including those in the field of language. The non-dualistic schools thus found an ineffable dimension at the heart of existence, to the point of denying the legitimacy of any other form of existence but that which is ineffable.

If we were to follow the strict monism of Advaita Vedanta, however, we would encounter serious troubles in our attempt at creating a new reality-system. On the basis of our initial definition of reality as that weave of existence and essence capable to act as background through which the world emerges, such absolute monism wouldn't allow for any reality as such to take place. If existence is reduced purely to its ineffable dimension, while all that falls within language constitutes *maya* and *avidya*, the end result is, once again, a collapse of the background of reality onto the stage of the world. The seamless, all-encompassing unity of existence proposed by a strictly monist vision, perversely mimics the annihilating void produced by the system of Technic. In both cases, the room required by reality – the however minimal distance and difference between essence and existence – is dramatically lacking. For this reason, we will have to look for an alternative and more moderate vision, to be able to articulate our proposal of an alternative reality-system stemming from the first principle of the ineffable.

To this aim, we shall retain some of the crucial intuitions of the Vedantic approach while moving westwards in our enquiry. Geographically, this will entail moving from beyond the easternmost borders of the Hellenized world, to its westernmost edges: from Shankara's ninth-century India, to the twelfth–thirteenth-century Andalusia of the great Sufi thinker Ibn Arabi – one of the sharpest metaphysical minds crowning the lineage of European philosophy. This movement from India to Islamic Andalusia shouldn't be too surprising. To a certain extent, it is a centuries-old movement, akin to those attempted by Plato in his *Timaeus* (at a time when Egypt was to Greece, the equivalent of what India constituted to the post-classical West¹⁶) or by Avicenna and Suhrawardi in their

¹⁶The Greek fascination with the mysterious wisdom of ancient Egypt is a recurrent theme throughout ancient Greek literature and culture. A good example is the

respective formulations of a project of 'oriental philosophy', or again in Mulla Sadra's synthesis of distant philosophical traditions. As argued in recent decades by the Japanese philosopher and historian of religions Toshihiko Izutsu,¹⁷ as well as by thinkers in the Perennialist tradition,¹⁸ it is possible to trace an uninterrupted meta-philosophical debate on the metaphysics of the ineffable, that crosses the geopolitical barriers between the East and the West, while orbiting around the area of the Mediterranean Sea as its symbolic 'centre'.

Ibn Arabi's sophisticated philosophical system might aid us to counteract some of the most problematic aspects of Vedanta philosophy, within the framework of the present attempt at devising an alternative reality-system to that imposed by Technic. In his major work *Fusus al-Hikam* (The Ringstones of Wisdom),¹⁹ Ibn Arabi summarizes the main tenets of his metaphysical vision,²⁰

treatment of Egyptian cosmology and cosmogonic theories in the first part of the first book of Diodorus Siculus's *Library of History* (see D. Siculus, *Library of History*, vol. 1, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). This is particularly true in the case of (Neo)Pythagorean and (Neo)Platonic thinkers and authors – a paradigmatic example in this sense is Iamblichus's book *On the Mysteries* (see Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Atlanta, GE: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.)

¹⁷T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2016, pp. 1–2.

¹⁸In particular, by thinkers who are part of the 'traditionalist school' of Perennialism, such as René Guénon, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon and, more recently, Alberto Ventura among others. Paradigmatic in this direction is, for example, A. Coomaraswamy's *Author's Note* to his volume *Hinduism and Buddhism*: 'Some notable Platonic and Christian parallels have been cited in order ... to emphasize that the *Philosophia Perennis*, Sanatana Dharma, Akālika Dhammo, is always and everywhere consistent with itself' (in A. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011, p. 111). An in-depth 'traditionalist' exposition of this notion can be found in F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1984.

¹⁹Ibn Arabi, *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fusus Al-Hikam)*, translated by C. K. Dagli, Chicago, IL: Kazi Publications, 2004. An earlier and more sprawling account of his religious and philosophical views is the collected volume *Al-Futuḥat al-Makkiyya* (see Ibn Arabi, *The Meccan Revelations*, 2 vols., translated by M. Chodkiewicz, New York, NY: Pir Press, 2002).

²⁰A good scholarly overview of Ibn Arabi's metaphysics, with emphasis on epistemological aspects that are particularly relevant to the present analysis, can be found in W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989. For a more passionately evocative, but

centred around the notion of the Absolute (*al-Haqq*) as the origin of the chain of emanations that is ultimately responsible for the existence and structure of the world. According to the great Sufi thinker, we can understand the innermost architecture of reality as a form of self-manifestation (*tajalli*) of the principle of the Absolute through a fivefold series of levels (*hadrah*), each acting as a specific ontological level (or hypostasis) of reality. Firstly, the ineffable Absolute stands in its utterly mysterious, non-manifest state. This most profound of the levels of reality, Ibn Arabi remarks, is beyond any possible human attempt at understanding, however intuitive or mystical it may be. The ultimate source of reality, Ibn Arabi says, is so completely ineffable, to transcend even the human notion of transcendence. It is existence beyond existence, in a state of non-*tajalli*. Yet, he continues, it is exactly this unfathomably transcendent dimension of being, that constitutes the innermost kernel of the existence of every single thing in the world – either material or immaterial. At a second stage, the ineffable Absolute manifests itself, however partially, as ‘something’ understandable by humans – though with great mystical effort – only in the form of a divinity. Here begins the *tajalli* proper. In accordance to his faith, this stage of emanation or self-manifestation of the absolute is described by Ibn Arabi with the name of Allah. From a non-confessional perspective, we can rename this stage as that in which the ineffable mystery of existence presents itself in the challenging yet approachable form of ‘Being’. Interestingly, we can note in passing how for one of the highest theologians of Islam, the ineffable Absolute precedes ontologically even the figure of the Godhead. In the following stage of his self-manifestation, the Absolute takes on the form of the Lord, as it is usually understood by most religious people, regardless of their specific faith. In the two final stages of *tajalli*, the Absolute manifests itself first as the Divine Names (permanent archetypes not too dissimilar to Platonic ideas, in their function as universal models of individual things, though infinite in number inasmuch as each possible existent derives from a unique Name), and finally as the plethora of concrete particulars

possibly also more freely ‘interpretative’ account, see H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton and Bollingen, 1998.

that populate the sensible world and ultimately make up the ‘world’ as such.

Looking at the philosophy of Ibn Arabi allows us to glimpse at a nuanced structure of reality that is capable of keeping together, however problematically, a dimension of pure ineffability and one open to the play of language. In Ibn Arabi’s vision,²¹ the relationship between the ineffable Absolute and the world of linguistically defined things is not merely one-way, as it is typically the case in strictly monistic systems. The Absolute and the world are bound to each other in an endless process of reciprocal ‘constriction’ (*taskhir*): just as the world is entirely dependent on the Absolute in terms of its existence (of which the Absolute is the ultimate source and ground), so the Absolute, via the permanent archetypes of its Divine Names, depends on the world for its self-manifestation. Attempting once again to translate Ibn Arabi’s theosophical language (as in, at once theological and philosophical) into more secular Western terms, we can say that the relationship between existence (as the limit-concept verging towards the ineffable Absolute) and essence (as the limit-concept verging towards pure language) is marked by a state of reciprocity. This is a theme of great importance in Ibn Arabi’s thought (and likewise, in Magic), returning also in his claim that the correct intellectual attitude towards both God and the world, must be marked by the coexistence of *tanzih*,²² the ineffable and secret dimension in which everything is One, and *tashbih*,²³ the empirically and rationally approachable dimension in which each concrete particular retains its linguistic individuality. To explain the importance of the coexistence of *tanzih* and *tashbih*, of ineffable unity and linguistic plurality, Ibn Arabi contrasts the teaching of Mohammed with those of Noah, on the one hand, and of the idolaters on the other. Noah, in chastising the idolaters in the name of the absolute unity of the divine, placed all the weight of divinity on the principle of *tanzih*, while discounting the *tashbih* as a crass

²¹The following account of Ibn Arabi’s metaphysics will largely follow Toshihiko Izutsu’s reading, from the first part of T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2016, pp. 6–285.

²²From the verb *nazzaha* meaning literally ‘to keep something away from contamination’, that is absolute transcendence.

²³From the verb *shabbaha* meaning ‘to make or consider something similar to some other thing’, that is in theology ‘to liken God to created things’ or immanence.

mistake. Conversely, the idolaters refused the idea of an unnameable and invisible Absolute principle running through existence, thus rejecting the *tanzih* in favour of a pure *tashbih*. According to Ibn Arabi, both Noah and the idolaters were right in a way, and wrong in another. They were right to find divinity respectively in the ineffable and in the linguistically definable realm, yet they were wrong to pick only one dimension while rejecting the other. Who finally managed to achieve this combination, this coincidence of opposites (to use a standard esoteric parlance) was Mohammed, who explained the world, as a self-manifestation of God, at once as *tanzih* and *tashbih*, at once hidden and manifest, at once interior (*batin*) and exterior (*zahir*). For Ibn Arabi, Mohammed represents the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) exactly because he hosts within himself the simultaneous presence of both dimensions.

Unlike Adi Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, Ibn Arabi doesn't negate the legitimate existence of the linguistic dimension of the world, but he envisions a coexistence between language and ineffability. Coexistence, yes, though hierarchically ordered. As with the system of Magic that is currently being proposed, Ibn Arabi considers the relative independence of the world of language from its ineffable origin, to be understood in terms of a hierarchically inferior position. Both Ibn Arabi and the reality-system of Magic propose the ineffable (in Ibn Arabi's parlance, the ineffable Absolute, *al-Haqq*) as the ultimate source from which language (in Ibn Arabi's vision, both the Divine Names, as universal forms of the possible, and the world of concrete particulars that derives from them) gains the necessary supply of existence to assert its own, relatively separate presence. Precisely, while the Ineffable's claim to existence can be absolute, that of language only reaches the level of 'presence'. However, as it shall become apparent in the following hypostases, while Ibn Arabi insists on the utter ontological dependence of language on ineffability, in the present proposal for an alternative reality-system built around Magic, this relationship shall be played more loosely.

Before proceeding to consider an archetypal 'incarnation' of our notion of the ineffable, let us cast a final glance at another thinker, who could help us to qualify the ineffable as a first principle in a cosmogonic chain of emanations. In particular, we will see with his aid how the ineffable, as life, constitutes a dimension that is internal to the principle of existence. Moving again forward chronologically, while moving back geographically to the East,

we shall seek inspiration from the writings of one of the greatest philosophers and theologians of Shia Islam: the seventeenth-century Persian thinker Mulla Sadra. Writing in a period of decline of the tradition of Islamic philosophy, Mulla Sadra aimed to salvage metaphysical speculations from their state of apparent irrelevance, stuck as they were in the dogmatism of academic debates. Crucial to Mulla Sadra's project was the desire to present philosophy as a tool for the redemption of human life on Earth²⁴ – and to this aim, he didn't hesitate to incorporate within his system elements from intellectual traditions that were culturally and geographically distant from his own.

Mulla Sadra is credited by contemporary scholars²⁵ as one of the earliest proponents of existentialism, though we should understand this term differently from its current meaning in the West. Sadra's existentialism is of a metaphysical nature, in that he preached the fundamental primacy of existence over essence – while not negating the legitimacy of the latter. Not unlike the claim from which this book departed, Sadra built his system partly as a response to what he perceived as a crisis of the notion of existence in the Islamic world of his age. According to Sadra, the principle of essence had seemingly annihilated the space for existence, thus reducing the philosophical debate to a remastication of trite dogmatic positions in adherence to the dictates of *Kalam*, and to a literal interpretation of the sacred texts.

Conversely, within Mulla Sadra's cosmologic system, existence is the first and foremost principle from which everything else originates. In this sense, Sadra creates an equivalence between existence and God, in that we can consider pure existence as God, and God as pure existence. It is difficult to miss the subtle influence that the great Iranian thinker received – wittingly or unwittingly – from the strains of Indian philosophy in the Upanishadic tradition. However, differently from monistic schools such as the Advaita

²⁴See, for example, his presentation of knowledge and self-knowledge as crucial tools for redemption, in the texts collected in M. Sadra, *The Elixir of the Gnostics*, translated, introduced and annotated by W. C. Chittick, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2003.

²⁵See for example, I. Kalin, *Mulla Sadra*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; and M. Kamal, *From Essence to Being: The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra and Martin Heidegger*, London: ICAS Press, 2010.

Vedanta, Sadra is careful not to dismiss essential differences as mere illusion. Although everything is fundamentally made of existence (which in itself is one and undifferentiated), there are still real differences between individual things – differences that can be appreciated and described both sensorially and conceptually, that is linguistically. But how are we to understand the relationship between undifferentiated existence, and linguistic differentiations? How can it be that all things are at the same time ineffably one, and linguistically many? Mulla Sadra answers this question with certainty: differences between things should be considered as functions of the varying intensity with which existence shines through each of them.²⁶ Borrowing a metaphor that was dear also to the Sufis, we could say that the realm of essence is like a slate of glass (though this glass should be imagined at a near-liquid state) varying in colour and thickness at different points. As the light of existence traverses it, individual things appear as the catalogue of detectable modulations in the colour and intensity of the light. Although the boundaries between individual things are somewhat fuzzy, it is possible to appreciate the difference between various modulations of the light, as functions of the varying intensity and colour taken on by the first emanating principle. Yet, all things are at the same time in perfect seamless unity with each other, inasmuch as they are all made of one and the same light, that is, of emanated existence. A similar point was presented more recently in a particularly evocative form, by nineteenth–twentieth-century Algerian Sufi thinker Sheikh Ahmed Ben Mustafa Ben Alliwa. According to Sheikh Ben Alliwa, we can understand this relationship between unity and multiplicity, or existence and essence, as that between the ink and the letters that it goes to compose on a page.

In truth, letters are symbols of the ink, because there are no letters outside of the ink. Their non-manifestation is in the mystery of the ink, and their manifestation is ultimately relying on the ink. They are its determinations and its stages of actualisation, and truly there is nothing but the ink – understand this symbol! And

²⁶Mulla Sadra's theories on existence, and particularly his notion of the 'modulation of being', are well discussed in S. H. Rizvi, *Mulla Sadra and Metaphysics*, London: Routledge, 2013.

yet, letters are different from the ink, and the ink is different from the letters. Because the ink existed before the letters came to being, and it will still exist when the letters will have vanished. ... A letter neither adds nor takes anything away from the ink, but it manifests through distinctions that which in itself is integral. The ink is not changed by the presence of the letter. ... You must understand that, for those who understand, there is no existence outside of the existence of the ink. Wherever there is a letter, the ink is not separated from it – understand these parables!²⁷

Mulla Sadra's reality thus seemingly explodes over myriad different grades, according to the ever-finer differences in the intensity of existence (*tashkik al-wujud*, 'gradation of existence') that constitute the luminous continuum of the world.²⁸ The world is composed both of completely ineffable dimensions of extremely intense existence, and linguistically approachable dimensions of existence at a lower grade of intensity. But Mulla Sadra didn't stop here. Considering that existence is ontologically superior to essence and that essential differences are just measures of the varying intensity of existence, Mulla Sadra proceeded to claim the instability and temporality of essences themselves. His claim was starkly opposed to the position of most of his contemporaries who, following Aristotle, saw essence and substance as permanent and solid categories. Conversely, Mulla Sadra envisioned a state of continuous 'substantial motion': everything in the universe, every single thing and category, undergoes a process of continuous transformation, depending on the varying 'penetration of being' (*sarayan al-wujud*) that endows every concrete entity with its own share of being. Such transformation doesn't only affect the accidental qualities of a thing, but also its very substance and essence. The light that traverses the slate of glass liquefies it with its heat, and in turn the glass moves and recombines itself endlessly, thus changing the way in which each portion filters the light and allows it to shine through. Language has a legitimate

²⁷Sheikh Ahmed Ben Mustafa Ben Alliwa, *The Unique Prototype*, as translated by T. Burckhardt – my translation from the Italian edition of T. Burckhardt, *Considerazioni sulla Conoscenza Sacra*, Milano: SE, 1997, p. 93.

²⁸Mulla Sadra's texts on 'gradational ontology' can be found collected in M. Sadra, *Metaphysical Penetrations*, translated by S. H. Nasr, edited and with an introduction by I. Kalin, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2014.

place in the cosmology, but it is one of subjection and dependence on the ineffable.

Mulla Sadra's complex system of ever-changing essences and countless gradations of existence, allows us to consider a particular place that ineffability can occupy within a cosmological architecture. As we saw earlier, Advaita Vedanta considered the ineffable *atman/brahman* as the metaphysical equivalent of a tyrannical autocrat, who clears the stage of any possible competitors by throwing them into the Tartar of 'illusion'. Conversely, Ibn Arabi proposed the permanent archetypes of the Divine Names as dependent though relatively separate categories, capable of adding a linguistic dimension to the ineffability of the Absolute. A combination of these two approaches and a resolution of their apparent contradictions was attempted by a near-contemporary of Mulla Sadra, the Indian Mughal prince Darah Shikoh. In his 1654 book, evocatively titled *Majma ul-Bahrain (The Mingling of the Two Oceans)*,²⁹ Darah Shikoh tried to tame the Vedantic message in favour of an interpretation that found in Sufism its centre of gravity. However, Darah Shikoh's heroic attempt at a mystical unification of seemingly distant doctrines relied more on a skilful game of interpretation than on the creation of a metaphysical system capable of overcoming the difficulties that are peculiar to each tradition. Unlike his princely near-contemporary, Mulla Sadra intervened exactly on this level, combining the Sufism of Ibn Arabi with a number of other influences, through the creation of a new metaphysical architecture and, thus, of a new possibility of reality. In Mulla Sadra's system, existence and essence coexist as limit-concepts along the same continuum: the former tending towards perfect unity and ineffability (the point at which God hides itself from the searching eyes of dogmatic theologians and of logical enquirers), and the latter towards the linguistically clear but fundamentally opaque field of precise formal cataloguing. Mulla Sadra's system thus privileges continuity between opposite poles, rather than a rupture between them or a proliferation of different fundamental principles within one system.

²⁹Prince M. D. Shikoh, *Majma-Ul-Bahrain or The Mingling Of The Two Oceans*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1998.

We can now attempt to unify elements from the various metaphysical approaches outlined above, into our own vision of the principle of the ineffable, not only as a first cosmogonic principle, but also as 'life'. What do we mean by 'the ineffable as life'? Defining as such the first principle of Magic's cosmogony and cosmology, intends to present Magic's reality as a continuum between the two poles of ineffability and language, existence and essence, where the former pole is understandable as akin to our common notion of 'life', and the former as close to our common notion of 'objecthood'. Every single thing that exists, whether material or immaterial, contains both these aspects: a living dimension of ineffable existence, and an object-like dimension that is susceptible to linguistic analysis. In this sense, we can say that every existent is at the same time animated, inasmuch as it is traversed by a dimension of ineffable life, and inanimate, as it also carries to a greater or lesser extent a dimension that is reducible to linguistic categories. Things may differ from each other in terms of the proportions of ineffability and language that compose them. For example, existents such as monetary units in the current financial structure of the economy, might strike us as almost entirely opaque objects, whose linguistic dimension appears to smother any glimmer of ineffability that nonetheless necessarily traverses it. On the opposite hand, as we will see in the next hypostases, we have other existents whose object-like texture is so thin and transparent to the ineffable that it is almost imperceptible. In any case, this living dimension that traverses and sustains the entire catalogue of existents, runs ontologically uninterrupted through all things, thus providing a level in which they can be said to all be one and the same 'thing-beyond-thingness'. Inasmuch as it is ineffably existing, every existent is alive and truly one with all others, while in terms of their varying essences as this or that specific object, every existent negotiates its own identity and difference from the others on the basis of a historically determined linguistic syntax. This perspective proposes a sort of two-level animism, so to say – in which everything is at once partly alive and partly dead, as Object Oriented Ontology has also recently claimed³⁰ – but one in which the ineffable, and

³⁰See for example T. Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, Verso, 2017, pp. 43–50.

this life, retains its prime and hierarchically superior position to all other forms in which the existent can be considered.

Before closing this section on the first hypostasis in Magic's cosmogonic chain, let us consider what we called an 'archetypal incarnation' of the ineffable, as we did for the five hypostases in our analysis of Technic's cosmology. The first time we encountered the ineffable in Technic's chain of emanations, it was as the painful limit that gave rise to the archetypal incarnation of the notion of 'possibility'. Here, in a specular opposite position to Technic's last hypostasis, we find it again represented by an archetypal incarnation that has something to do with possibility: *the miracle*. While Technic's notion of possibility had to do with the attempt to restart the chain by a frantic activity of 'resolution through simulation', the possibility of a miracle here assumes primarily a contemplative aspect.

When talking of miracles, we usually refer to events that seem to break from the normal course of 'natural' events. Even the nineteenth-century English mathematician, Charles Babbage, in his defence of miracles against Hume, referred to miracles as apparently aberrant occurrences within God's world-making 'calculation'.³¹ According to Babbage, miracles are calculated occurrences like any other, appearing strange to us humans only because of our ignorance over the entirety of God's universal equation. Miracles have maintained this sort of colouring also in our contemporary parlance. Typically, they indicate occurrences in the field of the sensible that do not have in themselves anything exceptional, apart from their apparent misplacement in what we understand as the 'natural' order of things.

If we wish to look at miracles as the ineffable's archetypal incarnation, we have to abandon such common understanding of the term. If the metaphysics of the 'ineffable as life' is built around our epistemological limits, then the miraculous also has to do with such limits – namely, with their loosening. It would otherwise be impossible to talk about an incarnation of the ineffable: by definition, the ineffable in its purest form transcends any possibility of incarnation – and at this stage we are indeed considering it in

³¹C. Babbage, *Passages from the Life of a Philosopher*, London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1864, pp. 404–5.

such an absolute state. So, if we want to consider what the ineffable as life might 'look like' – and in this, we shall claim, consists the essence of a miracle – we have to somehow distance ourselves from it. We have to place the ineffable at a however minimal distance, form which the epistemological limits that it imposes on our understanding are slightly loosened. The question at this point is what the ineffable might look like, to the gaze that is cast back upon it by the emanations that it pours out of itself.

Seeking an answer to this question, we will have to continue our intellectual journey, this time far to the northwest of Iran, where we left it with Mullah Sadra. We shall go to nineteenth-century Germany, more precisely to 1844 Berlin, the year of publication of Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*. Max Stirner, the first individualist anarchist philosopher and the object of Karl Marx's rivalry, had developed his ideas through an intellectual path that combined studies in philosophy and in theology. It shouldn't seem inappropriate, then, that to appreciate his contribution to our analysis of miracles in the context of Magic's cosmology, we shall introduce him with the words as ninth-century Neoplatonist negative-theologian John Scotus Eriugena, from his *Periphyseon* (The Division of Nature)³²: 'We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is, because He is not anything [i.e. not any created thing]. Literally God is not, because He transcends being.' As if replying to statements of this kind, the fiercely atheistic Max Stirner claims: 'They say of God, "names name thee not". That holds good of me: no concept expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names.'³³ And then he continues, in mystical polemic against any attempt to tame the ineffable: 'To step out beyond it [i.e. the domain of religion] leads into the *unspeakable*. For me paltry language has no word, and "the Word", the Logos, is to me a "mere word".'³⁴ Max Stirner's entire work could be read as the philosophical account of a miraculous experience, in which the author describes – with a fiery and passionate language reminiscent of certain examples

³²J. S. Eriugena, *Periphyseon: The Division of Nature*, translated by I.-P. Sheldon-Williams and J. J. O'Meara, Montreal: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987.

³³Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 324.

³⁴Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 164.

of Sufi 'drunkenness' – the sudden revelation of his own ineffable dimension (what Stirner calls the irreducible 'Unique One', *Der Einzige*) to his own linguistic dimension (i.e. the 'I', as vulnerable to linguistic and societal classifications).

As this miracle takes place, the linguistic dimension appears to enter a state of extreme fragility, and it seemingly disintegrates. On the one hand, my own linguistically definable dimension stinks of that repressive idolatry of concepts which is imposed over it by society. Society calls me 'man', yet every description with which they want me to identify, is but an annihilating cage where I am forced to give up myself. Yet on the other hand, if my truest part is this ineffable dimension that resists any form of description and classification, this seems to make me more of a 'nothing' than a 'something'. Am I really nothing, then? At this point, Stirner reacts to what Ibn Arabi called the 'metaphysical perplexity' (*hayrah*) that accompanies every miraculous experience. He shakes himself out of the terrified stupor of recognizing an abyss of ineffability within himself, by reclaiming to that very abyss the ultimate productive power: 'I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing [*schopfrische Nichts*], the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything.'³⁵ With this twist, Stirner implicitly suggests an ontological hierarchy between the first, ineffable principle, and all the linguistic categories that it might pour out of itself. This becomes even more apparent when Stirner describes the particular relationship that he envisages as taking place between the Unique One and the linguistic categories through which s/he necessarily has to navigate society. As we know it, society is essentially – or in the case of Technic, exclusively – composed of linguistic categories, which, as Stirner vehemently points out, are typically waved by the ruling power of the time as 'spooks' to whom the individual should submit completely. Yet, it would be unthinkable to live in society while giving up language in its entirety. So, how can we think of our social life after a miraculous experience of unveiling of the ineffable? Stirner has a clear take on this issue:

If the point is to have myself understood and to make communications, then assuredly I can make use only of human means,

³⁵Ibid., p. 7.

which are at my command because I am at the same time man. And really, I have thoughts only as man; as I, I am at the same time thoughtless. He who cannot get rid of a thought is so far only man, is a thrall of language, this human institution, this treasury of human thoughts. Language or 'the word' tyrannizes hardest over us, because it brings up against us a whole army of fixed ideas. Just observe yourself in the act of reflection, right now, and you will find how you make progress only by becoming thoughtless and speechless every moment. You are not thoughtless and speechless merely in (say) sleep, but even in the deepest reflection; yes, precisely then most so. And only by this thoughtlessness, this unrecognized 'freedom of thought' or freedom from the thought, are you your own. Only from it do you arrive at putting language to use as your property.³⁶

With a further step in the progression of his argument, Stirner proposes to turn the relationship between the ineffable and language into one of property. The ineffable Unique One maintains its ontological primacy and independence, while reducing language into a vessel through which it can – however partially – manifest itself in everyday social life. The relationship between the ineffable as life, and all that falls under the capture of language – and indeed, language itself – is a relationship of property, since the legitimacy of linguistic categories (such as social institutions) is measured against its utility in terms of the self-manifestation of the ineffable. Needless to say, this is a very different relationship to the one we saw in the cosmology of *Technic*, where every residue of existence was reduced to its function as an activator of linguistic positions.

The experience of the miraculous thus inaugurates the 'discovery' of the ineffable by ourselves as linguistic entities. In doing so, it also begins to transmit the rhythm which the ineffable imposes over the realm of language. Moving on to the next hypostasis in *Magic's* cosmogonic chain of emanations, we shall see how this rhythm goes on to profoundly influence every single aspect of reality, from its epistemological to its ethical dimensions.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 305–6.

Second hypostasis: Person

The first principle of the ineffable as life emanates the second hypostasis in Magic's cosmogonic chain: the person. This is the first instance of the ineffable dimension of existence, pouring out of itself a linguistic entity. Until this point, language existed only potentially within the ineffable – here, for the first time, the ineffable speaks. The unspeakable speaks, while remaining unspeakable.³⁷ By speaking, ineffable life creates a distance from itself. What used to be the absolute localization of an ineffable 'here', becomes the first displacement of a 'there' that can be grasped linguistically.³⁸ The ineffable speaks, and the first word that it utters is 'this' – the linguistic edge of its first distance. In our own individual experience, we hear the ineffable dimension pronouncing such original words as 'I' – but we shouldn't think that we are now entering a 'psychological' phase in Magic's cosmogony. We remain firmly grounded on a metaphysical and cosmological level – though a form of metaphysics whose roots are entangled with those of epistemology.

In the Vedas, this original word is described as *Ka* (who). *Ka* is the first name through which the original god Prajapati first

³⁷'The intellect cannot measure the divine, / azure is hidden from the intellect, / but seraphim sometimes bring a sign', from Aleksandr Blok, *The Intellect Cannot Measure the Divine*, in A. Blok, *Selected Poems*, translated by J. Stallworthy and P. France, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000, p. 25.

³⁸The progression from Magic's first hypostasis 'the ineffable as life' all the way to the last hypostasis 'the paradox', might at first appear as the exact reverse of the traditional Sufi path towards *fana* (annihilation) – where '[*fana* is] the total nullification of the ego-consciousness, where there remains only the absolute Unity of Reality in its purity as an absolute Awareness prior to bifurcation into subject and object' (T. Izutsu, *The Basic Structure of Metaphysical Thinking in Islam*, in M. Mohaghegh and H. Landolt (eds.), *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, Tehran: Iranian Institute of McGill University and Tehran University, 1971, p. 39). While the Sufi mystic moves from the accomplished form of the world, back towards its originating principle, the present discussion of Magic's cosmogony declares to move from the first cosmogonic principle towards the accomplished form of Magic world – hence this apparent reverse movement. However, as it will become clearer later and as it is discussed in a note to the Magic's fifth hypostasis, the movement between 'the ineffable as life' and 'the paradox', is in fact more akin to the passage from *fana* to *baqa* – with all that it entails.

recognizes himself, thus creating a distinction within himself – him, who was the origin of everything, who was everything and who contained everything in a state of perfect unity.

In the beginning, Prajapati didn't know who he was. Only when the gods issued from him, when they took on their qualities, their profiles, when Prajapati himself had seared their shapes, forgetting none, sovereignty and splendour included, only then did the question present itself. Indra had just killed Vrta. He was still shaken by the terror of it, but he knew he was sovereign of the gods. He came to Prajapati and said: 'Make me what you are, make me great.' Prajapati answered: 'Then who, *ka*, am I?' 'Exactly what you just said,' said Indra. In that moment Prajapati became *Ka*. In that moment he understood, understood it all. He would never know the joys of limitation, the repose in a straightforward name. Even when they had recomposed him, in the ten thousand, eight hundred bricks of the altar of fire, he would always be a shape shot through by the shapeless.³⁹

At this stage in the chain of emanations, we witness a double movement, at once ontological and epistemological. Ontologically, the ineffable pours out of itself the first word, 'this' (or 'I'), and then retreats into itself. The relationship between the ineffable and its first word remains asymmetrical: the former can utter the name of the latter, but not vice versa.⁴⁰ At the same time, we have an opposite epistemological movement, as the first word – the first linguistically defined entity, 'this' or 'I' – looks back at its own ineffable source and then looks again at itself. This is a continuation of the experience of the miraculous, once the 'I' has acquired sufficient metaphysical stability to be able to look back at itself. But if 'this' or 'I' is the name issued by the ineffable, how is this new entity supposed to call itself? How is it to understand its own position and role in Magic's *cosmos*?

³⁹R. Calasso, *Ka*, London: Vintage Books, 1999, pp. 36–7.

⁴⁰'With the daylight come / the words / when the garden falls silent / and in him, on the branches, / the unsuspected birds.' Francesco Scarabicchi, *Sui Rami* (On the Branches), in F. Scarabicchi, *Il Prato Bianco*, Torino: Einaudi, 2017, p. 27.

When the 'I' looks back towards the ineffable life that originally uttered it, and then looks again at itself as a linguistic entity, the only way in which it can define its own position, is as a 'person'. This term might seem misleading at first, since in our common parlance – though with notable philosophical exceptions⁴¹ – a person is, by definition a human. Yet, in the perspective of Magic's cosmology the term 'person' has little to it that is specifically human. Every non-human 'this', like every human 'I', is merely the first instance of a linguistic ground to which attributes and properties can be conceptually attributed, and, whether attached to humans or non-humans, it is equally suitable to enable the emergence of a 'person'. Drawing on its Latin etymology, *per-sonar*, a 'person' is just the first point through which the ineffable resounds. A person is defined as such, exactly on the basis of its ability to be traversed by the light or sound of the ineffable dimension of existence – that is, by life. By understanding itself as a person, the 'I' acknowledges its own proper position within Magic's cosmology, and proclaims the primacy of ineffable ontology over the ontology of names. In other words, the first principle of the ineffable emanates out of itself an entity ('this', or 'I') which, however detached from its origin, is very much a function of the ineffable itself (that is, it understands itself as a 'person'). By uttering its first word, the ineffable creates enough of a distance from itself to allow reality to take place, as per our earlier definition of reality. Yet, the newly created border of reality verging towards language ('this', 'I'), is ontologically dependent and hierarchically subjected to its own ineffable source. Magic's cosmology thus immediately declares what kind of reality it wishes to make possible. This is a form of reality that isn't entirely flattened on the principle of the ineffable – if it was so, it would replicate the apocalypse of reality produced by Technic – but that sees the space between existence and essence as hierarchically ordered.

The peculiar character of this second hypostasis makes it so that the archetypal incarnation of the person is necessarily double. Two seemingly very distant figures represent two complementary aspects of the person as a cosmogonic hypostasis: *Apollon and the Imam*. The former looks forward towards the emanation and moulding

⁴¹Most recently Timothy Morton; see T. Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, London and New York: Verso, 2017.

of the following hypostases in the chain of emanations. The latter looks back at the preceding principle while seeking guidance for its own productive action.

Let us begin with Apollo, granting a divinity right of way in the course of our exposition. As it is known, Apollo is one of the most complex deities in the Greek pantheon, endowed with a number of different and at times contradictory attributes such as health and plague, sunlight and destruction, archery, music, poetry, colonization and so on. What particularly interests us here – also in part following a Nietzschean characterization of Apollo's figure⁴² – is his close relation to the realm of harmony in aesthetics, and more generally of limit-setting. Even in his negative attributes such as the bearer of plague and destruction, Apollo is the god who is capable of bringing order to chaos by binding it within form, or to bring back chaos by removing form and limits from the world. Apollo naturally fits a discussion on cosmology, since his sphere of influence has to do exactly with the transformation of chaos into a 'world' which is *cosmos* (adorned and ordered, and thus beautiful) and, in Latin, *mundus* (adorned and ordered, and thus clean). Apollo represents an important aspect of the 'person': it embodies the process through which the first linguistic entity, having recognized itself as a function of the ineffable, 'orders' itself and makes itself 'clean' and 'beautiful', so as to be able to bring forward the light of the ineffable that shines through it. Symbolically, it will be Apollo's world-making hand that will accompany a person throughout the rest of Magic's cosmology, as the rest of Magic's world slowly emerges one hypostasis after the other. The Apollonian process of *cosmos*-making or *mundus*-making, on which an 'I' embarks as it first recognizes itself as a person, resembles the work of a poet

⁴²To be more precise, following in part Giorgio Colli's reading of the notion of the 'apollonian' in Nietzsche (see G. Colli, *Apollineo e Dionisiaco*, Milano: Adelphi, 2010, pp. 75–120). Like Colli, we are now considering Apollo's quintessence in terms of his ability to set limit and to bring a layer of 'representational' language into the world. Unlike Colli, however, the present interpretation of the figure of Apollo doesn't confine it to the realm of the phenomenon and of a 'word' that is 'closed onto itself', but puts it in direct connection with the Ineffable (though at a distance from it). For an interpretation of the figure of Apollo that is closer to that suggested in the present volume, see James Hillman's text *Apollo, Dream, Reality*, in J. Hillman, *Mythic Figures*, Washington, DC: Spring Publications, 2012.

imposing metric onto his/her verses, to allow rhythm and sound to shine through the text, over and above semantics.

Consistently with Apollo's attributes as the god of medicine, this process through which an 'I' first shapes itself as a person, also corresponds to a form of self-healing. In Magic's cosmology, the 'healthy' form is that which is best suited to be traversed by the light of the ineffable – that is, by life. The order of language, the health and beauty of a linguistic entity, is fundamentally defined by the relationship between its linguistic 'glass' and the ineffable 'light' that traverses it. This particular notion of health points again to an important feature of language, as it takes place within Magic. Unlike *Technic*, Magic's language is never closed onto itself. It is not a means to the expansion of its own linguistic order, on the contrary, it is always turned backwards, seeking guidance outside itself.

This aspect leads us to the second half of a person's archetypal incarnation: the figure of the Imam. With Apollo, we looked at the active aspect of the person: its imposition of form and limits over language – firstly, over itself – as part of its relationship with its own ineffable source. But we haven't yet investigated how a person decides what type of form would be best suited to allow the ineffable to shine through it. Here comes the figure of the Imam, etymologically 'the one who walks ahead', that is the 'guide' who is capable of directing one's actions. The peculiarity of the Imam's work is best appreciated if we consider it through the lens of Islamic Shia thought – particularly in its Twelvers and Ismaili⁴³ declinations – whose philosophical and theological system is largely built around this figure. According to the Shia vision,⁴⁴ the Imam has to be placed in a complementary relationship with the Prophet (or the prophets). While the Prophet is responsible for receiving from God the letter of the revelation and passing it on to humanity, the Imam is assigned the equally crucial role of interpreting that letter, in order to reveal its real meaning. The Imam is thus capable of detecting behind the exterior, literal dimension of the word (the exoteric, *zahir*), an inner dimension which is

⁴³An excellent discussion of Imamology in Ismaili thought can be found in: H. Corbin, *Cyclical Time & Ismaili Gnosis*, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 103–50.

⁴⁴See *Shiism and Prophetic Philosophy*, in H. Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 23–104.

ineffable and fundamental (the esoteric, *batin*). In the context of Magic's cosmology, the Imam represents the necessary complement to Apollo: the prerequisite of any form of ordering of the linguistic world is an understanding of the ineffable that it is meant to host. What is more, the Imam is concerned directly not only with the ineffable, but also with the ways in which the ineffable can be disentangled from language, or can be 'hidden' underneath it. The work of the Imam thus consists of a spiral movement between the ineffable and the first linguistic entity. On the one hand, the Imam, like a mystic, looks back directly at the ineffable and uses its findings as a compass to direct the ordering of the linguistic form. On the other, his work of constant interpretation (*ta'wil*) of language in the light of the ineffable, allows him to continuously reshape and bring back the linguistic entity to its function as a vessel for the manifestation of its ineffable source. While Apollo represents the power to build linguistic constructs, the Imam stands for the supremely architectural function of directing such building works, and to constantly check them against the requirements of that ineffable life which will ultimately inhabit the house of language.

It is important to stress again that Apollo and the Imam are complementary figures, and that both of them are internal to the second hypostasis in Magic's cosmogonic chain. As soon as the ineffable's first word, 'this' or 'I', becomes aware of its own position as a 'person', the processes symbolized by Apollo and the Imam take place simultaneously. They are two aspects of the endless construction of a 'person', as a suitable place for the epiphany (*mazhar*) of the ineffable. This notion of the Imam as an internal function of the person, finds its theoretical elaboration in the Twelver Shia doctrine of the Hidden Imam. Let us briefly look at this doctrine, to appreciate its relevance at this stage of our exposition. According to Islamic theology, the revelation brought to the world by Mohammed was the final seal that closed the cycle of revelation, which had started with Adam (considered as the first prophet). After Mohammed, the world won't be given any more prophets. However, according to Shia theology, the closure of the cycle of the revelation opens a new cycle: the cycle of the 'esoteric interpretation', of the 'initiation' and of the Imam (all these meanings are contained in the complex term *walayyat*). A crucial role in such effort to produce an esoteric interpretation of the revelation was played by the early Imams in the lineage starting from the first

Imam Ali. However, according to Twelver Shia theology, once the lineage reached its twelfth generation with the Imam Muhammad al Mahdi, something exceptional happened. At a certain point of his troubled life, the Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, decided to go into 'occultation'.⁴⁵ First, he disappeared from geography. He entered a stage of 'minor occultation' (*ghaybat soghra*), withdrawing to an impenetrable hideout, from which he would convey his messages to a number of chosen 'deputies'. Finally, he disappeared from history. The Mahdi underwent a 'great occultation' (*ghaybat kobra*), during which he would no longer appoint any deputies. The great occultation lasts to this day, and until the Hidden Imam's final return to our world, at the end of time. During the present period of great occultation, however, the Hidden Imam has not vanished entirely. His place now is within each faithful's heart, and as their very 'heart' (to use a terminology shared also by Sufism). As we shall see in detail in the course of our discussion of the next hypostasis, the ontological location of the Hidden Imam is not to be considered merely in metaphorical terms. His existence is not just that of a case of evocative fantasy; rather, it is an ontologically legitimate figure, inhabiting the 'imaginal world' (*alam al-mithal*, or *mundus imaginalis*) that lies between the ineffable and the linguistic dimensions of existence. But more on this later.

The Hidden Imam, understood as the Imam of This Time (*Sahib al-zaman*, 'he who rules over this time') resides within each person who seeks his guidance. He is the force responsible for leading an individual human to a state of proper 'personhood', that is to a state in which one's own linguistic dimension is rendered into a mirror that reflects one's own ineffable dimension (which, as we saw, runs unitary and uninterrupted through all existents). We can now appreciate the typical assimilation, within the Twelver Shia thought, between the figure of the Hidden Imam and that of the Perfect Man (*al-Insan al-Kamil*). As discussed also by Sufi thinkers like Ibn Arabi, the figure of the Perfect Man symbolizes the state in which a human – whether considered as a unique individual or as a representative of its species – is able to reflect the light of the

⁴⁵The following reading is largely based on Henry Corbin's account. See H. Corbin, *L'Imam cache'*, Paris: L'Herne, 2003. I consulted the Italian edition: H. Corbin, *L'Imam Nascosto*, Milano: SE, 2008.

Absolute in its greatest possible fullness. As Henry Corbin remarked, the Hidden Imam is: ‘the Perfect Man, the Integral Man, “for it is he who enables all things to speak, and, in becoming alive, each thing becomes a threshold of the spiritual world”’.⁴⁶ It should be clear by now how the combination of the figures of Apollo and of the Imam – as read through its Twelver Shia interpretation – constitutes an archetypal incarnation of Magic’s second hypostasis, in which the first linguistic entity tries to build itself as a ‘person’. Whereas Apollo is the power to mould language to create a person, the Hidden Imam is the guidance that directs such power. It is here, that we witness the earliest appearance of ethics within Magic’s reality.

Third hypostasis: Symbol

As the movement of Magic’s hypostases unfolds, we can see how its progression resembles that of any cosmogony based on a central form, including Technic – although, of course, the two differ completely in terms of their respective principles and overall architecture. From the first hypostasis, the following ones are emanated and, together with them, a normative direction also emerges, traversing them until its original energy is finally exhausted. Before approaching the third step in Magic’s cosmogonic chain, ‘symbol’, let us briefly run through the two preceding ones, to better appreciate the nature of their inner movement.

With the first hypostasis, we tried to look at the first principle of Magic’s cosmogony, as it is in itself. The ineffable as life stood there in its mysterious majesty, barely touched by the potential of its revelation as a miracle. We defined life, as the ineffable dimension at the heart of existence, and we considered it as a flow that runs uninterrupted throughout the whole existent – thus also adopting a claim about the life of apparently non-living entities, that is close to the position of contemporary Object Oriented philosopher Timothy Morton. Through repeated references to the philosophies of the Advaita Vedanta school, to Ibn Arabi and to Mulla Sadra, we presented the ineffable both as the life of an

⁴⁶H. Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 72.

individual existent – and in this respect, we called to our aid also Max Stirner – but also as the principle of existence considered in itself. The *atman* is the *brahman*.

In the second hypostasis, we witnessed the moment in which the ineffable, that is life, utters its first word: 'this' or 'I'. We explored in greater depth the instance of 'I' as its first name, since it refers to its reception by a human – but we also pointed out that, as 'this', it equally applies to non-human entities. This first word, in turn, looks back at its ineffable source and then at itself, and understands its own position as that of the 'person': the linguistic vessel through which the ineffable resounds. Once again, we made it clear that the figure of the person is not exclusive to humans, but it can apply to non-humans as well – although, us being human, we explored it from our own particular perspective. At that level, the person also realizes its two faces as Apollo and the Imam. That is to say, the person is capable of shaping linguistic constructs (first of all, itself) in such a way that allows the ineffable to shine through them. This level inaugurated in an embryonic form the ethical aspect of Magic's reality.

With the third hypostasis in Magic's cosmogony – 'symbol'⁴⁷ – the linguistic realm takes a further step away from its ineffable source, while still following its normative directions. Whereas in the second hypostasis the person was only potentially a subject, in this third one it begins to act as such. From this point onwards one acts no longer as an 'I' or a 'this', but as a 'person'. It is now the moment for the person to use its ability to mould language beyond its own self-creation, and to develop it into a process of creative interaction with linguistic constructs other than itself. The person here begins its construction of the world and of the things that populate it: a world that, like the person itself, has to always be capable of letting the ineffable traverse it. If we understand the ineffable as life, and life as the ineffable, this means that the person's work consists primarily in shaping dead linguistic constructs, to render them alive. Or, more correctly, to render them at once alive and dead,

⁴⁷For a fascinating and relevant discussion of the notion of symbol in Mediterranean thought (and India), with particular reference to its religious interpretations, see J. Ries (ed.), *I Simboli*, Milano: Jaca Book, 2016. For an understanding of symbols that is broadly sympathetic to that presented in this volume, see in particular E. Wind, *The Eloquence of Symbols: Studies in Humanist Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

coherently with the fact that such a world is at once an emanation of the (living) ineffable, and a (dead) linguistic construct.

'Symbol' thus stands both for the name of the third hypostasis within Magic's cosmogony, but also, more generally, for a particular way of structuring language vis-à-vis the question of the ineffable. As a hypostasis, the symbol goes to define the inner quality of Magic's world – while as a way of structuring language its methodology can be traced back to the process that brought about the figure of the person. A symbol is thus an exceptionally complex notion, and to proceed with our exploration we shall begin by looking at it from two particular angles: its definition, and its productive potential. We will try to answer two main questions. Firstly, what is a symbol? And secondly, what kind of world emerges at this stage of Magic's cosmogony? Let us begin by tackling the first, gargantuan question.

We can start to appreciate the peculiar character of a symbol, if we compare it with another form of language that is often mistakenly associated with it: the allegory. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe provides a brief but poignant characterization of the fundamental differences between the two.

There is a great difference, whether the poet seeks the particular for the sake of the general or sees the general in the particular. From the former procedure there ensues allegory, in which the particular serves only as illustration, as example of the general. The latter [symbolic] procedure, however, is genuinely the nature of poetry; it expresses something particular, without thinking of the general or pointing to it.

Allegory transforms the phenomenon into a concept, the concept into an image, but in such a way that the concept always remains bounded in the image, and is entirely to be kept and held in it, and to be expressed by it.

Symbolism [however] transforms the phenomenon into idea, the idea into an image, and in such a way that the idea remains always infinitely active and unapproachable in the image, and even if expressed in all languages, still would remain inexpressible.⁴⁸

⁴⁸J. W. von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, Nos. 279, 1112, 1113 – in M. H. Abrahams and G. G. Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015, p. 394.

Symbol and allegory aren't just different semantic devices. Taken as cosmogonic principles in themselves (leading respectively to allegorical reality versus symbolic reality), they represent different conceptions of the 'stuff' that makes up reality. The allegorical method, as a cosmogonic principle, is closely connected to Technic's renunciation to reality in favour of a plain of essence without existence. Allegory's first and overt claim is of language's ability to properly and exhaustively capture the existent: if there are things in the world, they can be properly and exhaustively expressed by allegorical (i.e. descriptive) language. Secondly, but more importantly, allegory's implicit claim is about the supposed coincidence between the range of language's capture and the range of what is ontologically possible. Since allegorical language is able to capture everything, can whatever escapes its capture really claim a legitimate ontological status? As we know, this is the heart of Technic's cosmogony.

Conversely, a symbol doesn't capture or exhaust its object. Rather, it 'points' towards it. In the words of Joseph Campbell:

A symbol, like everything else, shows a double aspect. We must distinguish, therefore between the 'sense' and the 'meaning' of the symbol. It seems to me perfectly clear that all the great and little symbolical systems of the past functioned simultaneously on three levels: the corporeal of waking consciousness, the spiritual of dream, and the ineffable of the absolutely unknowable. The term 'meaning' can refer only to the first two but these, today, are in the charge of science – which is the province as we have said, not of symbols but of signs. The ineffable, the absolutely unknowable, can be only sensed. It is the province of art which is not 'expression' merely, or even primarily, but a quest for, and formulation of, experience evoking, energy-waking images: yielding what Sir Herbert Read has aptly termed a 'sensuous apprehension of being'.⁴⁹

We will have a chance to look in further depth at the idea of a direct 'apprehension of being' in the next chapter, as we will consider the

⁴⁹J. Campbell, *The Flight of the Wild Gander*, New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1990, p. 188.

epistemological theories developed by Mulla Sadra on the basis of the work of *twelfth*-century Persian philosopher Suhrawardi. For now, let's remain focused on the particular form of a symbol. A symbol is at once a semiotic sign, existing within linguistic reality, and something that exceeds both semiosis (since it is impossible to fully communicate the object of its signification) and productive language (since it resists any absolute reduction to instrumentality). An example of this paradoxical condition of the symbol can be found in the figure of a 'sacred object', particularly as it is conceived in traditional cultures: a sacred rock, for example, is at the same time merely a normal rock and the manifestation of ineffable forces. This aspect has been described by the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade as the 'dialectic of the sacred', wherein the piercing movement of the ineffable through the linguistic realm, gives rise to manifestations of the sacred or *hierophanies*:

Apparently, nothing distinguishes any moment of profane time from the timeless instant stained by enlightenment. Rightly to understand the structure and function of such an image, one must remember the dialectic of the sacred: any object whatever may paradoxically become a hierophany, a receptacle of the sacred, while still participating in its own cosmic environment (a sacred stone, e.g., remains nevertheless a stone along with other stones).⁵⁰

This close relationship between symbols and the sacred is a recurrent topic in their use and analysis throughout history. Of particular interest in this respect, is the attempt by German philosopher Ernst Cassirer to create an entire philosophical system, based on the notion of symbolic forms as the basic structure of human understanding – to the point that Cassirer defines the human as an '*animal symbolicum*'. According to Cassirer, any cultural system, spanning from art to science, finds its primary source in the uniquely human way of thinking through symbols. Among all these systems, however, one in particular seems to retain some of the earliest and most fundamental qualities of the symbolic function: the mythological system. Cassirer dedicates the entire second volume of his trilogy on

⁵⁰M. Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 84–5.

*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*⁵¹ to an exploration of 'mythical thought', which however more primitive than contemporary science and less susceptible to the development of rational argumentation, is alone capable of offering to us a unique frame through which the world emerges to our experience. Cassirer went on to summarize some of his main findings in his volume *Language and Myth*, where he juxtaposed these two forms of conceptualization (language and myth) in a manner that is not entirely alien to the perspective offered by Magic. Unlike language – to which, however, it is closely related – mythic thinking perceives within the world a field of force, 'which permeates all things and events, and may be present now in objects, now in persons, yet it is never bound exclusively to any single and individual subject or object as its host'.⁵² Such a mythic field of force is well exemplified by the Melanesian notion of *mana* – an ever-present yet irreducible divine energy that traverses all things – but it can equally be found in forms of mythic thinking from all over the world. In all authentic instances of mythic thinking – which is, according to Cassirer, the original form of symbolic thinking – meaning emerges not as the product of semiotic conventions, but rather as something that dwells within mythic structures like life dwells in a body. The ineffable that myths are able to summon through their symbols, animates them and turns them into all-too-real 'things', that are often considered by archaic societies as actual and concrete particulars. It is thus, concludes Cassirer, that they are considered to be 'holy' objects – material or immaterial that they may be, stones or formulas alike – and their ability to convey the ineffable is deemed to be an inherent supernatural power.

Cassirer finds the same process still at work today in the field of poetry, although in a form that is almost entirely ethereal and liberated from the association with material objects.

The spirit lives in the word of language and in the mythical image without falling under the control of either. What poetry expresses is neither the mythic word – picture of gods and daemons, nor the logical truth of abstract determinations and

⁵¹E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2: *Mythical Thought*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955.

⁵²E. Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1953, p. 63.

relations. The world of poetry stands apart from both, as a world of illusion and fantasy – but it is just in this mode of illusion that the realm of pure feeling can find utterance, and can therewith attain its full and concrete actualization. Word and mythic image, which once confronted the human mind as hard realistic powers, have now cast off all reality and effectuality; they have become a light, bright ether in which the spirit can move without let or hindrance. This liberation is achieved not because the mind throws aside the sensuous forms of word and image, but in that it uses them both as organs of its own, and thereby recognizes them for what they really are: forms of its own self-revelation.⁵³

Despite coming from a very distant place, Cassirer's conclusions seem to point to the same notion of self-revelation of that 'mind' which, in his conception, is implicitly not distant from a notion of '*atman* as *brahman*'. The 'spirit' – in Cassirer's parlance – is summoned by symbolic, poetic language, so that it is able to reveal itself while remaining free from capture. It is worth noting, at least in passing, how Cassirer's brief mention of poetry could equally apply to the presently developed system of Magic. To paraphrase Heidegger, if we can understand Technic as the essence of technology, so we can understand Magic as the essence of poetry. But, saving a discussion on the relationship between Magic and poetry to a later occasion, let us continue to look at the way in which symbolic expression finds a natural home in the field of mythology. Following Cassirer, we shall seek a clearer understanding of the symbolic form, by focusing on its productive dimension in the field of mythology.

As with all preceding hypostases, we can find an archetypal incarnation also of this third hypostasis: in this case, in the form of a *mythologem*. The term 'mythologem' has been borrowed directly from the lexicon of the Hungarian scholar of mythology Karl Kerényi. In his *Prolegomena* to a volume co-authored with Carl Gustav Jung, Kerényi defined the mythologem as the basic core element, motif or theme of a myth.

A particular kind of material determines the art of mythology, an immemorial and traditional body of material contained in

⁵³Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, p. 99.

tales about gods and god-like beings, heroic battles and journeys to the Underworld – ‘mythologem’ is the best Greek word for them . . . Mythology is the movement of this material⁵⁴

Similarly, Levi Strauss says of a mythologem (precisely, in Strauss’ terminology, a ‘mytheme’) that it reflects ‘the kind of language in which an entire myth can be expressed in a single word’.⁵⁵ A mythologem is thus the fundamental unit of a mythological narration, containing in itself not only a synthesis of the unfolding of a particular myth, but also a distilled miniature of all the essential structures of mythical thought as such. A mythologem is to mythical thinking, what a microcosm is to a macrocosm.

The role of mythologems as incarnations of the symbol (understood as a cosmogonic hypostasis), can be better appreciated if we consider them in terms of their ‘archetypal’ function within the psychological realm. According to the perspective of Depth Psychology, as developed by Jung, myths can be read as structures through which a buried, unspeakable dimension is allowed to emerge – however partially – without being subjected to capture or exploitation. This ineffable dimension, according to Jung, is the kaleidoscope of primordial psychic forces that populate the collective unconscious. While lying at once within and beyond the linguistic rationality of waking humans, such unconscious forces also provide the necessary preconditions for rational language to take place. In a manner that is not dissimilar to Magic’s perspective, those unconscious forces that Jung sees emerging through myths, are in fact the earliest manifestations of the ineffable fact of life itself surfacing through the mesh of language. The way in which they surface, again according to Jung, is as a set of fundamental archetypes – highly symbolic figures that already, in themselves, contain entire mythical narrations. A mythologem, seen as a Jungian archetype, is a symbol caught midway through the process of its actual functioning.

⁵⁴C. Kerenyi, *Prolegomena*, in C. G. Jung and C. Kerenyi, *The Science of Mythology*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 3.

⁵⁵See Levi Strauss’s discussion of the mytheme in L. Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vol. 2, translated by Monique Layton, New York: Basic Books, 1976, p. 144.

At this point, though, we have to address an issue that is becoming evermore urgent. According to Cassirer, symbols and myths refer primarily to a human's emotional apprehension of the world, and thus are essentially a function of epistemology. For Jung, they have to do with the deepest foundations of the collective unconscious, and thus are to be considered essentially as psychological elements. For Eliade, on the contrary, as for most archaic societies, their origin is extra-mental and can be found in a divine dimension that actually animates the world – and thus, their proper location is within metaphysics. How are we to reconcile these different positions, if at all possible? In other words, within the architecture of Magic's cosmos, should we consider mythologems and symbols as purely mental entities, or as things that enjoy an autonomous form of existence?

Here, once again, we shall call to our aid the Sufi thinker Ibn Arabi, though this time through the sophisticated – and at times, admittedly, inventive – interpretation of his mystical philosophy proposed by Henry Corbin in two of his texts.⁵⁶ Corbin develops Ibn Arabi's notion of an 'imaginal world' (*alam al-mithal* or, in Corbin's terminology, *mundus imaginalis*) as an ontologically real 'place-beyond-geography', lying between the most inaccessible dimension of the universe and the dimension that can be apprehended through discursive rationality and the senses. As an in-between realm, the *mundus imaginalis* hosts archetypes that are produced by the ineffable spirit inhabiting symbolic linguistic forms, while also offering an ontological ground to symbolic forms themselves. The *mundus imaginalis* is thus at the same time a function of the psyche, of human epistemology, and an ontologically legitimate element within a specific cosmology.

To clarify the ontology and unique function of this intermediate world, Corbin looks at *The Crimson Archangel*,⁵⁷ a Gnostic tale of initiation by twelfth-century Persian philosopher Suhrawardi.

⁵⁶H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton and Bollingen, 1998; Henry Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal*, in *Spring* 1972 (Zürich) pp. 1–13, originally in *Cahiers Internationaux de Symbolisme* 6, Brussels, 1964, pp. 3–26.

⁵⁷See *The Red Intellect*, in Sheikh S. Suhrawardi, *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises*, translated by W. M. Trackston Jr., London: Octagon Press, 1982, pp. 35–43. For an in-depth exegesis of this tale, see *Il 'Racconto dell'Angelo Imporporato' e le Gesta*

This tale recounts a voyage towards and beyond Mount Qâf, 'the cosmic mountain, which, summit after summit and valley after valley, is built up of celestial spheres, all enveloping one another'.⁵⁸ Mount Qâf is not a place existing within common geography, but neither is it pure fancy; this cosmic mountain exists – and truly so – in *Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd*, 'the country of non-where', a neologism coined by Suhrawardi himself. The voyage through *Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd* thus takes place at the level of the *mundus imaginális*; it is a real voyage, at once occurring outside geography while remaining solidly grounded within ontology.

Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd does not denote something that is shaped like a point, not having extension in space. In fact, the Persian word *abâd* stands for a city, a cultivated region that is inhabited and consequently an expanse. ... Topographically this region starts at the 'convex surface' of the ninth Sphere, the Sphere of Spheres, or the Sphere that envelops the Cosmos as a whole. This means it begins at the very moment one leaves the Supreme Sphere, which defines all the types of orientation possible in our world (or on our side of the world). ... It becomes obvious that, once this border has been crossed, the question 'where' (*ubi*, *kojâ*) becomes meaningless at least in terms of the meaning it has in the realm of sensible experience. ... Undoubtedly what is involved is not a movement from one locality to another, a bodily transfer from one place to another, as would occur in the case of places in the same homogenous space. ... It is essentially to go inward, to penetrate to the interior. Yet, having reached the interior, one finds oneself paradoxically on the outside, or, in the language of our authors, 'on the convex surface' of the ninth Sphere, in other words 'beyond Mount Qâf'. Essentially the relationship involved is that of the outer, the visible, the exoteric (in Greek *ta exo*, in Arabic *zahir*) to the inner, the invisible, the esoteric (in Greek *ta eso*, in Arabic *batin*), or the relationship of the natural to the spiritual world. Leaving the where, the *ubi* category, is equivalent

Mistiche Iraniche, in H. Corbin, *Nell'Islam Iranico: Sohrawardi e i Platonici di Persia*, Milano: Mimesis, 2015, pp. 237–84.

⁵⁸H. Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imagenal*, in *Spring* 1972 (Zürich) p. 2.

to leaving the outer or natural appearances that cloak the hidden inner realities, just as the almond is concealed in its shell. For the Stranger, the Gnostic, this step represents a return *home*, or at least a striving in this direction.⁵⁹

Corbin's understanding of the location of the 'country of non-where' and of its being a 'home' to which one can return, further clarifies our present description of the third hypostasis in Magic's cosmogony. In particular, it helps us to understand the dimension of the symbol as a real 'place' that remains active at all subsequent levels in Magic's cosmology. Within Magic's reality-system, mythologems cannot be dismissed as mere epistemological or psychic functions, but they are the actually existing inhabitants of the *mundus imaginalis*, itself being an ontologically legitimate dimension lying midway between language and ineffability. Its resistance to being apprehended by allegorical language, and its simultaneous availability to host the entire dimension of symbolic forms, constitutes its particular character. At this level in the development of Magic's reality, the world is still at an intermediate stage in which, to say it with the fourth-century pagan philosopher Sallustius, 'one may call the world a myth, in which bodies and things are visible, but souls and minds hidden.'⁶⁰ Importantly, as Magic's cosmogony progresses, the world reaches a more defined state, akin to what we know as our everyday reality – yet these intermediate stages are not denied or overcome, but simply complemented by other, more 'external' (*zahir*) layers. This means that, at any later stage of Magic's world-making, and at any point in Magic's reality, the dimension of the *mundus imaginalis* remains fully active and powerful, and fully existing. This is, of course, something well known by those poets described by Ernst Cassirer in a previously mentioned quote. Yet, Magic's reality appears to generalize the exceptional position of the poet to

⁵⁹H. Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imagenal*, in *Spring* 1972 (Zürich) pp. 3–4.

⁶⁰Sallustius, *On the Gods and the Cosmos*, III, *Concerning Myths*, translated by G. Murray, in G. Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2003, p. 192. Sallustius was a fourth-century CE Roman pagan philosopher and theologian, a friend of Emperor Julian (later known as 'The Apostate') and the author of the treatise *On the Gods and the Cosmos*. Not to be confused with the homonymous first-century BCE Roman historian.

a state of full normality – precisely, as the most accurate position to apprehend the world within this particular reality-system. Although in the following hypostases we shall move further away from the original cosmogonic source of the ineffable as life, every ‘linguistic’ existent – that is, everything that can be comfortably apprehended and communicated through language – will nonetheless still maintain within itself an intermediate dimension in which it functions as a symbol of the ineffable. Every layer in the construction of Magic’s reality-system survives within all subsequent ones, just like it lies dormant within the earlier ones.

Fourth hypostasis: Meaning

In the previous hypostasis, we saw how the ineffable’s linguistic emanations are structured according to a symbolic form, so that the ineffable is able to coexist with language, while enlivening it and shining through it. We also looked at the archetypal incarnation of the hypostasis ‘symbol’ in the form of a mythologem: the minimal linguistic construct that is capable of conveying an entire myth in the compressed space of a single symbol.

The fourth hypostasis continues this process of emanation of an increasingly linguistic world, out of the original principle of the ineffable as life. This cosmogonic flow proceeds according to the normative injunction of preserving life within each linguistic construct, to craft words in the guise of windows through which the ineffable can shine. As we reach this level, however, we move beyond the atomic units of individual linguistic constructs, to focus instead on their syntactic connection within accomplished ‘sentences’. When language takes place, syntax inevitably follows. The issue at this point is no longer just that of the relationship between language and ineffability, but the more complicated equation that includes meaning, as it emerges at the level of larger syntactic compounds. Yet, it might be surprising to see the question of meaning raised here, as if it didn’t apply to earlier hypostases. Doesn’t an individual symbol ‘mean’ something, namely the ineffable that it reflects? Doesn’t meaning apply at all to levels of language?

We can tackle this question by looking at a particular theory of language, which resonates – although with some *caveats* – with our present discussion of Magic’s own reality-system. As we did in the

first hypostasis, when we looked at Adi Shankara's monistic system of Advaita Vedanta, we are moving back to India, though this time to a period between the fifth and sixth centuries CE. The thinker who will come to our aid here is the grammarian Bhartrhari,⁶¹ one of the greatest philosophers of language in the Indian tradition, in the lineage of grammarians such as Panini (circa fifth century BCE) and Patanjali (second century BCE).⁶² As in the case of his two illustrious predecessors, the details of Bhartrhari's biography are shrouded in uncertainty, though his intellectual legacy has survived intact in his magnum opus *Vakyapadiya*. Bhartrhari's philosophy and lexicon are particularly complex, and it would be impossible to sketch a comprehensive picture of his entire system in such a short space. Nonetheless, it is still possible to address a number of his key concepts that might clarify the problem of 'meaning' at the present stage of Magic's construction of reality and of the world. Central to Bhartrhari's thought, is the idea that, if we wish to grasp the essence of language, we have to look at the way it functions at the level of sentences, rather than focusing on individual words or on particles within words. Behind this idea, lies the wish to understand language not so much in terms of its internal functioning, but more importantly in its relationship with meaning. According to Bhartrhari, it is at the level of the sentence that language truly expresses meaning, while individual words or particles are only abstract ways of fragmenting the semantic unit of a sentence. A sentence is composed by words, yet it is not reducible to any of them, in the same way that a word is not reducible to any of its individual composing sounds. Bhartrhari defines the meaning expressed by a sentence as *sphota*, a complex term around which the grammarian builds a great part of his system of thought. *Sphota* here stands for what contemporary scholar Bimal Krishna Matilal describes as:

⁶¹For a multi-voice discussion of possible interpretations of Bhartrhari's thought, in the light both of traditional and of contemporary philosophy, see M. Chaturvedi, *Bhartrhari: Language, Thought, and Reality*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2009. The interpretation adopted in the present volume is mainly based on that provided in B. K. Matilal, *The Word and the World: India's Contribution to the Study of Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁶²For an overview of the tradition of Sanskrit grammarian/philosophers, see J. F. Staal, *A Reader on the Sanskrit Grammarians*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

The real substratum, proper linguistic unit, which is identical also with its meaning. Language is not the vehicle of meaning or the conveyor-belt of thought. Thought anchors language and language anchors thought. *Shabdana*, 'languageing', is thinking; and thought 'vibrates' through language. In this way of looking at things, there cannot be any essential difference between a linguistic unit and its meaning or the thought it conveys. *Sphota* refers to this non-differentiated language-principle.⁶³

For Bhartrhari, the meaning expressed by a sentence, the *sphota*, manifests itself to our mental perception as an instantaneous flash of awareness (*pratibha*) triggered by the sounds or characters that compose the actual utterance of sequential words (what Bhartrhari calls *nada*). Thus, it might appear that meaning and actual language, *sphota* and *nada*, are two distinct things. Yet, for Bhartrhari this isn't so. At their most fundamental level, language and meaning are inextricably bound, to the point of coinciding with each other. Not only the very act of perception is, according to Bhartrhari, a quintessentially linguistic act, but the very constitution of the world is the product of the language-principle. Bhartrhari is quick to develop this thesis to its metaphysical conclusions, particularly in the light of the Hinduist character of his philosophy. Although Bhartrhari wasn't an adherent of the Advaita Vedanta school, he shared with them a similar monistic (that is, non-dualistic) attitude. He agrees with the likes of Shankara that the world is essentially Brahman and that Brahman is essentially consciousness. Yet, he adds that consciousness and thought are in fact, in themselves, nothing but language, and that the world itself is just an all-encompassing linguistic construct. It follows that, according to Bhartrhari, Brahman and language must be one and the same thing. Bhartrhari defines this notion of Brahman-as-language, *Shabda-Brahman*, the 'eternal word', or *eternum verbum*. Hence the monistic character of his philosophy of language.

Stepping back for a moment from Bhartrhari's system, we can compare his metaphysical creation with the differentiation in the stages of *tajalli* (self-manifestation of the Absolute) proposed by Ibn

⁶³B. K. Matilal, *The Word and the World: India's Contribution to the Study of Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 85.

Arabi and discussed in the first hypostasis of Magic's reality-system. As the reader might remember, Ibn Arabi pointed out how, at the earliest stage of the Absolute's chain of emanations that gives origin to the whole of reality and of the world, the first ineffable principle stands before any form of manifestation (*tajalli*) whatsoever. This is what we called 'non-*tajalli*', borrowing a term from Toshihiko Izutsu's scholarship on Ibn Arabi. It is only at the following level (*hadrah*) that the Absolute begins to manifest itself, thus starting the chain of *tajalli* proper. Likewise, in our description of Magic's cosmogony, we placed the appearance of language at the level of the second hypostasis, while the first one, considered in itself, is completely immune from language. Even just to be able to talk about a form of incarnation of the ineffable at the level of its first hypostasis, we had to bring in the notion of the miracle: the event of a gaze that is cast *back* upon the ineffable by later hypostasis. In the light of these qualifications, we can see how Bhartrhari's notion of *sphota* and of the semiotic primacy of sentences has particular resonance within the current hypostasis. Like Bhartrhari, Magic's system also agrees that the world and language have a symbiotic relationship. Without language, the world as such wouldn't come into existence, and the 'things' that compose it (including the world itself as the largest 'thing', as well as each individual existent) wouldn't be able to emerge in their difference and uniqueness. Against Advaita Vedanta, Magic reclaims the legitimacy of language, which can't be discounted as mere 'illusion' (*maya*) or 'ignorance' (*avidya*). However, both Ibn Arabi and the system of Magic would point out that this is true only from the second hypostasis onwards, that is, from the point at which *tajalli* begins. As soon as the ineffable speaks, language emerges as the essence of the world. Yet, in line with Mulla Sadra's notion of the primacy of existence, before this act of speaking, existence stands in itself, untouched by language. Also in Magic, the world emerges as language – yet it isn't reducible to language. Magic rejects both forms of monism: the ineffable monism of Advaita Vedanta, as well as the linguistic monism of Bhartrhari. Bhartrhari's theory of sentence-meaning fits comfortably within Magic's reality-system (and actually manages to explain the functioning of its fourth hypostasis), but on condition that it leaves untouched the first and original hypostasis of the ineffable as life.

Applied to Magic's fourth hypostasis ('meaning'), this qualified adoption of aspects of Bhartrhari's philosophy amounts to a characterization of the place and role of symbolic syntax. As Bhartrhari pointed out, meaning is not expressed by any single, atomic linguistic unit – word or particle that it may be. It takes the frame of a sentence to allow the ineffable to emerge as *sphota*. For this reason, we identified the building-unit of Magic's world with the figure of the symbol and, particularly, with the mythologem as its incarnation. Both the symbol and the mythologem are, in themselves, compressed sentences, in that they exceed that function of atomic classification that belongs instead to the figure of the allegory (following Goethe's interpretation, among others). A symbol functions as a particular framework that is irreducible to its constituent atomic elements; it is irreducible to its sign, verbal or non-verbal as it may be, as well as to its immediate signification. As such, it is closer to Bhartrhari's notion of a sentence, than to that of a word. Indeed, symbols have their own internal syntax, although at such a level of complexity that renders it exceptionally difficult to detect. But this fourth hypostasis wishes to push the scope of symbolic language one step further. Although symbols already act like micro-sentences, capable of manifesting the ineffable as their *sphota*, it is also possible to conceive of ampler syntaxes, made of the combination of a plurality of symbols, just like narratives result from the combination of a plurality of sentences. Needless to say, this particular conception of symbolic syntax bears important consequences also in terms of a theory of poetry – though this is not a topic that we shall consider in-depth at this point of our exploration.

The fourth hypostasis thus investigates how particular combinations of symbols can give rise to meaning, in the same way that combinations of mythologems can give rise to broader myths. Since we are moving towards the twilight of Magic's chain of emanations, this passage to a broader meaning and a broader narrative also coincides with a weakening of the ineffable light that is transmitted through an increasingly opaque linguistic framework. To use again the Sufi metaphor of glass, as we proceed towards the fifth and last hypostasis, the slate of glass through which the ineffable shines, becomes increasingly thick. The ineffable itself, which until this point was considered largely in its own right, is here transformed into a form of 'meaning': a *sphota* that reveals the *Brahman*. Because of this decline in the energy of the first

principle, a new set of preoccupations enters now Magic's reality. On the one hand, the danger of mistaking the literal dimension of the world for the 'truth' about it; on the other, and consequent to it, the importance of bringing back these increasingly thick and more complex linguistic constructs to their fundamental nature as symbols. Both these preoccupations are expressed in two main characteristics of the fourth hypostasis, 'meaning': firstly, the 'law of correspondence' that regulates it; and secondly, but not less importantly, the notion of the 'centre', which here assumes the role of the archetypal incarnation of this hypostasis.

The idea of the law of correspondence is a centuries-old Hermetic concept that was first properly expressed and theorized in the *Emerald Tablet*, an extremely succinct treaty attributed by tradition to Hermes Trismegistus.⁶⁴ Nowhere, more than in the case of Hermes Trismegistus, does history and tradition intertwine in a fashion that is appropriately unfathomable. The earliest textual evidence of the *Emerald Tablet* dates back to a tenth-century Arabic text, *Kitab Sirr al-Asrar* (The Secret Book of Secrets, or *Secretum Secretorum*) – itself presented as a translation by renowned ninth-century Syrian scholar Abu Yahya Ibn al-Batriq of an earlier text in Syriac, which in turn was supposed to be the translation of a Greek original. Yet, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus itself is a product of the Hellenistic syncretism between Greek and Egyptian religions, amounting to the fusion of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian divinity Thoth. Interestingly, it is to the god Thoth that a number of inventions and practices are traditionally assigned, which would find a suitable location at the current stage of development of Magic's reality-system; especially the art of writing (as recounted in Plato's *Phaedrus*) and the ritualistic praxis of magical arts. Of the fourteen brief sections that compose the *Emerald Tablet*, the first two are of particular interest here. In the translation of Sir Isaac Newton, as found in his alchemical papers, the law of correspondence recites:

1 – Tis true without error, certain & most true.

⁶⁴For a collection of all the texts attributed by tradition to Hermes Trismegistus, see VVAA, *Corpus Hermeticum*, edited by A. D. Nock and A. J. Festugiere, Milano: Bompiani, 2005.

2 – That which is below is like that which is above & that which is above is like [*est sicut*] that which is below to do the miracles of one only thing.⁶⁵

The interpretation of these cryptic lines has engaged philosophers, theologians and alchemists for centuries. Instead of entering this tireless dispute, we can limit ourselves to consider this passage from the point of view of Magic's cosmogony. In particular, we can consider how the law of correspondence set by Hermes Trismegistus, might help us to clarify the connection between the fourth hypostasis, 'meaning', and the three preceding ones. The law of correspondence states the possibility of interpreting the evermore distant products of linguistic construction ('that which is below') as essentially related to their earliest forms, resting closer to the original ineffable source ('that which is above'), and vice versa. As we saw, within Magic's perspective a person is a symbol, and a symbol is a person. Likewise, a symbol counts as a sentence (as described by Bhartrhari), and a sentence counts as a symbol. Again, the ineffable presents itself as the meaning of language, and meaning presents itself as the ineffable of language.

In the next chapter, particularly in the section on the idea of salvation, we shall see in further depth how a crucial part of this principle lies in the way in which such correspondence entails the relationship of 'being like' (*est sicut*, in the Latin translation of the *Emerald Tablet*). For now, we shall focus instead on the normative aspect that the law of correspondence brings within the construction of Magic's reality. As the strength of the original principle of the ineffable weakens, its emanating power is increasingly supplemented and also supplanted by an overtly normative dimension – which was unnecessary until this point. We noticed a similar process in the case of Technic's reality-system; as we move further away from the original force of a cosmological system, what used to be the direct emanation of the first principle progressively turns into the crystallized form of a set of normative directions. The law of correspondence thus acts within Magic's reality as an ordering principle, according to

⁶⁵Hermes Trismegistus, *The Emerald Tablet*, translated by Sir I. Newton, CreateSpace, 2017.

which the proliferation of linguistic constructs that goes to create Magic's world (that is, the world as such), has to maintain a form of 'servitude' to the ineffable that animates it. In other words, as the dead element of language wraps itself evermore tightly around the original life that animates it, it becomes all the more important to tailor such linguistic clothing in a way that safeguards the living element within it. The same relationship of 'property' that, according to Max Stirner, characterizes the relationship between the 'Unique One' and its 'names', returns throughout Magic's chain of emanations as the property that each hypostasis has of the following one, back to the ineffable as life, the original proprietor of all.

Translated in less abstract terms, this means that within Magic's reality, the ineffable traverses both the individual as a 'person', his/her immediate creation of objects in the world as 'symbols', but also the complex linguistic structures that s/he goes to create within the social world as places of 'meaning' (*sphota*). Ultimately, everything within Magic's reality-system is a symbol: both oneself as an individual entity, and every single object defined as such, but also – importantly – broader narrative aggregates spanning from one's own existential narrative to societal structures and institutions. The fourth hypostasis thus oversees a process of proliferation of the symbolic form throughout the world, in every single aspect of its constitution. Faithful to its notion of the ineffable as life, Magic's reality-system thus declares the imperative to keep life flowing through the narrowest capillaries of the cultural and social body. Even in the kaleidoscopic freedom to create all sorts of possible linguistic constructions, that befalls every person in their linguistic construction of the world, the imperative remains that of never closing language onto itself. Never reducing a 'thing' to its linguistic dimension, but keeping it always open to its own ineffable dimension, which is, after all, the same 'ineffable as life', that traverses all things.

To express this concept with a more succinct formula, we could say that the product of every level of Magic' cosmogony (so far, the person, the symbol and meaning – since the ineffable itself is in a state of non-*tajalli*) is always structured as a 'centre of the world'. And we could add that this process of turning all entities into 'centres', is perhaps what is most characteristic of Magic's creation of its own reality and of its own world. Indeed, the figure

of *the centre* can be considered as the archetypal incarnation of this present hypostasis.

But what does it mean exactly, to say that everything within Magic's reality-system is a 'centre of the world'? We owe to Mircea Eliade⁶⁶ a particularly in-depth analysis of the symbolism of the 'centre', and his interpretation of this notion will aid us to appreciate this crucial aspect of Magic's cosmologic architecture. In several of his works,⁶⁷ Eliade explores the religious, philosophical and cultural importance of the idea of 'centre' in archaic societies. In doing so, he proceeds by carefully unfolding the main constitutive aspects of this notion, and its most typical realizations in fields spanning from metaphysics, through liturgy to architecture. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade offers a useful summary of his conclusions about the symbolism of the centre.

The architectonic symbolism of the Center may be formulated as follows:

- 1 The Sacred Mountain – where heaven and earth meet – is situated at the centre of the world
- 2 Every temple or palace – and by extension every sacred city or royal residence – is a Sacred Mountain, thus becoming a Center
- 3 Being an *axis mundi* (that is, a cosmic axis or axis of the world), the sacred city or temple is regarded as the meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell. ...

The summit of the cosmic mountain is not only the highest point of earth, it is also the earth's navel, the point at which the Creation began. ... In the *Rg-Veda* (for example X,149), the universe is conceived as spreading from a central point. The

⁶⁶Though we should equally mention René Guénon's work on the symbolism of the centre, especially in his volumes *Symbols of Sacred Science*, Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004, pp. 8–17, and *The Symbolism of the Cross*, Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 1996, pp. 127–32.

⁶⁷See for example, M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996; *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991; *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

creation of man, which answers to the cosmogony, likewise took place at a central point, at the centre of the world.⁶⁸

Again, in his magnum opus *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Eliade further characterizes the idea of the 'centre' as follows:

The symbolism of the 'centre' embraces a number of different ideas: the point of intersection of the cosmic spheres (the channel joining hell and earth; cf. the *bethel* of Jacob § 79 f.); a place that is hierophanic and therefore *real*, a supremely 'creational' place, because the source of all reality and consequently of energy and life is to be found there. Indeed, cosmological traditions even express the symbolism of the centre in terms borrowed from embryology.⁶⁹

One of the things that make Eliade's work particularly fascinating is its extreme wealth of citations and examples taken from a vast array of traditions throughout the world. Unfortunately, due to reasons of space, it won't be possible within the present volume to complement Eliade's conclusion with a recollection of his extensive anthropological material. What we can do, however, is to unpack at least the relevant metaphysical aspects of the idea of the 'centre', both in terms of Eliade's analysis and in reference to the present task of developing a general architecture of Magic's cosmogony and cosmology. In line with most archaic forms of thinking, the idea of the centre combines ritualistic, metaphysical and architectural aspects. A temple or sacred building is built specifically in a place that is supposed to be the centre of the world (for example, around the *omphalos* stone in Delphi, considered to be the navel of the world), yet at the same time it is exactly its definition as sacred, that singles out a certain place as a 'centre'. This circularity returns in the apparently contradictory fact that there is not one, but countless and potentially infinite 'centres'. Every sacred space, according to Eliade's analysis, is a centre, precisely because its sacredness endows it with the quality that is essential to every 'centre': being

⁶⁸M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: or, Cosmos and History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 12 and 16.

⁶⁹M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996, p. 377.

the place traversed by the axis of the world (*axis mundi*), that is, by the axis that connects the dimensions of heaven, earth and hell. Consecration and 'centring' thus appear to go hand in hand, to the point that every house or city built according to proper ritual can and should be considered in itself as another centre of the world.⁷⁰ The notion of centre is thus rooted in that of sacredness, which, in turn, is embodied by the figure of an axis connecting the world's multiple dimensions. In terms of our present work on Magic, Eliade's intuition expresses the fundamental quality of the normative imperative traversing the whole of Magic's reality. Every hypostasis, and everything that exists in Magic's world, is structured as a centre, in that it is always necessarily traversed by an 'axis' connecting the ineffable with the linguistic dimensions of existence. While in the case of Technic's reality this connection was made unnecessary by the absence of any actual multiplicity in its reality – to the point, as we said earlier, that Technic abolishes reality tout court – in Magic's fourth hypostasis it is revealed how the imperative of 'centring' runs through the entire reality-system as its organizational and architectural principle.

References to the sacred are equally appropriate, especially if the sacred is understood in terms of what the German theologian Rudolf Otto defined as the 'numinous'. According to Otto,⁷¹ the sacred as numinous, is a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* ('a terrifying and fascinating mystery'). A force that at once attracts and repels its witness, while remaining shielded in its own ineffable dimension. Within Magic's reality, however, the space of the sacred imposes itself as *the* space par excellence. As noted by Eliade, a centre, that is a sacred space, is 'a place that is hierophanic and therefore *real*'. Likewise, within Magic, full ontological legitimacy – the possibility of being fully 'real' – is granted only to entities that are built as centres, that is, that are traversed by the life of the ineffable. For this reason, most of the creations of Technic's cosmology, inasmuch as they embody the structuring principle of absolute language, do not find any ontological legitimacy within Magic's reality. The notion of the individual as a processor, for example, or of an entity as pure

⁷⁰See *The 'Construction' of the Sacred Space*, in M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996, pp. 371–4.

⁷¹See R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958.

‘stockpiling of productive reserves’, are deemed by Magic as mere – and deadly – fantasy. The normative aspect of any reality-system accounts both for creation and for destruction: the basis, on which certain things are made to emerge within it, is the same upon which others are denied existence. In the case of Magic, the line between ‘meaning’ and ‘noise’ is drawn in reference to the ‘liveliness’ of an entity: hence the fact that most of Technic’s ontological creations don’t find any room in Magic’s reality-system. For individuals currently living within Technic’s regime, this constitutes a call for the reconstruction of their reality that is as *tremendum* as it is *fascinans*. Not everything will be able to move from one system to the other, and the sudden discovery of a living dimension in non-human entities and in inanimate objects as well as in immaterial symbols, for example, would bring forward an unfathomable *mysterium* that might be difficult to approach at first. Likewise, suddenly facing the absolute unreality (as in, their unreality even as conventions) of commonly accepted social institutions, might repel those who invested in them their whole presence in the world. Every sacred space is surrounded by a limit – as the guardians or the labyrinth surrounding a treasure, in several mythological traditions – and not everything will be able to pass this threshold.

Fifth hypostasis: Paradox

We have now reached the last hypostasis in Magic’s cosmogonic chain of emanations. At this point, Magic’s reality finds its final shape, while the original force of its first principle – the ineffable as life – is ultimately exhausted. As it was the case with Technic’s last hypostasis, this is effectively the sunset of a cosmogonic force, yet it is also presented as the moment of its perfection – with a view to relaunch the entire process all over again.

Over the course of the preceding three hypostases, we have considered the cosmogonic spectacle before us as a progressive emanation out of the first ineffable principle, of an ever-thicker linguistic dimension. As the emanated flow became stronger, its original source started to appear increasingly feeble. Thus, our notion of the process of emanation resembled that of a fountain, whose nozzle is eventually occluded by the limescale left by the water flowing out of it. Yet, at the level of the fifth hypostasis,

this understanding of Magic's cosmogonic emanation is suddenly overturned. While the living force of the ineffable finally sinks under an ocean of language, Magic resolves its cosmogonic exhaustion by presenting what appeared to be a process emanation, as in fact a form of self-manifestation. Rather than a stream flowing out of an original source, the development of Magic's cosmogony is revealed at this stage as a progressive self-manifestation of the original principle – hypostasis after hypostasis, unveiling after unveiling. In other words, the fifth hypostasis presents its own twilight, not as the consequence of language smothering its ineffable source, but as a manifestation of the fullness of the ineffable – which always-already included language as a part of itself. According to the perspective offered at this level, language always lay dormant within the ineffable, but only at this stage it is finally revealed in its true cosmological place. As it was the case with Technic, where the principle of absolute language re-appropriated its final obstacle by turning it into the very justification of the entire process – in the form of 'possibility' – so Magic's system uses its cosmogonic swansong to reclaim language as an internal dimension to ineffability. Likewise, death is proclaimed to take place *within* life, so that what appears to be life's asphyxiation under its own dead product is in fact a dynamic internal to life itself. This sudden and final twist accounts for the definition of Magic's fifth and last hypostasis, as that of the Paradox.

In the preceding hypostasis, we looked at how 'meaning' was regulated by the principle of the 'law of correspondence'. In the present case of the 'paradox', we can identify its constitutive principle as that *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites – a term first coined by the fifteenth-century German theologian Nicholas of Cusa in his 1440 book *De Docta Ignorantia*⁷²) which so often recurs in alchemical theory and virtually in all esoteric traditions. Reaching an understanding of the coincidence of opposite, typically constitutes the pinnacle of the esoteric and alchemical *opus*: it is the accomplishment of the 'work' undertaken by those who trace the ineffable within the world of language, or the indistinct within the world's myriad distinctions, only to realize that ultimately the ineffable was always-already present within language itself. From

⁷²Nicholas of Cusa, *Of Learned Ignorance*, New York, NY: Hyperion Press, 1979.

this perspective, Bhartrhari's theory of the *Shabda-Brahma* also acquires a more complete and clearer sense. The paradox functions as a form of 'resolution through integration', like the notion of possibility functioned within Technic as a form of 'resolution through simulation'.

But how can it be that two opposite principles can exist in a state of compresence and integration? Wouldn't this amount to a blatant infringement of the law of non-contradiction? And, in the interest of preserving reality, wouldn't a coincidence of opposites (such as existence and essence), lead to yet another collapse of the very possibility of reality as such? The answer to these questions is itself paradoxical. *Para-doxa*: unlike the commonly held opinion – that is to say, unlike whatever can be communicated in the way in which opinions are communicated.⁷³ As we shall see in the next chapter (in the section on initiation), paradoxical understanding can be achieved through a form of 'direct apprehension' that only in part falls within the grasp of descriptive language. Nonetheless, as with anything ineffable, while allegorical language fails to convey such an incommunicable object, it is still possible to 'point' towards it through symbolic language. Continuing with the same line of architectural metaphors presented in the previous hypostases, we can hint towards the nature of this metaphysical paradox, by pointing towards the architectural feat of the Roman arch. One

⁷³On the peculiar value of the paradoxical form, see Pavel Florensky's comments on Origen's theory of the Second Coming (in which even the damned are eventually saved): 'If you ask me: will there be eternal torments? I will answer: yes. But if you ask me: will there be a universal reintegration in blessedness? I will answer again: yes. ... In the face of antinomy faith is necessary, given that it is impossible to submit it to reason. It's a yes and a no, and this is the best proof of its religious significance' (P. Florensky, *La Colonna e il Fondamento della Verità*, Milano: Rusconi, 1974, p. 309 – my translation from the Italian edition). See also Massimo Cacciari's comment to these lines: 'That the *eschaton* should have to be thought antinomically, much more than a sign, ... perhaps represents the sign of the profoundly ir-religious form of this "religion." The redemption it promises cannot be attained through any method or any univocal and clearly predictable path. Its truth cannot be defined nomothetically. ... Any attempt to rationalize it – that is, to render it univocal – betrays it. It remains concealed in the pure possible of the gratuitous communicating-participating of all dimensions of being – a harmony that is, like the Platonic Good, beyond every determination of being' (M. Cacciari, *The Necessary Angel*, translated by M. E. Vatter, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994, p. 82).

of the key developments in the architectural revolution of the age, the Roman arch consists in a series of heavy blocks of solid stone that are placed in a semicircular pattern, so to be able, not only to balance each other, but to sustain the weight of further architecture above them. Each stone, by itself, would require firm support to sustain its own weight. Yet, when placed together in the form of the semicircular Roman arch, it is exactly the weight of each stone that counter-balances that of all others. Lightness is achieved through a combination of weights. A principle is achieved through its opposite, as if the opposite was already contained within the same. Such is the structure of the paradox presented as the principle of Magic's fifth and final hypostasis.⁷⁴

The crucial point here is that opposing forces and principles can coexist paradoxically, not by annihilating each other, but by combining together. Of course, this is not an instance of pluralism, but rather a case of coincidence of opposites – where the keyword is 'coincidence', which is unlike both 'difference' and 'identity'. Within the structure of the Roman arch, opposing weights achieve an overall lightness, not because they are all identical (if that was so, they would only add to each other), or merely different from each other (in that case, each of them would require special support), but because they 'fall together', as per the Latin *co-incidere*. Their 'fall' – in Gnosticism, a frequent term to refer to existence in the world⁷⁵ – is simultaneous, thus constituting a single event. Yet, their singularity as one event doesn't do without their respective singularities as individual entities. Within Magic's reality,

⁷⁴Compare this with the final stage in the Sufi path, *baqa* (permanence). As explained well by Toshihiko Izutsu: 'At the stage of *fana* the pseudo-ego or the relative self has completely dissolved into nothingness. At the next stage [*baqa*], man resuscitated out of nothingness, completely transformed into an absolute Self. What is resuscitated outwardly is the same old man, but he is a man who has once transcended his own determination ... the world of multiplicity appears again with all its infinitely rich colors. Since, however, he has already cast off his own determination, the world of multiplicity he perceives is also beyond all determinations. The new worldview is comparable to the worldview which a drop of water might have if it could suddenly awaken to the fact that being an individual self-subsistent drop of water has been but a pseudo-determination which it has imposed upon itself' (T. Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Existence*, Petaling Jaya: Islamic Book Trust, 2007, pp. 16–17).

⁷⁵For an analysis of the Gnostic religion and philosophy, see the as-yet-unsurpassed H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963.

happening and existing are not identical concepts, although they ‘fall together’: linguistic presence and ineffable existence are distinct facets of integral existence, yet they ‘fall together’ to compose it. This appropriately paradoxical statement finds its typical example in ‘hierophanic’ situations that, according to Eliade, open up a sacred dimension within the profane world. It is worth repeating this brief quote from Eliade:

Any object whatever may paradoxically become a hierophany, a receptacle of the sacred, while still participating in its own cosmic environment (a sacred stone, e.g., remains nevertheless a stone along with other stones).⁷⁶

Hierophanies make apparent the coincidence of opposites that is at the heart of Magic’s fifth hypostasis, that is, of the complete form of Magic’s world. A sacred stone is at the same time sacred and profane, just like Jesus Christ is at the same time God and Man. Applied to the metaphysics and ethics of Magic’s world this entails the ontological legitimacy of both the world’s ineffable dimension, and of its linguistic one. In the Roman arch, one side of the semicircle achieves lightness thanks to the coincident weight of the opposing side, with the central keystone regulating their interaction. Likewise, ineffability achieves lightness through the coincident impact of language, with the overarching form of Magic acting as the keystone. ‘Lightness’, within this perspective, amounts to the very emergence of ‘reality’ as such – that is, as a space where worldly existence, action and imagination are both possible and authentic. If we compare the paradoxical lightness of Magic’s world, with the unbearable weight of Technic’s world of ‘possibility’, we can appreciate the therapeutic quality of Magic’s entire cosmogonic project. Whereas Technic’s ‘possibility’ attempts to relieve its own weight through an endless *extension* of its limits – hence its lust for infinite growth – Magic’s ‘paradox’ seeks to resolve this issue through *intensive* harmony. As we discussed earlier in the book, the therapeutic dimension of Magic’s reconstruction of reality is at the basis of the entire project presented in this book – that is,

⁷⁶M. Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 84–5.

imagining and detailing a reality-system that is alternative to the annihilating one which is currently enforced onto the world by the regime of Technic. It is more than fitting, then, to conclude the cycle of hypostasis in Magic's cosmogony, by presenting as its final archetypal incarnation (though with a few caveats), the figure of the *Self* as it is understood by Carl Gustav Jung.

The idea of the *Self* recurs throughout Jung's entire written legacy. In the present context, however, we shall look at it primarily through the angle developed in his alchemical texts, contained in the thirteenth volume of his collected works. In the last fifteen years of his life, Jung engaged in a careful study of the symbolism and philosophy associated with the Hermetic and alchemical traditions. At the heart of his interpretation of the alchemical *opus*, lay the unshakeable belief that the materials discussed in the alchemical texts should be understood as symbols, or archetypes of the ineffable populations living in the depths of the individual and collective unconscious. As we briefly mentioned in the section 'What is Reality?', Jung's exclusive focus on the psyche differs importantly from the perspective of our analysis of Magic's reality-system. Nonetheless, it is inevitable that metaphysical terminology shall differ (even substantially) when discussing ineffable objects. While Jung understands the objects of alchemy as psychic archetypes, and a Perennialist thinker like Titus Burkhardt sees them in Neoplatonic terms as functions of a cosmic consciousness, the present volume wishes to put forward an interpretation of the symbolic forms of alchemy (including their re-elaboration by Jung) within Magic's particular metaphysics. While Jung interpreted symbols belonging to the esoteric tradition as pointing towards the psychic archetype of the self, here we shall look at the psychic construct of the self, as an archetype pointing towards the forms of Magic cosmogony. Thus, we shall approach the notion of the *Self* as the archetypal incarnation of Magic's fifth hypostasis, that is as a figure in which the coincidence between the opposites of ineffability and language, existence and essence, is finally realized – and, at the same time, as the place in which Magic's cosmogonic force dies and restarts anew.

Having clarified these distinctions, let us see how we can interpret the *Self* as the archetypal incarnation of Paradox. According to Jung's theory, the *Self* represents the state of psychic totality and integration, in which both conscious and unconscious functions 'fall together', *co-incidere*. Far from being a 'given' with which

every person is naturally endowed, the Self is thus to be understood as a difficult and precious conquest, that can be brought about only through a strenuous work at the deepest level of one's psyche. The work of bringing about the self passes through a number of stages, and crucially through a confrontation with the archetypes that populate a person's psyche. Archetypes, according to Jung, are 'the introspectively recognizable form[s] of a *priori* psychic orderedness';⁷⁷ furthermore, 'as a *priori* ideal forms, [they] are as much found as invented: they are *discovered* inasmuch as one did not know about their unconscious autonomous existence, and *invented* inasmuch as their presence was inferred from analogous conceptual structures'.⁷⁸ The Self itself can be understood as an archetype, which is in turn symbolized by a number of symbolic figures, spanning from the mandala to alchemy's 'philosophical tree': 'if a mandala may be described as a symbol of the self, seen in cross section, then the tree would represent a profile view of it: the self, depicted as a process of growth.'⁷⁹

Read through the lens of Magic's cosmology, the Self stands for a state of metaphysical integration, in which both language and ineffability 'fall together'. Of course, it is always the case throughout Magic's system that whenever there is language, there is also ineffability: what really changes here is that these two principles are found at the level of the worldly event (hence our reference to 'falling', in a Gnostic sense as the way to enter the world). At this final stage in Magic's cosmogony, the ineffable has already produced a complete, linguistic world – a world that can be easily navigated through the classificatory and descriptive means of allegorical language. Nonetheless, thanks to the normative streak that structured every linguistic utterance as symbolic – while also allowing for a subaltern allegorical dimension – the ineffable is able to inhabit every small portion of that world that it has created. Indeed, from the perspective of this final hypostasis, it can do so because the world of language is always-already internal to the ineffable dimension of existence – so that the also rigid normativity

⁷⁷C. G. Jung, *Synchronicity*, London: Routledge 2008, p. 140.

⁷⁸Jung, *Synchronicity*, p. 59.

⁷⁹C. G. Jung, *The Philosophical Tree*, in *The Collected Works*, vol. XIII, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 253.

enforced so far should be seen as the structure of the ineffable's own inner architecture.

If this was a book written by a Romantic or Decadent writer, we could now claim that the world, as it emerges at this stage, is simply the world as it is seen through the eyes of a poet: truly, a *forêt de symboles*⁸⁰ (forest of symbols). While at the first stage of Magic's cosmology, language lay dormant at the heart of the ineffable, here it is the ineffable that inhabits the heart of every single linguistic construct – not merely as its potential, but as the force of which every possibility is a form of actualization. This is indeed a forest, but it could be equally described as a garden – following a tradition that stretches from Babylonian and Persian antiquity, through Shia Islam, all the way to Renaissance garden architecture. To close this final hypostasis in the series, and to cast a final glance at the world of Magic, as it stands in its finished form, let us consider for a moment in what sense we can call this kind of world, a 'garden'.

As it is known, garden high-culture dates back at least to the age of the Chaldean Empire (7th–6th BCE), and underwent its first spectacular flourishing at the time of the Achaemenid Empire (6th–4th BCE). In these Babylonian/Persian cultures, the garden enjoyed a cultural status that far exceeded the field of hedonism, entertainment or agriculture. A Persian garden was a *Paradeisos*, to follow Xenophon's first Greek transliteration of the original Persian term *Pairidaeza*.⁸¹ As such, a garden was closer to an earthly 'Paradise', than to a park. A Babylonian/Persian garden reproduced the structure of the universe, with its four rivers and its exact ordering of the primordial elements. It was a living picture of the cosmos, and thus an active fragment of the original cosmogony. Together with the word *Paradeisos*, this notion of garden entered the Greek world and, through it, also Roman culture. As we see in surviving Roman villas such as that of Hadrian in Tivoli, the garden remains through the centuries a place in which the sacred meets the profane, or, more accurately, in which the profane is sacralized

⁸⁰Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondances*: 'La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers / Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles; / L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles / Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.'

⁸¹See Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, I, iii, 14, in Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, Books 5–8, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

through a particular mixing of nature and art. The arrangement of artefacts and a delicate architectural balance – holding together what is ‘artificial’ and what is ‘natural’, without sacrificing either force – allowed for the sacred to shine through a space that would otherwise be merely profane. A garden revealed the sacredness that always lies dormant at the heart of every material compound – but which requires a specific symbolic form to be perceptible to human eyes and heart. This same structure surfaced again in Italy at the time of the Renaissance, when gardens were designed as miniature *cosmoi* (plural of *cosmos*, the universe).⁸² A garden of the age typically contained a part that was farmed for fruit and vegetables, a part that was shaped by the geometry of rational architecture and a final part, the *bosco*, which was left in a state of wilderness, dotted by statues of pagan gods. We can interpret the first of these three parts as the allegory of the applied reason, the second as that of pure reason, and the latter, the *bosco*, as the symbol of the ineffable in its earliest stages of manifestation. There, it was precisely the combination of ineffable wilderness and perfectly crafted artistic objects that allowed the integral universe to emerge. The similarity between this cosmological view and that discussed in the current section of this book won’t be lost on the reader.

But it is the Shia literature of early Islam that offers us what is possibly the most accurate interpretation of gardens as the mirror of a particular type of cosmology. In a *hadith* (saying) attributed to the Prophet Mohammed, it is written: ‘Between my pulpit [*minbar*] and my tomb, there opens a garden from the gardens of Paradise.’⁸³ This *hadith* of the Prophet presents the ‘garden’ as that space that opens up between the ‘pulpit’ and the ‘tomb’ – yet, as Henry Corbin warned us, ‘needless to say, this saying is not to be understood in a literal, exoteric sense (*zahir*)’.⁸⁴ The pulpit (*minbar*) typically represents the place of the law, that is, the most dogmatic aspects of religion. In the parlance of this volume, it represents the linguistic realm, in which things fall obediently into

⁸²See J. Godwin, *The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance*, Boston, MA: Weiser Books, 2005, pp. 153–80.

⁸³As reported in W. Diem and M. Schöller, *The Living and the Dead in Islam: Studies in Arabic Epitaphs*, vol. 3, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004, p. 49, and H. Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 78.

⁸⁴H. Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 78.

communicable and productive categories – to borrow Heidegger's language, the realm where things are *ready-to-hand*. Conversely, the 'tomb', as a place of darkness, stands for the realm in which things withdraw into their original darkness, becoming unavailable for any instrumental use. In the parlance of this volume, the tomb symbolizes the impenetrably ineffable dimension of life – or, to say it in the words of Ibn Arabi, the first stage (*hadrah*) of non-manifestation (non-*tajalli*) in which the Absolute (*al-Haqq*) stands before any possibility of conceptualization. But what is this 'garden' that stretches between pure ineffability and perfectly functional language, between existence and essence? This space in-between, this 'garden', is nothing less than 'reality' itself – reality precisely as it is produced through Magic's cosmogony.

This claim might strike the attentive reader as circular to our earlier definition of reality, from the section 'What is reality?' immediately before this chapter. Indeed, this should not be seen as a mere mistake or coincidence. Magic builds its world precisely so to allow reality to emerge – a form of reality in which linguistic entities can exist and flourish on the basis of the ineffable life that traverses them. Yet, this particular form of reality hints back towards its original principle as the necessary precondition to take place. There are two aspects to this situation that should be noted here. First is the aspect of circularity within the book. At the beginning of this volume and also of this chapter, it was made clear how the project that we were about to undertake was essentially therapeutic in its nature. Our primary concern was to show how it is possible to imagine an alternative reality-system that was capable of reactivating that space in which living individuals can live, act and flourish, free from any annihilating reduction to their linguistic dimension (and thus, to their economic, productive, ethnic or identitarian dimension). Magic's system was built with this aim in mind, and the apparent circularity between the endpoint of Magic's cosmogony and the premises that lead to its very imagination, is to be considered as revealing of the projectual nature of our thought experiment. Second, we should address the circularity that takes place within Magic's cosmogony itself. Already in the section on Technic, we encountered this movement that leads the final hypostasis to look back towards the first one and to reignite the cosmogonic process. Magic is not different in this respect. Just as it finally fades, the original cosmogonic force lays down the conditions that will lead

to its resurrection – in a fashion that presents the first principle as ‘necessary’. The dying light of the ineffable creates a world which is able to remain alive, only inasmuch as it continuously brings back to life its original principle.

Upper and lower limits: Double negation and *Deus absconditus*

As with every cosmology, Magic’s architecture is also defined by its overall limits, particularly by those that shape its first and last hypostasis. We shall encounter these two limits as the *Deus Absconditus* at its lowermost edge, and Double Negation at its uppermost.

Let us begin with Double Negation, defining what lies ‘behind’ or ‘before’ the first hypostasis of the ineffable as life. It might strike the reader as a little surprising that there might be something limiting from ‘behind’ even the apparently primordial field of ineffability. Yet, we should take this limit as referring specifically to the ineffable in its position of principle of a reality-system, rather than to the ineffable in its entirely autonomous form. In other words, Double Negation here defines the point before which the ineffable as life does not stretch – but only if we consider it, as we’re doing here, in its function as the first hypostasis of Magic’s cosmogony. Double Negation refers to a glitch within our (human) concept of ineffability, which presents the roots of the absolute ‘something’ of the *atman/brahman*, as if they edged on a field of pure nothingness. Mentioning the ineffable as life here in terms of *atman/brahman* is not a just a shorthand, since this distinction between pure existence and pure nothingness, has been a point of endless contention between the Hinduist schools – to whom we owe the notion of *atman* and *brahman* – and the *Mahayana* Buddhist schools of the Great Vehicle, who denounced the apparent existence of something as an illusory veil cast over the ‘emptiness’ (*sunyata*) that constitutes the ultimate ‘reality body’ (*Dharmakaya*).⁸⁵ However, rather than

⁸⁵With regard to the notion of ultimate ontological emptiness, see in particular the second/third century CE, *Mahayana/Madhyamaka*, Indian philosopher Nagarjuna’s

looking at this issue through the angle of Indian metaphysics, we shall consider it through the lens of a particular epistemological concept proposed by the already mentioned twelfth-century Persian philosopher Suhrawardi.

Suhrawardi intervened in the debate of his age over the nature of God, stating a position that differed both from that of the so-called apophatic (or negative) theologians, and to that of their cataphatic (or positive) opponents. According to apophatic theology, it is impossible to capture God's essence through the means of language. Whatever we say about God, even attributing to him the most exalted and triumphant attributes, constitutes a form of blasphemy in the eyes of apophatic theologians. To them, saying that God is 'great' or 'good' – or even that He 'exists' – is a crass attempt at reducing His absolutely transcendent nature. We have already briefly encountered this form of negative theology in the words of Scotus Eriugena, mentioned earlier as an introduction to the thought of Max Stirner. Conversely, cataphatic theologians claimed that what is truly blasphemous is their opponents' attempt to rob God of His attributes. How can we say that God is not good, not great and even that He does not exist? Cataphatic theology insists that God indeed possesses all positive attributes, though to such an extreme degree that they are incomparable with what we can appreciate from our merely human perspective. Suhrawardi's position came to break this apparent dichotomy between negative and positive theology. According to Suhrawardi, both positions were partly right and partly wrong. Negative theologians were correct to stress the absolutely transcendent nature of God: He truly is behind the grasp of language or the limited reach of attributes. Nonetheless, positive theologians were also correct to state that, if attributes belong to anybody, they certainly do all the more so to God. Suhrawardi thus proposed Double Negation as a way to characterize God in such a

considered by some as the inventor of the concept of *sunyata* (see C. W. Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamaka*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989). For the differences between the ontology of Advaita Vedanta and of Mahayana Buddhism, see R. D. Karmarkar's introduction to the *Gaudapada Karika*, one of the founding texts of Advaita Vedanta (see R. D. Karmarkar, *Introduction*, in Gaudapada, *Gaudapada Karika*, edited and translated by R. D. Karmarkar, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1953, pp. XXXIX–XL).

way that He wouldn't be robbed of His transcendence nor of His immanence.⁸⁶ All we can truly say about God, so claimed Suhrawardi, is that He is not-not good, not-not great, that He does not-not exist and so on. By adding a second negation to the one proposed by apophatic theology, we limit the *hybris* of thinking that negation is capable of conveying God's essence, while also safeguarding His claim over the field of language. God's essence is at such a level of transcendence, that it goes beyond transcendence itself.

We have, of course, already encountered a similar claim in our earlier discussion of Magic's first hypostasis, particularly when we mentioned Ibn Arabi's notion of a stage of the Absolute that is before any possibility of manifestation. What is different here, however, is how this notion constitutes an epistemological glitch, within an understanding of the roots of the ineffable (and thus of life) as stretching into Double Negation. In what way is it possible to distinguish the absolute 'something' of ineffable life, from a radical form of nothingness? Suhrawardi's Double Negation is a paradoxical construct that would fit well at the level of the fifth hypostasis – that is at the level of Magic's accomplished 'world' – yet if we apply it to the original principle of the cosmogony, it risks shattering our already feeble understanding of it. It is as if, before existence, and even before ineffable absolute existence, there was an original kernel that is radically different from any understanding of existence whatsoever. In other words, it is as if the first hypostasis itself was the product of a previous and entirely undetectable one that somehow 'uttered' it – in the same way that the first hypostasis utters the second. If the ineffable as life is the original silence from which the first word emerges, it seems that there is something even before it that, so to say, utters silence. This is the uppermost limit of Magic's chain of emanations – a disquieting limit to be sure, since it exceeds into a field that cannot be apprehended, not even negatively.⁸⁷

⁸⁶Suhrawardi's notion of Double Negation should be distinguished from the Sufi notion of *fana' al-fana* ('double annihilation'), which is a form of Double Negation applied to a person's own self-identification (see M. H. Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*, Albany, NY: SUNY, 1992, pp. 156–8).

⁸⁷We could liken the relationship between these two aspects of the ineffable dimension of existence – one utterly transcendent, one immanent to the world at work within it – to the relationship between God and Mohammad in its cosmic function, as

This form of extreme escape even from negative reason – in psychological terms, something akin to an unconscious of the unconscious – returns in a different guise at the lowermost edge of Magic's reality-system, this time in the form of a *Deus Absconditus*, a 'hidden God'. The figure of the hidden God (or 'lazy God', *Deus otiosus*) recurs throughout the history of religion and mythology, since the time of the earliest surviving records of the belief system of archaic societies. A number of 'ascension myths' found in regions stretching from Siberia to the Amazon forest, tell the story of an original divinity who at some point decided to abandon the world, cutting the access path that used to connect Earth to the Heavens. Ever since that rupture, only a small number of exceptionally gifted spiritual people (typically, the shamans or those belonging to the priestly caste) have been able through complex ritual to climb to the top of the 'cosmic tree' and to converse again with the gods. In the case of our present analysis, of course, the figure of the hidden God has to be understood philosophically rather than religiously. At the end of Magic's cosmogony, we encountered the stage in which the world finally emerges in its complete form – as a paradoxical combination of language and ineffability. We briefly hinted at the circularity of Magic's cosmogony – and of all philosophical cosmogonies – and at how, having reached the final point of exhaustion of the first principle, the whole reality-system leaps back to its original source. Yet, this process is far from being automatic. Nestled within language, ineffable life always threatens to disappear entirely and to leave the world as 'dead'. Its presence is never fully granted once and for all, and the world itself has to constantly revive its own internal life – in the same way that a body has to continue breathing in the oxygen that keeps dissolving

first conceptualized by the eleventh–twelfth-century Persian mystic Al-Ghazali. According to Ghazali (in Al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1998) – and to most Sufi schools since – Muhammad's cosmic function is to be the *muta* ('the one who is obeyed') and to act as God's working principle in the world – while God's absolute transcendence has removed Him altogether, so to speak, from the world and from ontology. Whenever a mystically inclined person experiences God's presence and action in the world, it is not God directly that they experience, but God's manifestation through Mohammad's cosmic function as the *muta* (see A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 223).

in its lungs. Like breathed-in air, the most apparent movement of the ineffable at the level of the fifth hypostasis, is one of constant disappearance. 'God' keeps leaving the world, and the world has to endlessly attempt to bring it back within itself. If it was ever to stop seeking its life, the world itself would turn into a stockpiling of dead stuff – into the sort of compound that is 'actualised chaos', devoid both of order and of potential. Under this light, the alchemical notion of *opus* (work) acquires a clearer quality, as it refers to the interminability of the process through which a world is constantly made to emerge. The world as a Self requires the same level of constant work attention as that demanded by a cosmological garden. The cosmogony of Magic is thus never concluded, it's never closed onto itself.

The work of constant maintenance that it requires follows the same relentless rhythm of ritual action. The particular conception of ritual and sacrifice presented in the Vedas will help us to grasp the nature of this endless work through which the world keeps reconstructing its own reality – and it will also allow us to conclude this chapter. Roberto Calasso's book *Ardor*, a magisterial work on the role of sacrifice in the Vedas, can guide us through this brief exploration. In a section dedicated to analysing why, in the Vedas, the Gods themselves have to perform rituals and sacrifices, Calasso discusses the ultimate function that all rituals and sacrifices have in Vedic culture. Rituals allow the world to start afresh each time, by reintegrating within it all necessary forces and principles – visible or invisible, linguistic or ineffable. Following the Vedas, Calasso identifies the minimal ritualistic unit in the gesture of the 'libation', which is capable of synthesizing in the simplest possible form the same essence of the most complex rituals.

There is one gesture that inextricably unites the whole Indo-European world. It is the gesture of the libation. The pouring of a liquid into a fire that flares up, destroying a valuable or an ordinary substance in the flame. ... Violence – which always leaves some mark, however much one tries to hide it – is absent here. But destruction is present, the irreversible yielding of something to an invisible presence. This action of abandoning something is called *tyaga* – and is often presented as the essence of sacrifice, of every sacrifice. Or otherwise: as its prerequisite. It is the gesture that indicates someone is approaching an invisible

presence – showing submission or at least the willingness to *give way*.⁸⁸

Calasso then proceeds to identify exactly what a libation ‘does’, that is in what sense we can understand ritualistic action to be effective.

‘For whichever divinity a person draws this libation, that divinity, being seized by this libation, fulfils the wish for which he draws it’. This sentence appears in the passage that most clearly expresses the acrobatic play on the word *graha* throughout the *Shatapatha Brahmana*. Usually translated as ‘libation’, *graha* is always related to the verb *grah-*, ‘to grasp’ – in a similar way as the German word *begreifen*, ‘comprehend’ (from which *Begriff*, concept), is related to *greifen*, ‘grasp’. ... The libation is a way of grasping (of understanding) the divinity. And from it the divinity feels bound, grasped. This also happens with names: they are our libations to reality. They are used to grasp it.⁸⁹

Rituals, as read by Calasso, thus bear a striking resemblance with the endless reconstruction of reality that takes place at the lowermost border of Magic’s fifth and final hypostasis. As the original reality-making force of the ineffable exhausts its energy, in the task of creating an actual ‘world’, this world and the entities that populate it start to engage in endless ritual action geared to rekindle the ineffable emanation that produced them in the first place. Beyond magic’s world and reality, so to say at its southernmost border, lies the looping movement of the ineffable being breathed in and out of the world. This movement bears a certain similarity to so-called ‘occasionalist’ positions, according to whom any occurrence taking place in the world is ultimately to be attributed to God’s direct intervention. An occasionalist philosopher such as the eleventh-century Iranian thinker Al-Ghazali,⁹⁰ for example, claimed that the world itself and each of its most minute details, are constantly

⁸⁸R. Calasso, *Ardor*, London: Penguin, 2014, page unspecified from the kindle edition – equivalent to pp. 243–4 in the original Italian first edition.

⁸⁹Calasso, *Ardor*, page unspecified from the kindle edition – equivalent to pp. 247–8 in the original Italian first edition.

⁹⁰See Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers (Tahāfut al-falāsifa)*, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002.

recreated by God at every instant. If such endless creation was ever to stop, concludes Al-Ghazali, the entire world would suddenly vanish. Likewise, at the southernmost edge of Magic's cosmology we find an abyss of precariousness, in which the life of the world – that is, its being 'alive' – depends on a relentless work, aimed firstly at 'remembering' the ineffable, and then at reinforcing the symbolic form of the world of language, to allow the ineffable to shine through it. Magic's reality, understood as the all-encompassing 'Self' of the world, is thus akin to the 'gold' (*aurum*) sought by Hermetic alchemists; unlike the *aurum vulgare* ('vulgar gold') that is exchanged on the market, this *aurum philosophorum* ('gold of the philosopher') is never created once and for all, but needs constant work to be created over and over again.⁹¹ Within this perspective, metaphysics itself becomes a form of gardening.

Conclusion

In the course of this chapter, we have seen Magic's cosmogony unfold through five hypostatic levels. As with Technic, Magic's creation of reality began with a first principle, the ineffable as life, and ended with the accomplished form of its world, the paradox. The passage from the first to the last level in Magic's cosmogony, marked a passage from a state of utter ineffability, absolute existence and pure life, to one in which ineffability and language, existence and essence, life and death are deeply intertwined. This passage took the form of an emanation of symbolic language out the ineffable that affirmed the primacy of ineffable existence over linguistic essence, while not denying legitimacy to the latter. It is precisely through this affirmation of the compresence of existence and essence – though hierarchically ordered – that Magic's cosmogony allows 'reality' to take place once again. As discussed in the intermissions that preceded this chapter, reality always emerges as that world-making space which stretches between the limit-concepts of existence and essence; while Technic entirely denied the former principle, thus leading to a collapse of reality, Magic is capable of retaining both.

⁹¹See T. Burckhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2006, pp. 82–3, 182–95.

In this, consists Magic's 'reconstruction of reality' – while the particular modulations of these two parameters (i.e. the hierarchical order between existence and essence) constitute the specific brand of reality that characterizes Magic's reality-system and its world.

In the following chapter, we shall look at Magic's world, no longer in its cosmological dimension, but through the eyes of an individual inhabiting it – just like we did in Chapter 1, in reference to Technic's world. As we approach the next step in our analysis of the reality-making force of Magic, let us consider one final issue that connects like a bridge our reading so far of Magic's cosmogony, with the existential reading that shall follow. This is the issue of the relationship between the fundamental principles of Magic's reality-system, and the 'world' that they go to create. Particularly, it is the question of whether Magic considers its core reality-principle, ineffable existence, as transcendent or immanent to its world as it is existentially experienced by an individual. We shall begin by briefly considering an alternative (though close in many other respects) interpretation of 'magic', as it was put forward by the great Russian theologian and philosopher, Pavel Florensky.⁹²

In his 1908 address to the Moscow Academy of Theology, Pavel Florensky put forward the claim that the roots of Platonism are to be found in the realm of magic.

Asking ourselves 'where does Platonism come from?', we are not seeking to trace the historical influences that have determined its birth. ... Rather, we should interpret the question 'from where?' in the sense of: 'from what elements of consciousness?' ... If you agree with me to pose the problem in these terms, my answer will be clear and simple: 'it comes from *magic*.'⁹³

⁹²Merely for reasons of space, in the present volume we shall not properly engage with the wealth of Florensky's thought. It is nonetheless certainly worth exploring it in depth, since it represents one of the pinnacles of twentieth-century philosophy. Unfortunately, very little of his work has been translated into English. The interested (anglophone) reader might want to see in particular P. Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004; and P. Florensky, *Iconostasis*, Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996.

⁹³P. Florensky, *The Universal Roots of Idealism* – my translation from the Italian edition, P. Florenskij, *Realtà e Mistero*, Milano: SE, 2013, p. 19.

He then proceeded to argue his claim, by lyrically describing the magic experience of nature that Russian peasants – supposedly – still entertained at his time. According to Florenksy, their experience coincided with the founding existential experience that was at the origin of Platonism.

Anything over which the eye rests, everything has its own hidden meaning; it has a double life, a substance that is ‘other’ and over-empirical. Everything partakes to *another* world, and such *other* world leaves its mark on everything.⁹⁴

Here, perhaps, lies the greatest difference between a Platonic understanding of magic as a means to transcend the world, and the understanding of Magic that is developed in this volume. While Florensky presents magic in reference to ‘another world’ with which magic can connect us, this volume suggests instead that Magic is a world-making force that allows us to be at the same time *inside* the world, and *outside* from any world. Magic, as it is described in this book, differs from Platonism in that it doesn’t suggest a hyperuranian ‘world beyond this world’, where the ‘truth’ authentically lies. More Neoplatonically, it suggests instead that within the world, there lies a dimension that altogether escapes both worldliness and truth, thus transcending the very notion of transcendence.

Yet, this presence of ineffable existence within the world, shouldn’t be taken as the sign of a merely immanentist position. Magic’s cosmology cannot be reduced to the formula *Deus Sive Natura* (God or Nature).⁹⁵ According to Magic, although ineffable existence (that is, life) can be found within the linguistically built world, such linguistic world is ultimately distinct from its ineffable source. Ineffable existence precedes linguistic essence,⁹⁶ and the question of whether the former can be truly located within the latter (i.e. if ineffable life is entirely within the linguistic world), is upturned by Magic’s claim that the ultimate form of localization,

⁹⁴Florensky, *The Universal Roots of Idealism*.

⁹⁵B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, London: Penguin, 1996, p. 118.

⁹⁶In this sense, the present account can be interpreted as broadly part of the ‘existentialist’ tradition – particularly in its ancient, Islamic version.

'here', belongs to ineffable existence alone. To essence, belongs the relative form of localization, 'there'. The two concepts produce different forms of metaphysical geography, and thus are irreducible to one common geographical denomination. Both 'immanence' and 'transcendence' are elements of descriptive language that can only in part find a home in Magic's reality-system. As it surpasses the notion of transcendence, so Magic also surpasses that of immanence. Its world is at the same time a world and no world at all, it is both language and silence, unmeasurable existence and limited presence, indistinctness and essence. It is unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity, where the two terms are simultaneously fused and irreducible to each other. In other words, it is reality in the form of a paradox.

CHAPTER FOUR

Magic's world

Outside within

This book is composed like a foldable mirror. The two central chapters are specular to each other, like the two that open and close the volume. While Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the internal architecture of the two opposing cosmogonic forces, Technic and Magic, Chapters 1 and 4 look at the marks that these two forces impress upon the world and on our existential experience within it.

During our discussion of life under Technic's regime, in Chapter 1, we briefly mentioned Emanuele Severino's idea that the shape imposed by Technic onto the world transcends specific political doctrines. According to Severino, systems as different as American-style Capitalism and Soviet Communism, are both operative under the same set of constraints (metaphysical and ethical) that constitute the shape of Technic's cosmology. Indeed, what turns a cosmogonic 'form' into a 'force' is exactly its imposition of a 'set of constraints' onto a world's possible ethics and metaphysics. A cosmogonic force acts as a frame, as a set of limits to what can possibly exist in the world, what can possibly be done, what good can possibly be pursued, etc. In this sense, each cosmogonic force – Technic, Magic and so on – acts as the ground zero of a certain form that power can take. Going with the definition of power suggested by Italian philosopher Franco 'Bifo' Berardi:

I call *power* the selections (and the exclusions) that are implied in the structure of the present as a prescription: power is the

selection and enforcement of one possibility among many, and simultaneously it is the exclusion (and invisibilization) of many other possibilities. This selection can be described as *gestalt* (structuring form), and it acts as a paradigm. It may also be seen as a format, a model that we can implement only by complying with the code.¹

Within the framework set by Technic's power, several different political structures are possible – as long, that is, as they respect the fundamental metaphysical and ethical diktats that are implicit within Technic's own form. Likewise, Magic's reality-system allows for a proliferation of different political articulations in the world that it goes to create – as long as they remain within the set of possibilities contained in Magic's own metaphysical and ethical paradigm. In either system, the impossible is precisely that which escapes the respective cosmological paradigm.

Thus, if we wish to look at the mark that Magic impresses over its world, we shouldn't start by considering any particular social or political structure. Rather, as we did with Technic, we will be looking at the fundamental framework within which our existential experience can possibly unfold – and consequently, on whose basis further social, political, economic or cultural structures can possibly be developed. However, the similar unfolding of Technic's and Magic's cosmogony should not obfuscate the very different conditions under which such unfolding actually takes place. While Technic's regime enjoys today a near-total hegemonic status on virtually any field of human thought and action, that of Magic is presently confined to a state of utter marginality. While the normative directions that are implicit within Technic's cosmogonic form are enforced at all institutional levels on a global scale, those of Magic can't be seen to possibly operate much beyond an individual's own, private experience of the world. As we begin to look at Magic's world and at its restructuring of our everyday experience within it, we should keep in mind the particularly narrow angle through which this world and this experience could actually take place today. In the following pages, we shall adopt the perspective of a

¹F. Berardi, 'Bifo', *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, Verso, 2017, p. 2.

(human) individual living in today's world, and we shall look at some of the most crucial ways in which their existential experience would be affected by the adoption of Magic's reality-system over that of Technic. In particular, we shall consider Magic in terms of its existential strategies of disentanglement from the current world of Technic.

This perspective, privileging the power of an individual to reshape their experience of reality over the power of a socially hegemonic reality-system, echoes a general trend in the philosophical schools of the Hellenistic age. The philosophies developed by the Cynics, the Cyrenaics, the Epicureans and the Stoic, and also by the Sceptic academy, concentrated primarily on changing the fundamental framework through which an individual gains an existential experience of reality.² Only marginally, if at all, they went on to discuss particular aspects of political philosophy – suggesting instead a set of basic metaphysical and ethical axioms which, if adopted, would implicitly set the limits for political and social structures. Hence, for example, it was on the basis of their metaphysics, that the Stoics advocated a cosmopolitan stance in politics – regardless of the particular shape in which such cosmopolitan order would take place. Equally, it was on the basis of their metaphysics that the Epicureans challenged the institution of slavery, the Cyrenaics called for gender equality, the Cynics made a mockery of nationalism and so on.

Yet, the primacy assigned by Hellenistic schools to the task of reshaping the fundamental categories of thought and experience, rather than to merely reforming social institutions, doesn't contradict their impact on the sociopolitical system of the time. On the contrary, their philosophical tenets quickly gained a supreme cultural status among the Greek-Roman elite and, following their adoption by the then-emerging Christianity, they went on to produce a tremendous transformation in the social discourse of the late-ancient world. Although the task of reshaping the framework of reality – through which a particular world emerges to our experience – might appear at first to be far removed from active social engagement, its long-lasting

²A particularly interested analysis of this aspect can be found in U. Zilioli, *The Cyrenaics*, Durham: Acumen, 2012.

consequences are more dramatic than any superficial revolution at the level of the immediate political system.

What is more, such restructuring of reality aims to be immediately useful to the living individual, bordering on that form of ‘self-help’ that enjoyed much respect throughout the Hellenistic age.³ In a similar fashion, our present project wishes to reclaim the usefulness of philosophical speculation also in terms of an individual’s ‘self-help’, that is, of what an individual can do, within yet beyond the limitations imposed by their historical context. In other words, we wish to imagine a form of philosophy that works also for those who are hopelessly defeated by history, and who can hope for no revolutionary ‘sun of tomorrow’ to lighten their burden during their lifetime. This is not to downplay the importance of historical variables, such as the political/social/economic/cultural situation of a specific place and time in which individuals find themselves to live. It is precisely on the basis of acknowledging the dramatic impact that such variables have on an individual’s life, that we wish to reclaim a space beyond them, where a person can find sufficient room and refuge to cultivate their own, autonomous re-setting of reality – in a manner that is also compatible with an active engagement in broader emancipatory projects on a social level. Indeed, if we wish to reignite the process of social imagination, and thus the very possibility of systemic political change in the direction of greater emancipation, we must be able to think of a space that allows such reignition, beyond the smothering waves of the current reality-system.

In the following pages, we shall concentrate on this particular space, and on the way it can function as a breeding ground to restructure reality along the lines of Magic’s cosmogony. This is a space that at once escapes the grid of the contemporary map of reality, while remaining subjected to the limitations imposed by it. An ‘outside within’, that doesn’t merely break the totalizing shape of Technic’s world, but that exceeds it by vanishing. As it is well known, this problematic position has also been widely discussed in political terms by thinkers of the ‘post-operaista’ Italian tradition – such as,

³See A. A. Long, *Greek Models of Mind and Self*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

for example, Antonio Negri commenting on Sandro Mezzadra's political theory:

The horizon of the 'thousand plateaus' has become real. And where there is no longer an 'outside', the 'inside' produces ever-more relevant diversities; where the concave is given, the convex establishes itself not as a contrary, but as a fluctuating alternative.⁴

Yet, this is far from being exclusively a contemporary political problem. The first step of our overview of Magic's existential impact on individual lives today, begins precisely from a brief genealogy of ancient strategies of secrecy, occultation and vanishing that allow a person to create a space at once within and without their own historical time.

Secret

On a bright morning of January 1492, accompanied by a splendidly dressed retinue of a hundred horsemen, Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad XII reached a rocky prominence just outside Granada. Until a few hours earlier, he had been the last Muslim ruler of the last Muslim city on the Iberian Peninsula. But everything was lost. Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad XII cast a last look back towards the distant silhouette of the walls and towers of the palace of Alhambra. As he raised his hand to order to continue their journey southwards, he finally broke down in tears. Yet, his sorrowful exile paled in comparison with the hardship that was to befall his abandoned subjects. The Muslim inhabitants of Granada were now at the mercy of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castille, and about to join their co-religionists in the courts and torture chambers of the newly established Spanish Inquisition.

Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad XII eventually reached the Moroccan city of Fez, where he established himself and his remaining family under the protection of the local Sultan. The following year, another

⁴ Antonio Negri's review of S. Mezzadra and B. Neilson, *Confini e Frontiere*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014, online at <http://www.euronomade.info/?p=2814>

crucial figure in Islamic history joined him there. Ahmad ibn Abi Jum'ah moved to Fez from his native Oran in 1493, having been offered a position as professor of law, which soon developed into the prestigious role of 'Mufti' jurist. There are no surviving records testifying an encounter between the legal scholar and the deposed king, but certainly the plight of the *Moriscos* back in Spain did not leave Ahmad ibn Abi Jum'ah unmoved. In 1504, the Mufti from Oran issued a famous *fatwa*, in which he declared that Sunni Muslims who lived under the oppressive rule of non-believers (i.e. under the Spanish Crown) were allowed to conceal their faith from their persecutors, and even to publicly declare their apostasy to avoid martyrdom.

If, at the hour of prayer, they force you to prostrate yourself before their idols, or make you attend their prayers, ... bow down to whatever idols they are bowing to, but turn your intention towards Allah. Even if the direction is not that of Mecca, that requirement may be disregarded, as it is in the case of prayer when in danger on the battlefield.

If they oblige you to drink wine, you may do so, but let it not be your intention to make use of it.

If they force pork upon you, eat it, but in your heart reject it, and hold firm to the belief that it is forbidden. In the same way, if they force you to do anything which is forbidden.⁵

With his *fatwa*, Ahmad ibn Abi Jum'ah institutionalized in the Sunni world those practices of *taqiyya* and *kitman* (dissimulation and concealment, *suggestio falsi* and *suppressio veri*), that were already common in the Shia world. Used to centuries of persecution at the hand of the Sunni, Shia Muslims had developed a sophisticated theory around the concealment and dissimulation of what lay in their heart. Resting on Quranic Suras such as 3:28⁶ and 16:106,⁷

⁵A. ibn Abi Jum'ah, *Oran Fatwa*, as reported and translated in L. P. Havery, *Muslims in Spain: 1500 to 1614*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 61–2.

⁶Let not the believers take the unbelievers for protectors rather than believers; and whoever does this, he shall have nothing of (the guardianship of) Allah, but you should guard yourselves against them, guarding carefully.

⁷He who disbelieves in Allah after his having believed, not he who is compelled while his heart is at rest on account of faith, but he who opens (his) breast to disbelief – on these is the wrath of Allah, and they shall have a grievous chastisement.

Shia faithfuls had long conceived *taqiyya* as an integral part of their way of practising their beliefs. Central to their understanding of *taqiyya*, was the notion that it was done 'with the tongue only' (following the lesson of Ibn Abbas), not with the heart. But their understanding of this practice had more far-reaching implications than its tactical conception by the Spanish Sunni. Although the art of concealment and dissimulation had informed Shia daily life first under Sunni rule, then at the time of the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, their *taqiyya* and *kitman* also stood for a profound understanding of the chasm between exotericism and esotericism. Considered in terms of what Henry Corbin calls 'the discipline of the arcane', *taqiyya* and *kitman* also served the purpose of safeguarding what is ineffable, from the grasp of descriptive language.⁸ Only through a complex path of initiation, can the ineffable knowledge be 'passed on' to another person, while always refraining from the temptations of linguistic reduction.

The 'discipline of the arcane' (*taqiyah*, *kitman*) [was] prescribed by the Imams in conformity with the injunction, 'God commands you to make deposits to those entitled to them' (4:55). This means: God orders you not to pass on the divine trust of gnosis except to him who is worthy of it, who is an 'heir'. The whole notion of a knowledge which is a spiritual inheritance, is implicit in this injunction.⁹

Thus, *taqiyya* and *kitman* acquire a double meaning: on the one hand, they are contingent tactics to escape persecution, while on the other, they reflect the chasm between what is ineffable and what

⁸In the Sufi tradition, prudential strategies of communication were developed as early as the ninth century by Abu'l Qasim Muhammad al-Junayd – in part as a reaction against the 'excessive' openness of martyr Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, who paid with his life for having spoken too plainly in public about that which should remain *batin* (inner) or at the very least 'esoteric'. Developing the position of saint Abu Said Ahmad al-Kharraz, Junayd advocated the necessity of speaking in *isharat*, that is through subtle allusions to the truth, in a language that 'veils rather than unveil the true meaning' (see. A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 59). As it will be discussed in the following pages in greater detail, this attitude has strong resemblances with Baltasar Gracian's notion of *conceptismo*.

⁹H. Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 37.

can be conveyed through descriptive language. Following Etan Kohlberg's suggestion:

Looked at from the point of view of motive, there appear in fact to be two main types of *taqiyya*: one which is based on fear of external enemies and another which is based on the need to conceal secret doctrines from the uninitiated. I will call the first type 'prudential *taqiyya*' and the second, 'non-prudential *taqiyya*'. In what follows I attempt ... to establish a connection between the two.¹⁰

Indeed, 'prudential' and 'non-prudential' *taqiyya*, share a common conceptual root. It is only on the basis of a fundamental distinction between the 'heart' and the 'tongue' (using again Ibn Abbas's parlance), that is possible to conceive practices of dissimulation and concealment, that don't compromise what they are meant to protect. Likewise, in the case of Magic's cosmogony, we have witnessed a real difference running between the coexisting principles of ineffable existence (found in the first hypostasis) and of descriptive essence (found in the fifth and last hypostasis). Even if the 'tongue' was to go astray in the realm of the linguistically built world, the 'heart' would still be able to remain faithful to its apprehension of the ineffably living layer of existence that lies within yet beyond the world. Fundamentally, a person adopting Magic's reality-system is well aware that descriptive language can be nothing but a form of concealment and dissimulation, whenever it takes the ineffable as its object.

All these considerations aid us to understand the role played by secrecy, in any attempt to adopt Magic's reality-system within a world that is ruled by Technic. Certainly, it would be possible to wear Magic on one's sleeve, and traverse Technic's world never missing a chance to make clear to all that one has chosen to adopt an alternative metaphysical, ethical and ultimately cosmological approach. It would be possible, but it would be neither useful nor advisable. True to the esoteric spirit that animates it, Magic's

¹⁰E. Kohlberg, *Taqiyya in Shi'I Theology and Religion*, in H. G. Kippenberg and G. G. Stroumsa (eds), *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995, p. 345.

reality-system doesn't require conquest of social hegemony in order to function, and it doesn't demand to have its principles spread through the means of cultural propaganda. It's not that Magic has a minoritarian vocation; rather, whether it enjoys a majoritarian or minoritarian status within society is of little importance to its functioning. Although a universal adoption of its tenets would arguably enhance the cause for emancipation on a massive scale, even when adopted by one person alone it is still capable of contributing to the reactivation of their ability to imagine, act and ultimately exist in the world. Moreover, there is little doubt that an all-too-public display of one's adoption of a radically alternative reality-system, would encounter the uncompromising hostility of a social world that is built on the exact opposite principles. What would be the use of exposing oneself to gratuitous martyrdom, when such a sacrifice would in no way enhance one's cause?

We find echoes of a similar debate in a religious controversy internal to the Christian world of early modernity, at the time of the fratricidal war between the Catholic and Protestant factions. Possibly because of their bid to supremacy in Central and Northern Europe, the Protestant camp found it particularly expedient to assert the lack of any legitimate distance between the private and public life of a truly 'reformed' believer. Invited to encourage those Protestants who were suffering under Catholic rule, the French theologian Jean Calvin wrote a stern rebuke of any practice of concealment and dissimulation of the beliefs lying in one's heart. In his 1544 book *Excuse à messieurs les Nicodémistes*,¹¹ Calvin had words of fire for those who hid their Protestant faith for fear of persecution. He disparagingly referred to them as 'Nicodemites', that is, followers of Nicodemus, the character from the Gospel who would act as a pious Jew during the day, while secretly sneaking to hear Jesus preach after nightfall.

This accusation of cowardly hypocrisy found an even more explicit reinforcement in the writings of Giulio della Rovere (aka Giulio da Milano), a former Augustinian friar who had converted to Protestantism. In his 1552 pamphlet *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Della Rovere left no doubt that death itself was preferable to publicly lying about one's embrace of the Protestant

¹¹J. Calvin, *Deux épîtres contre les Nicodémistes*, Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2004.

tenets. For thinkers like Della Rovere, there seemed to be no distance between the realm of descriptive language and that of ineffability, so that anything happening at the level of the former, was supposed to also deeply affect the latter. Translated in temporal terms, anti-Nicodemist positions saw no possibility of escaping the temporality of history, if for history we understand all that can be recorded through the descriptive categories of language. For all its pretences to reach into the innermost abyss of a person's soul, the Protestant attitude ultimately claimed that one's truest existence amounted to little more than one's communicable essence. It might not be mere coincidence, that the cosmogonic force of Technic first established its reign in the northern lands of the Protestant world.

On the opposite front, and not only politically, we find the complex tradition of early modern Catholic thinkers. As recently noted by Italian philosopher Mario Perniola,¹² up until the council of Trent, the Catholic attitude had developed into something akin to a 'feeling' with spectacular connotations, rather than a discipline of existential orthopaedics. According to Perniola, pre-Tridentine Catholicism was in its daily practice a 'religion without dogma', whose kernel consisted in a form of 'non-participatory participation', based on escaping one's narrowly defined subjectivity through the use of rituals. To pursue its double goal of disentangling itself from the constraints of the linguistic world, while at the same time creating a shared cultural platform, Catholicism found an important complement in the generous use of metaphorical aesthetics.

For [American sociologist Andrew] Greeley, 'Catholics live in an enchanted world'. The rituals, the arts, the music, architecture, prayers, the stories, create an aesthetic climate that is an essential part of Catholic imagination and confer metaphoric character to it. 'The Catholic imagination loves metaphors; Catholicism is a verdant rainforest of metaphors'. ... The protestant imagination distrusts metaphors; it tends to be a desert of metaphors.¹³

¹²See M. Perniola, *Del Sentire Cattolico*, Il Mulino, 2001.

¹³M. Perniola, *The Cultural Turn of Catholicism*, in R. Dottori (ed.), *Reason and Reasonableness*, Munster: Lit Verlag, 2005, p. 259.

Thanks to this metaphorical attitude, Catholics could see themselves and the world as if 'from an outside'. Through their embodiment of liturgical ritualism also at a cultural level, they were capable of feeling at the same time foreign and at home in the world – itself perceived at the same time as a familiar and an uncanny object.

For Perniola, this peculiar form of non-dogmatic 'feeling' was eventually lost in the course of Catholicism's struggle against Protestantism – as the Church of Rome strove to set up a monolithic identity of its own, against that of its opponents. But in fact, even in the Baroque era that follows the Tridentine Council, this strategic form of distancing oneself from the linguistic world without fully renouncing it, remained active in certain intellectual milieus of the Catholic world. Particularly among the Jesuits,¹⁴ the theory and practice of concealment and dissimulation reached a supreme level of sophistication, as it is epitomized by the work of the Spanish priest and writer Baltasar Gracián.¹⁵

In his 1647 book *The Pocket Oracle and Art of Prudence*,¹⁶ Gracián selected 300 aphorisms that meant to instruct the reader on the 'art of worldly wisdom', along a peculiar trajectory that combined the cunning use of worldly hypocrisy with the attainment of sainthood. Despite the blatant immoralism of most of his advice – which gained him the admiration of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, who translated it into German – Gracián's book was read and approved by his superiors in the Society of Jesus, and soon rivalled Machiavelli's *The Prince* throughout the courts of Europe. According to Gracián, society was to be considered as nothing but a play, a dangerous game of mirrors and masks, which the individual should traverse with the shrewd and imperceptible *metis* (Greek for 'cunning intelligence') of the wise, rather than the explicit *bie* (Greek for 'brute force') of the fool.

In heaven everything is good, in hell everything bad. In the world, since it lies between the two, you find both. ... Our life

¹⁴For a comprehensive historical overview, see J. Lacouture, *Jesuits: A Multibiography*, Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1995.

¹⁵For an exploration of Gracián's thought, context and later influence, see N. Spadaccini and J. Talens (eds.), *Rhetoric and Politics: Baltasar Gracián and the New World Order*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

¹⁶See B. Gracián, *The Pocket Oracle and Art of Prudence*, London: Penguin, 2011.

is arranged like a play, everything will be sorted out in the end. Take care, then, to end it well.¹⁷

Stuck in the hostile environment of a society which is always, according to Gracián, a control-society, the ‘wise man’ carefully weaves a web of strategies of deception, removing anything ‘authentic’ from the surface of his public life. The awareness of his inferiority and vulnerability is exactly the source of his strength. This existential strategy resembles that of the Byzantine Emperors Leo VI¹⁸ and Maurice,¹⁹ or of the Roman military author Frontinus,²⁰ whose main focus – in their *Tactica*, *Strategikon* and *Stratagematon*, respectively – was on how to turn a position of weakness into one of strength, and how to enforce a judo-style relationship with one’s opponent, where brute force would successfully be reflected against itself.

Because of his state of minority, the ‘wise man’ has to be as apt at concealing his ideas and his plans, as he is proficient at reading the web of unspoken narratives by which society tries to entrap him.

Know how to be all things to all people. A discreet Proteus: with the learned, learned, and with the devout, devout. A great art to win everyone over, since similarity creates goodwill. ... Go with the current, undergoing a transformation that is politic – and essential for those in position of dependency.²¹

¹⁷B. Gracián, *The Pocket Oracle and Art of Prudence*, London: Penguin, 2011, aphorism 211, p. 80.

¹⁸Leo VI the Wise (866–912) was Byzantine emperor from 886 to 912. He was the author of the military treatise *Taktika*. See Leo VI, *The Taktika of Leo VI*, translated and commented by G. T. Dennis, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

¹⁹Flavius Mauricius Tiberius Augustus (539–602) was Byzantine emperor from 582 to 602. He was the author of the highly influential military treatise *Strategikon*. See, Maurice, *Maurice’s Strategikon*, translated by G. E. Dennis, Philadelphia, PE: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

²⁰Sextus Julius Frontinus (43–103) was a Roman aristocrat and the author of technical and military treatise, such as the *Statagematon*. See Frontinus, *Stratagems and Acqueducts of Rome*, translated by C. Bennett, Harvard, MA: Loeb/Harvard University Press, 2003.

²¹B. Gracián, *The Pocket Oracle and Art of Prudence*, London: Penguin, 2011, aphorism 77, pp. 29–30.

Know how to appear the fool. ... There are times when the greatest knowledge consists in appearing to lack knowledge. You mustn't be ignorant, just feign ignorance. With fools, being wise counts for little, and similarly with madmen, being sane: you need to talk to everyone in their own language.²²

Better mad with the crowd than sane all alone, say politicians. For if everyone is mad, you'll be different to none, and if good sense stands alone it will be taken as madness. ... You have to live with others, and most are ignorant. To live alone, you must be either like God, or a complete animal.²³

His success depends both on his ability to produce a critical reading of society's ideology, and on his specular performances of tactical conformism and vanishing. Gracián's wise man does not shy away from a public and conspicuous performance of conformism – even to the point of feigning ignorance, when ignorance is rife – because by doing so he can create for himself the necessary contextual conditions for autonomy, as well as for striking back. Ultimately, Gracián's advice can perhaps be summed up in one aphorism, which reveals the Jesuit thinker's profound distrust of the ability of the public realm – resting as it does on descriptive language – to act as the terrain for a full appraisal of that which is ineffable.

Think with the few and speak with the many. ... The wise cannot be identified by what they say in public, since they never speak there with their own voice but following common stupidity, however their inner thought contradicts this. The sensible flee being contradicted as much as contradicting: what they're quick to censure, they're slow to publicize. Thought is free; it cannot and should not be coerced. It retreats into the sanctuary of silence, and if sometimes breaks this, it only does so among the select and the wise.²⁴

At first glance, Gracián's book seems to amount to little more than an immoralistic guide on how to stay out of trouble in a dangerous

²²Gracián, *The Pocket Oracle and Art of Prudence*, aphorism 240, pp. 90–1.

²³Ibid., aphorism 133, pp. 49–50.

²⁴Ibid., aphorism 43, pp. 17–18.

world. Many have read the book in this light, and certainly opportunism plays an important role in the conceptual economy of the volume. Yet, in approaching Gracián's text we should be careful not to remain on a merely superficial level. When Gracián concludes the book with a 300th aphorism titled 'In a word, [become] a saint', he doesn't wish to offer us a final twist of comedy, but rather the key to read his whole work. How can a liar and a hypocrite ever wish to be a saint? The answer is simple, albeit it is left implicit in the book: sainthood has little to do with what happens at the level of descriptive language. Its horizon is that of the ineffable as life, and values the world only as far it allows for ineffable life to shine through it – anything else, the pomp of societal language and its institutions, is nothing more than a stupid and dangerous game, worthy of contempt and hypocrisy. In this sense, one can only talk to 'the few', regardless of who they are: any sociality that is built around a shared experience of the living ineffable is necessarily contained within the limits of friendship, that allow for no limitless expansion along abstract economies of scale. Seen from this perspective, Gracián's 'saint' remains in the human consortium exactly through his/her refusal to leave to societal institutions – and more generally, to the realm of descriptive language – the role of declaring what in the world is worthy of value and protection. To Gracián's 'saint', as to the person who adopts Magic's reality-system, the extreme solidarity among the living that accompanies a metaphysical 'unity of existence' – what is defined as *Tawhid* in Islamic theology – is always-already given, before and beyond societal rule. It is only by putting societal language back in its place, that it is possible to bend its institutions to the service of the universally shared ineffable, that is, of life as the unspeakable dimension of existence.

Initiation

One of us must suppose that he was just created at a stroke, fully developed and perfectly formed but with his vision shrouded from perceiving all external objects – created floating in the air or in the space, not buffeted by any perceptible current of the air that supports him, his limbs separated and kept out of contact

with one another, so that they do not feel each other. Then let the subject consider whether he would affirm the existence of his self. There is no doubt that he would affirm his own existence, although not affirming the reality of any of his limbs or inner organs, his bowels, or heart or brain or any external thing. Indeed he would affirm the existence of this self of his while not affirming that it had any length, breadth or depth. And if it were possible for him in such a state to imagine a hand or any other organ, he would not imagine it to be a part of himself or a condition of his existence.²⁵

This brief thought experiment, known as the 'floating man argument', was composed in the early 1020s by the Persian polymath Ibn Sina (Avicenna), one of the brightest philosophical minds to have ever appeared West of the Ganges river. As we shall see, this will also be the starting point for our next step in understanding the existential mark produced by Magic's reality-system.

At the time when he composed his argument, Avicenna was being held captive in the fortress of Fardajan, in the Iranian province of Hamadan – a situation not atypical in his adventurous life. It would be tempting to read romantically the 'floating man' as a subtle metaphor for that hope for inner freedom, that most likely accompanied the philosopher during his captivity – much like a condensed equivalent to Boethius's *Consolations of Philosophy*.²⁶ However, the actual reason behind its development was much more internal to the technicalities of the philosophical debate of the time. By proving that a person would have direct apprehension of their own existence even in the absence of previously acquired information and of sensory perception, Avicenna wished to put forward a case for the soul's substantiality and for its independence from the body. Anticipating certain aspects of Descartes's *cogito* by over six centuries, Avicenna ignited a revolution at the foundations of epistemology. But while Descartes saw a person's rational thinking as the ground zero of all knowledge, Avicenna's 'floating man' suggested an epistemology based instead on 'presence'. Avicenna's argument shows that at the

²⁵Avicenna, *De Anima* 1,1 – as reported in L. E. Goodman, *Avicenna*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 155.

²⁶A. Boethius, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, London: Penguin, 1999.

basis of knowledge, before and beyond any other form of reason or of perception, lay that kind of immediate intuition that a person has of their own existence. This is a form of 'knowledge by presence' or 'presential knowledge', in which 'knowing' and 'being' stand in an almost indistinguishable proximity.

Avicenna's epistemological suggestion found fertile ground in later Persian philosophy, where the notion of 'knowledge by presence' acted as the cornerstone for a long tradition of mystical thinking. It was in particular the twelfth-century philosopher Suhrawardi, founder of the 'Illuminationist' school, who formalized a possible line of development starting from Avicenna's theory. According to Suhrawardi,²⁷ knowledge by presence is the purest form and the foundation of all other forms of knowledge. This is a kind of non-discursive, non-conceptual, non-propositional type of knowledge, akin to the unmediated perception that one has of one's own pain.²⁸ To the attentive reader, it will not escape that pain was exactly what we found towards the end of Technic's cosmogonic chain, as the symptom of life's irreducible ineffability. Indeed, for Suhrawardi, as for Magic, pain and the ineffable dimension of the existent are epistemologically connected. Both of them are accessible only through a particular type of unmediated knowledge, where one's 'knowing' something and one's 'being' that something, are inextricably intertwined. As if responding to the Indian Vedanta suggestion that one's true self (*atman*) and the ultimate reality of the world (*brahman*) are actually one and the same thing, Suhrawardi claimed that self-knowledge and the knowledge of the divine realm (the 'Light of Lights') are of the exact same kind: we can experience both only through direct apprehension. Ultimately, what we witness through presential knowledge is that 'light' which enables all other forms of perception, by making their objects 'visible' to

²⁷For a presentation of Suhrawardi's theory of 'presential knowledge', see M. A. Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination*, Oxon: Routledge, 2014, Chapter 4.B. Suhrawardi's own texts on this notion can be found in the 'discourses' collected in Suhrawardi, *Philosophy of Illumination (Hikmat al-Ishraq)*, translated and commented by J. Wallbridge and H. Ziai, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999.

²⁸'The secret / of this world is an enigma that knowledge alone will never solve.' Hafez, *Divan*, in Hafez, *Ottanta Canzoni*, Torino: Einaudi, 2008, p. 7 – my translation from S. Pello and G. Scarcia's Italian version of the Persian original.

our cognition. Self-knowledge coincides with knowledge of the ineffable lying at the heart of the world, since both of them are the 'luminous' precondition by which any other type of understanding is possible. But unlike the objects that are illuminated, and which we can grasp through descriptive language, 'light' itself belongs for Suhrawardi to the field of pure ineffability. As such, it is at once the foundation of descriptive language (which would be impossible in condition of 'darkness'), while also escaping its grasp.

However, Suhrawardi did not identify this 'light' with the principle of pure existence. On the contrary, according to the twelfth-century philosopher we should consider essence, not existence, as the solid bedrock of all that is. It will be seventeenth-century Persian philosopher Mulla Sadra, who will overcome Suhrawardi's Platonist essentialism²⁹ in the direction of an 'onto-theology' that has much in common with Magic's reality-system. Mulla Sadra, whom we already encountered in the previous chapter, advocated for a kind of 'existentialist' philosophy that was alternative to the metaphysical tenets in vogue during his time. According to Mulla Sadra, reality unfolds as the progressive self-manifestation of a principle of pure and utterly ineffable existence – what in the previous chapter we symbolically defined as 'life'.

Mulla Sadra constructed his philosophy through a masterfully bold combination of different traditions, spanning from ancient Zoroastrianism to Sufism, to the latest Islamic theories of his age. His epistemological vision is no exception, emerging from his reinterpretation of Avicenna's and Suhrawardi's notions of presential knowledge, as seen through the lens of late-ancient Greek Neoplatonism. In particular, Mulla Sadra had in mind the epistemological theory of the third-century Lebanese Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry, who – building on Plotinus – claimed the identity between the intellect (the process of knowing), the intellecting subject (the knower) and its intelligible object (the known). According to the Neoplatonic school, as briefly described at the beginning of Chapter 2, we can conceive the existent as the product of a cosmogonic emanation outpouring from the first principle of the utterly ineffable and all-encompassing 'One'. The One, a 'Being-beyond-being', proceeds (*progressio*) in its

²⁹See M. Kamal, *From Essence to Being: The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra and Martin Heidegger*, London: Icas Press, 2010, pp. 51–67.

creation of the world, from its initial state – that transcends even the notion of transcendence – all the way to the material world which we experience through our sense. Among the hypostases of the One, we find the Divine Intellect, acting both as the stage in which the One begins to self-perceive, and as the cosmogonic source of all possible types of knowledge. According to Neoplatonism, a person can aspire to authentic knowledge only by ‘moving back’ (*regressio*) through the chain of emanations, to the point of reuniting with the Divine Intellect.

Likewise, for Mulla Sadra, knowledge is grounded on the principle of ‘unity of existence’, according to which all things ultimately depend for their existence on God’s all-encompassing existence. For Mulla Sadra (as for Magic), the authentic nature of all that exists is ‘unity in multiplicity’ (*al-wahda fil-kathra*): at an ineffable level, all things are one and the same ‘thing beyond thingness’, while at the level of descriptive language they maintain their respective difference. Such nature, however, can be understood only through direct apprehension, that is, only through a form of unmediated and presential self-knowledge. In other words: it is possible to truly know only what one already is, and it is possible to truly be only what one already knows.

The main tenets of Mulla Sadra’s epistemology are also at the core of Magic’s reality-system, thus informing the experience of an individual who was to adopt Magic’s perspective within their life in the world. Considered through this lens, truly knowing and truly being are one and the same thing. Although we can know the objects of descriptive language through sense-perception, rationality or information, yet such levels disclose to us only a specific layer of reality – and not that which is innermost. According to Magic, if one wished to ground all forms of understanding in the most fundamental type of knowledge, they would have to consider what kind of perception is capable of approaching the ineffable dimension of existence. If ‘life’ is the ineffable at the heart of existence, then the two fundamental questions, ‘who am I?’ and ‘what is this?’, can be answered through the same kind of apprehension. In both cases, it is a type of apprehension that is non-discursive, non-conceptual and non-propositional: it is a form of ‘knowledge by presence’, in which the knower, the known and the process of knowing become one and the same thing.

Here, we reach the key to the title of this subchapter, ‘initiation’, and its connection with the previous section on ‘secrecy’. Since truly

knowing and truly being are just two different names assigned to the same process, then gaining new knowledge amounts to gaining new existence. If I can truly know only what I am, then my getting to truly know something inevitably means my getting to become that something. I can know the ineffable that is life (thus, also my 'individual' life), only by recognizing that fundamentally *I am* that ineffable. This is not so much an expansion of my knowledge, but an expansion of my existence. Achieving it means symbolically 'dying' to one's old form of existence – in which we coincided completely with the serial units of descriptive language – and 'being reborn' to a new form, in which our linguistic dimension is just a level in the self-manifestation of an utterly ineffable kernel that runs uninterrupted throughout the existent. This process of symbolic death and rebirth is precisely what constitutes the process of initiation, as understood since the time of archaic societies, all the way to the still ongoing traditions of mysticism.

Following the lesson of the French school of theology inspired by the work of Mircea Eliade, we can understand the process of initiation to be composed by three main elements:

- a) Reference to an archetype. The archetype is a model that is placed at the origin and which is considered to be the initiator of the development of the ritual. ... Through the ritual [of initiation] the archetype provides completeness to the life of the person being initiated.
- b) A second element is the symbolism of initiation as death. Initiation allows its candidate to exit historical time, while connecting him/her with foundational time, *illud tempus*. It is death in terms of a previous situation.
- c) The symbolism of a new birth. Symbolic death is followed by a new birth, consisting in the candidate acquiring the new existence to which s/he has been introduced by the rituals of initiation. ... A role of particular importance is played by myths that induce to replicate the actions of the original creators: thus, initiation is a reproduction of cosmogony as well as second, mystical birth.³⁰

³⁰J. Ries, *Rites of Initiation and the Sacred*, in J. Ries (ed.), *Rites of Initiation*; my translation from the Italian edition, J. Ries (ed.), *I Riti di Iniziazione*, Milano: Jaca Book, 2016, pp. 32–3.

Both when indicating a rite of passage into an age group (e.g. puberty rites), and when referring to a person voluntarily joining a secret confraternity or sorority, the term 'initiation' has always denoted a passage to a new type of existence. Rituals of initiation mark the end of an 'old' form of presence in space/time, and the beginning of a 'new' one. So, for Saint Paul,³¹ baptismal waters are at once waters of life and of death: a faithful's descent into them symbolizes Christ's descent into the underworld, and their emergence out of them resonates with Christ's resurrection. When a person undergoes initiation, they break away from the socialized space and the historical time to which they used to belong. For the duration of the process of initiation, they literally step into an unknown else-where and else-when, for which they don't have any criterion of navigation. In many archaic societies, particularly in those that practised shamanism, this was the moment and the place in which a person had visions that went to define the rest of their life. Not too dissimilarly, a person's initiation to Magic's reality-system begins with their 'presential vision' of a different kind of metaphysics that profoundly affects and transforms them. Adopting Magic's cosmological hypostases as the frame through which the world emerges to one's experience, means shaping a particular vision of what exists in the world, and in what way existents relate to each other. This implies a movement outside of Technic's perfectly mapped space/time, and a step into a world-form in which the ineffable plays a crucial role; a movement that is as much a new way of seeing the world as a new way of being in the world.

An individual's adoption of Magic's reality-settings as their own is thus a practice of initiation, which in its process resembles a form of self-directed 'theurgy'. First theorized in the third century by Syrian Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus,³² theurgy is a complex ritualistic art, through which a person might be able to summon the ineffable One, so as to allow it to manifest itself in its purest possible form. Iamblichus warns us that the ineffable can only be invited to manifest itself in its purer forms, not be coerced into

³¹Rom. 6.3-4.

³²For a study of the practice of theurgy, as profoundly interwoven with the figure of Iamblichus, see G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

doing so. Theurgy is unlike the techno-scientific practice, which constantly attempts to capture its object in order to put it to work – as with electricity being extracted from the movement of water, in order to be fed into industrial production. Conversely, theurgy – and indeed, Magic – wish to make the linguistic world available to host the manifestation of the ineffable, rather than attempting to ambush it. As presented by Iamblichus, theurgy concerns in particular the use of statues as vessels for the self-manifestation of the early hypostases of the One – yet, the process is not necessarily limited to this particular medium. To adopt Magic's perspective, means to consider one's own linguistic self (i.e. one's linguistic identities) as the equivalent of a vessel through which it is possible to allow the ineffable to shine. Initiation, as a theurgic act, amounts to the transformation of one's existence – achieved through the acquisition of presential knowledge – to make oneself a suitable vessel to host a clear manifestation of the ineffable. Such a manifestation is witnessed first and foremost by the person him/herself, who acquires at the same time the position of theurgist and of theurgic object – much like presential knowledge achieves the unity of the knower and the known.

We have seen how acquiring presential knowledge of one's own existence – as composed by an ineffable kernel, which one shares with the whole of the existent, combined with a differential layer of descriptive language – is a process of initiation. It involves 'dying' to a previous form of reality and being 'reborn' to an alternative world as shaped by alternative reality-settings; it relies on the archetypal form of the 'miracle'³³ as the *locus* of manifestation of the ineffable as life; it is a form of acquisition of knowledge that produces an existential and ontological transformation in those who undergo it; it is necessarily performed in 'secret', since it cannot be communicated through means of descriptive language. Nonetheless, even rituals that deal with the ineffable can be somehow communicated, and also initiations allow for a certain passage of knowledge between different people. How can this happen in the context of Magic? How can a person be helped to achieve presential knowledge of the ineffable layer of existence – and thus also of their own existence?

³³See Chapter 3, hypostasis 1.

How can a person be taught the incommunicable fact that s/he is ineffably alive?

Tackling this question means opposing the notion of education to that of initiation, in the same way that we can oppose the notion of information to that of presential knowledge. Understood in contemporary terms – that is, within Technic's perspective – education amounts to a process of acquisition of information that allows the acquiring person to master an increasing amount of skills. Education too can bring about a certain transformation in the person being educated, but this has to do exclusively with the expansion of one's technical abilities, referring to one's socially defined linguistic structure. Through Technic's education, one learns to become a better 'processor':³⁴ a better engineer, professor, nurse, father, lover, citizen and so on. Education in the age of Technic has to do, predictably, with the acceleration of the pace with which an 'abstract general entity' can contribute to the overall expansion of as many productive series as possible. Ultimately, all forms of education in Technic's world are merely forms of training. Coherently with the limitless stretch of linguistic series of productions, Technic's education does not produce any radical transformation in those who acquire it: only incremental transformations are possible.

Conversely, the process of initiation is aimed precisely at producing in its subject a radical transformation at the existential and ontological level. After initiation, a person ceases to be merely the sum of their linguistic and productive dimensions, while becoming *also* a manifestation of the ineffable dimension that constitutes existence in itself. The person initiated to Magic's reality is at the same time the galaxy of their names *and* complete silence. As we discussed at the end of the previous chapter, such a person is a paradox – and in this, it resembles precisely the world that Magic produces through its reality-frame. But how can a paradox be talked about? How can it be taught? Certainly, it cannot be described linguistically, other than in its most superficial form. Initiation resembles a *koan* – the insoluble riddles that the disciple had to solve in order to be admitted to the higher monastic grades of Zen Buddhism – in that its presentation through descriptive language does not seem to allow for a linguistic solution. The paradox of

³⁴See Chapter 2, hypostasis 4.

Magic's initiation consists exactly in affirming that what isn't linguistically solvable, is nonetheless ineffably inhabitable. Likewise, the way in which initiatic knowledge can be taught, resembles more a person inviting another into a certain space, than the transference of information in Technic's education. The initiator within Magic is not a provider of knowledge-units. Rather, s/he is somebody who might invite another one into a space that s/he inhabits already, and whose access is through the testimony of one's living experience of Magic's reality-system. As in traditional initiatic rituals, this is a passage that happens in secret, however publicly it might be displayed – in that same way that a friendship or a kiss in public lose nothing of their secrecy.

To conclude this section on initiation and to lead to the next one, a brief recapitulation of its main points might be useful. We began where we had left our exposition in the previous section on the 'secret'. There, we saw how a first step to adopting Magic's reality-system within the present social constraints, has to do with being able to separate between the public sphere of descriptive language, and the sphere of the ineffable. Secrecy is the precondition to begin one's work within Magic, since it allows for the opening up of the necessary 'space' where Magic's process can take place. In this section, we proceeded looking at what kind of work that would be. We defined it immediately as a process that is at the same time epistemological and ontological. By defining it as a form of presential knowledge, we wished to make clear how adopting Magic's reality-system as one's own, requires a particular form of knowledge that is at the same time a form of existential and ontological transformation. By presentially witnessing the ineffable dimension of one's own existence and of existence in general, we acquire a different form of existence altogether – that is to say, we modify the fundamental reality-settings through which the ontological discourse takes place. This is a form of initiation, which is starkly opposed to Technic's education. Indeed, Magic's initiation is a form of theurgy – but one in which the subject, the object and the process itself all merge into one entity. Yet, initiation is not a process that is completely closed onto itself: as with traditional understanding of this practice, the initiated person is removed from their social and descriptively linguistic context, only so to be able to re-enter it as a new kind of entity. In the following section, titled 'as if', we shall see what kind of

existential consequences derive from initiation, as we re-enter our social context.

As if

To feel everything in every way,
to live everything from all sides,
to be the same thing in all possible ways and at the same time,
to realise in oneself the whole of humanity from every moment
in one single moment that is diffused, profuse, complete
and distant.³⁵

I am nothing.
I'll never be anything.
I couldn't want to be something.
Apart from that, I have in me all the dreams of the world.³⁶

Patriot? No: just Portuguese.
I was born Portuguese like I was born blond and blue-eyed.
If I was born to speak, I have to speak a language.³⁷

These brief excerpts come from the work of Álvaro de Campos and Alberto Caeiro, arguably the two most important Portuguese poets of the twentieth century, and among the greatest poets of modernity.

³⁵Álvaro de Campos/Fernando Pessoa, *A Passagem das Horas, Ode Sensacionista*, 1–5, my translation from the Portuguese original: 'Sentir tudo de todas as maneiras, / Viver tudo de todos os lados, / Ser a mesma coisa de todos os modos possíveis ao mesmo tempo, / Realizar em si toda a humanidade de todos os momentos / Num só momento difuso, profuso, completo e longínquo.' See F. Pessoa, *Obra Poética de Fernando Pessoa*, 2 vols., Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2016.

³⁶Álvaro de Campos/Fernando Pessoa, *Tabacaria*, 1–4, my translation from the Portuguese original: 'Não sou nada. / Nunca serei nada. / Não posso querer ser nada. / À parte isso, tenho em mim todos os sonhos do mundo.' See F. Pessoa, *Obra Poética de Fernando Pessoa*, 2 vols., Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2016.

³⁷Alberto Caeiro/Fernando Pessoa, *Patriota?*, my translation from the Portuguese original: 'Patriota? Não: só português. / Nasci português como nasci louro e de olhos azuis. / Se nasci para falar, tenho que falar-me.' See F. Pessoa, *Obra Poética de Fernando Pessoa*, 2 vols., Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2016.

Caeiro was a semi-illiterate, ascetic 'keeper of sheep' living with an old aunt in a village near the Tago river, while de Campos was a cosmopolitan and flamboyant naval engineer based in Lisbon. Yet the two were connected by a strong bond of friendship, which for de Campos overflowed into unrestrained admiration towards his spiritual and poetic master Caeiro. But there is one more thing that united them: neither of them ever had a body, or an official birth certificate. Álvaro de Campos, Alberto Caeiro and dozens other poets, fiction writers and essayists, were heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa, the Protean genius of philosophical poetry. Fernando Pessoa-himself was also one of his own heteronyms, figuring as just another name through which the author inhabited the world. What is more, Fernando Pessoa-himself was one of the lesser heteronyms, and not the most important one. When Alberto Caeiro died, at the age of 26, Fernando Pessoa was one of the few of his friends and disciples missing from his bedside – he couldn't attend because he was ill, or so we are told. But who is telling us? To whom belongs the voice that the Portuguese register and the bibliographic classifications assign to a certain Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa, 'actually' born in Lisbon in 1888 and who 'actually' died there in the late autumn of 1935? Pessoa-himself would answer: to nobody, to everybody.

To legions of critics, the irony was not lost that in the Portuguese language, Pessoa means 'person'. And what better way to introduce the practice of being a Magic's 'person' in the world, than looking at the lesson of Pessoa? When we think about Pessoa and his galaxy of heteronyms, the first definition that comes to mind is that of 'poet', despite the fact that he was an equally prolific writer of detective novels, philosophical treatises, astral charts and even crossword templates. In fact, Pessoa was a poet not only in literary terms, but also in his very life – as according to his definition of the poet:

The poet is a feigner.
 He feigns so completely
 That he even feigns that it is pain
 The pain that he really feels.³⁸

³⁸Fernando Pessoa-himself, *Autopsicografia*, 1–4, my translation from the original Portuguese: 'O poeta é um fingidor. / Finge tão completamente / Que chega a fingir que é dor / A dor que deveras sente.' See Pessoa, *Obra Poética de Fernando Pessoa*.

Delving into Pessoa's world means entering a labyrinth, where every turn brings you forward and sends you back to the starting point at the same time. Pessoa didn't use his heteronyms as *noms de plume* through which he could enrich his publishing portfolio. Rather, there was never any distance between the 'real' Pessoa and his 'fictional' heteronyms. Pessoa, like a 'person' in Magic, *was* at the same time all of his names, and none of them. He was each and any of them – including Pessoa-himself – *as if* he had been them. Only Alberto Caeiro, in his embodiment of an ecstatic metaphysical paganism, was capable of inhabiting a world where everything was truly and starkly itself, and where nature had 'no inside'. All other heteronyms, and Pessoa-himself, clearly perceived their existence in the world as a game of reflections in which they themselves were the reflections; reflections of what? This is impossible to say – literally, it is ineffable. All that can be said is that Pessoa, Caeiro, Campos and all others truly existed only inasmuch as they were instances of ineffable existence itself.³⁹ They truly existed only in their living dimension – which runs unified and uninterrupted through all of them, as it does throughout the existent. But whether such ineffable existence made itself manifest through one or the other name, counted for little or for nothing. Pessoa's 'persons' wore their linguistic clothing as a costume with which they had to identify to a certain degree in order to live in the world – but with which they never identified exclusively. In Pessoa, as in Magic's world, the 'as if' becomes the only possible way in which one's own ineffable dimension can inhabit its linguistically descriptive dimension.

[Pessoa] lived the life of an office worker *as if* he was an office worker, he treated himself *as if* he was another, he wrote his own poems *as if* they were somebody else's. ... But also the 'as ifs' can cause pain, of course. And maybe also pleasure. Like a prosthesis. And they require a certain connection with the sensibility of the terminal to which they refer: thus, they are endowed with the

³⁹For an examination of Pessoa's metaphysical thinking, see J. Balso, *Pessoa, the Metaphysical Courier*, New York and Dresden: Atropos Press, 2011. Pessoa's (slightly underwhelming) philosophical essays are collected in F. Pessoa, *Philosophical Essays*, edited by Nuno Ribeiro, New York, NY: Contra Mundum Press, 2012. However, more relevant to the present discussion are Pessoa's esoteric writings, collected in F. Pessoa, *Pagine Esoteriche*, Milano: Adelphi, 2007.

same principle as this, they have the same mechanics, perhaps they are even made of the same material. That Fernando Pessoa who lives his own 'as if', is clearly himself also Fernando Pessoa. ... Pessoa's 'true fiction', according to his subtle distinction, is an attitude towards reality, not only a literary dimension, and he used it indifferently in his life and in his literature.⁴⁰

Likewise, a person who has adopted Magic's reality-system treats the descriptively linguistic structures of the world *as if* s/he accepted their claim to existence. How could one traverse the world, if one was to fully reject the linguistic labels that distinguish one thing from another, or to the conventions that distinguish between noise and sound? Yet, such a belief is always performed at a distance, always shrouded in the *caveat* of the *as if*. 'If I was born to speak, I have to speak a language' – but let it be clear that I shall never consider this language as the arbiter of what exists, how it exists, what it is worth and so on. In the world as it is currently structured, I will have to have a passport to be able to traverse borders – but far from me any belief in the fact that this document says anything more than what it states literally. I am 'as if' Italian, with the same disbelieving distance with which I am 'as if' male. I shall never swear my allegiance to these linguistic divisions, or imperil anybody's life to safeguard my national identity, my gender identity and so on.⁴¹ Equally, I accept the distinction between edible and inedible vegetables only within the specific narrative of alimentation – but this amounts merely to a 'fictional' position in metaphysics, in the same way that one would say that Hector and Achilles 'really' existed, but only within the specific narrative of the Iliad. According to Magic, one has to take the contingency of the world of descriptive language at face value: it is necessary to inhabit it somehow, but we should never do so with any faith in its ability to convey anything more than a fractionally minute level of existence. It is not a matter of holding a sceptical position towards the world

⁴⁰A. Tabucchi, *Un Baule Pieno di Gente: scritti su Fernando Pessoa*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2009, pp. 94–5 and 98. My translation from the Italian original.

⁴¹'What matters the party to me? I shall find enough anyhow who will unite with me without swearing on my same flag' (M. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 210.).

of names – where scepticism, etymologically, stands for an attitude of constant ‘inquiry’. No matter how hard or sharp, no inquiry will ever extract from the realm of descriptive language anything more than what is already in plain sight. The point here is that a person adopting Magic’s reality-setting as their own, will have to maintain a *distance* from all that can be said in that ‘allegorical’ mode which, as we saw, Goethe starkly opposed to ‘symbolic’ language. If we are ever to use language to learn something more than a list of tautologies, then we should follow the direction towards which it points: allegories don’t point to anything more than themselves; symbols, ever so rare, point towards an ineffable that exceeds them completely. In either case, it is language that ‘has no inside’.

Performing the ‘as if’ at an existential level means fundamentally to identify with that ineffable dimension of existence that, as life, traverses uninterrupted through all that exists – whether material or immaterial. And from that standpoint, to treat language as a legitimately present yet hierarchically subordinate dimension of reality – in the same way that Mulla Sadra claimed the ‘primacy of existence’ over essence. Precisely, the person that adopts Magic’s reality-setting, takes the standpoint of the ineffable dimension of existence (which is equally their own and common to every existent), and from there they treat the objects of descriptive language as their own *property*. In doing so, they appropriate the lesson of Max Stirner, both in reference to themselves,

To step out beyond it leads into the unspeakable. For me paltry language has no word, and ‘the Word,’ the Logos, is to me a ‘mere word.’ My essence is sought for. If not the Jew, the German, than at any rate it is – the man. ‘Man is my essence.’ ... Man is the last evil spirit or spook, the most deceptive or most intimate, the craftiest liar, the father of lies.⁴²

and as a general methodology for their imagination and action in the world:

If the point is to have myself understood and to make communications, then assuredly I can make use only of human

⁴²Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, pp. 164–5.

means, which are at my command because I am at the same time man. And really I have thoughts only as man; as I, I am at the same time thoughtless. He who cannot get rid of a thought is so far only man, is a thrall of language, this human institution, this treasury of human thoughts. Language or 'the word' tyrannizes hardest over us, because it brings up against us a whole army of fixed ideas. Just observe yourself in the act of reflection, right now, and you will find how you make progress only by becoming thoughtless and speechless every moment. You are not thoughtless and speechless merely in (say) sleep, but even in the deepest reflection; yes, precisely then most so. And only by this thoughtlessness, this unrecognized 'freedom of thought' or freedom *from* the thought, are you your own. Only from it do you arrive at putting language to use as your *property*.⁴³

If we consider this methodology in the context of its originating cosmogony, we can understand its connection to Magic's relationship between the ineffable and the linguistic dimensions of existence. And if we substitute the terms 'ineffability' and 'descriptive language' with their respective limit-principles 'pure existence' and 'pure essence' (as discussed in the intermission between Chapters 2 and 3), we can appreciate how this methodology of life, imagination and action in the world, ultimately constitutes the most apparent form of Magic's reality. In the intermission, we suggested to understand 'reality' as such, as the space that takes place between the poles of pure existence and pure essence: the specific distance and relationship between these poles constitutes the specific shape of one reality-system or another (in this case, of Magic's reality). Through the existential strategy of the 'as if', we recreate once again that distance between existence and essence, ineffability and language, that is a basic requirement of 'reality' as such. In doing so, we reconstruct reality – with an opposite and specular movement to that through which Technic had proceeded to the annihilation of reality as such.

The method of the 'as if' thus displays in practice the cosmogonic mark that Magic impresses over the world, as filtered through a person's living experience. In itself, it is just a method of 'unparticipatory participation' and 'distant presence' within the

⁴³Ibid., pp. 305–6.

world, and of ‘metaphorical belief’ in the realm of descriptive language. As a method, its primary justification is in its usefulness rather than its truthfulness. Important insights on this distinction were offered by nineteenth–twentieth-century German philosopher Hans Vaihinger, particularly in his influential 1911 work *Philosophie des Als Ob* (The Philosophy of the As If). Departing from some of Kant’s basic intuitions, Vaihinger developed a vertiginous system of philosophy, based on the notion that our way of dealing with the world is always based on ‘fictions’ rather than ‘facts’ or even ‘hypotheses’. Since the world as it is in itself is hidden to our rational understanding, claims Vaihinger, we cannot then proceed through our life by way of verifiable hypotheses – rather, we must always make up fictional concepts and notions that we employ to navigate the world, while treating them ‘as if’ they were ‘real’. The point of this fictional endeavour – which Vaihinger painstakingly traces in virtually all fields of human activity, from modern science to theology – is that such fictions are useful to us.

This allows us to introduce order and develop some sort of classification, even if it be only a superficial one. ... In the second place, communication is thereby rendered possible. ... The communication of an event or an impression in an intelligible manner was made possible only through the formation of a limited number of categories. By bringing reality under these categories, communication between individuals became possible in terms of some known analogy, which immediately awakened in the recipient an idea of what the speaker wished to communicate. This is related to our third point, namely that understanding is thereby engendered – from our standpoint an illusion of understanding – reality being thought of under some known analogy. The tremendous pressure of the inrushing sensations is reduced, and the tension of these impressions is removed, in consequence of their being apportioned to different divisions. I would add at once that this was only made possible *in extenso* by language, ... since it was only by this means that the division of existence into categories became possible. Finally, it was only in this way that action could be determined.⁴⁴

⁴⁴H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of the ‘As if’*, translated by C. K. Ogden, London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner & Co., 1935, p. 176.

Thus, according to Vaihinger, we should treat our ideas about the world – that is, the notion that I exist as an individual, that this rock and its atoms exist, that freedom exists, etc. – ‘as if’ they were real, because by doing so we are able to enjoy a dignified existence in the world. Indeed, they are never to be considered as representative of anything true in itself – they don’t truthfully depict anything that preexists them – and they should be discarded as soon as their usefulness fades or is supplanted by a better fiction. Likewise – despite some important differences with Vaihinger’s perspective – Magic’s adoption of the ‘as if’ as an existential strategy in the world, is dictated on the grounds of its usefulness rather than of its fundamental truthfulness. On the one hand, accepting the linguistic divisions of the world ‘as if’ they were authentic enables us to take part in social life and enhances our range of activities in the world. On the other hand, by grounding it on the basis of Magic’s cosmology, it also allows us to structure the ‘as ifs’ that concern us most closely – for example, our notion of ourselves – in a symbolic manner, that is in a way that doesn’t smother our awareness of the ineffable dimension of existence, or its ability to manifest itself as such.

Yet, if we consider Magic’s strategy of the ‘as if’ in the context of today’s regime of Technic, we can also read it as a form of rebellion – though a rebellion of a particular kind. For one, it is a rebellion that often happens outside of the public eye, though on occasion it might also take a more publicly visible form. Rather than a direct assault against the social reality of our time and its underlying principles, it is a way to void it from the inside. By already inhabiting a different architecture of reality, Magic’s person creates an immediately effective alternative to Technic’s world-making. Such a course of action doesn’t seek to dialectically overcome the present, but rather to move beyond it. It is a withdrawal that is also an exit – and an exit that is also the foundation of an alternative reality-system. Coherently with the intense ‘biopolitical’ colonization of our lives by Technic, Magic’s first impact on our world takes place exactly at the level of a person’s lived experience of the world. By removing the existential involvement of a person into the very mechanisms of capture that are laid by Technic’s institutions, Magic’s ‘as if’ goes to erode at the core the very material that sustains and makes up the edifice of Technic’s world.

Yet, such ‘political’ aims are not the main reasons behind a person’s adoption of Magic’s reality-setting. Rather, they come

as welcome consequences, in the same manner that the adoption of anarchist ‘prefigurative’ practices (i.e. living already as if we had achieved radical emancipation) has public, macro-political consequences only as a symptom, rather than as its primary aim. In fact, the parallels between anarchic practice and an individual’s adoption of Magic’s reality-system in today’s world of Technic are more than superficial. The strategy of disengagement – or of ‘disentanglement’, in Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s parlance – promoted by Magic echoes a particular form of anarchy, which holds together such unlikely champions as the Hellenistic school of the Cyrenaics, the individualist anarchism of Max Stirner and the mature Ernst Jünger.⁴⁵ It was the latter who suggested a name for the person who relates to the hegemonic reality-form of their age, in the way that Magic suggests: the ‘Anarch’.

Ernst Jünger, whom we briefly encountered in Chapter 1, began his century-long literary career by identifying Technic as the reality-principle of the contemporary age, while proposing to wholeheartedly embrace its reshaping of the world and of our lives within it. Particularly in his 1932 volume *Der Arbeiter*⁴⁶ (The Worker), Jünger both presented Technic’s terrifying ‘total mobilisation’ of life and of the world, and encouraged his readers to enthusiastically follow its cosmogonic imperatives. It was only after the Second World War, at the dawn of the atomic age, that Jünger radically modified the ethical direction of his philosophy. While in his younger days he had believed that embracing Technic would have allowed humans to enter a new heroic age, in his maturity Jünger recognized Technic’s nihilism as pure annihilation of any possibility of life, imagination and action in the world. His radical turn fully materialized in 1951, when in his short book *The Forest Passage*⁴⁷ Jünger suggested that the only possible response to

⁴⁵This particular kind of ‘anarchic thought’ could be also classified as a heterodox form of ‘post-anarchism’ – whose main theorist at present is Saul Newman, see the seminal S. Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan*, London: Lexington Books, 2001; and his latest systematization in S. Newman, *Postanarchism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016. There are some important similarities (as well as some strong dissimilarities), for example, with the strand of post-anarchism proposed by Michel Onfray, in M. Onfray, *La Sculpture de Soi: La morale esthétique*, Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1993).

⁴⁶E. Jünger, *The Worker*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017.

⁴⁷E. Jünger, *The Forest Passage*, Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2014.

our contemporary world consisted in 'withdrawing to the forest' – where such a forest is to be understood as the ineffable wilderness that lies in one's own heart. Passing to the forest means, for Jünger, reclaiming for ourselves Technic's banishment of that dimension of existence that is irreducible to serial production. *Die Waldgänger*, the original title of the book, refers to the Icelandic practice of banishing into the forest those who had transgressed the rules of the community; for Jünger, we can follow our own ineffable dimension into the 'forest' to which Technic has cast it, and, from there, we can seek a new form of alternative and autonomous life.

A few years later, in 1977, Jünger sent to press the oneiric and dystopian novel *Eumeswil*,⁴⁸ which developed the notion of the *Waldgänger* in a more fully fledged and possibly less optimistic dimension. There, Jünger presented for the first time the figure of the 'anarch' who is capable of combining the withdrawal into the forest with a form of dissimulation in the context of social life. While the *Waldgänger* can play a role at the triumphal 'midday' of Nihilism, the Anarch is best equipped to survive the endless afternoon of its established kingdom. The Anarch, Jünger points out, is only a distant cousin of the anarchist – echoing more closely the secrecy of Magic's 'as if', as it is enacted by an individual living in Technic's world.

The anarchist is dependent – both on his unclear desires and on the powers that be. He trails the powerful man as his shadow; the ruler is always on his guard against him. ... The anarchist is the antagonist of the monarch, whom he dreams of wiping out. He gets the man and consolidates the succession. The -ism suffix has a restrictive meaning; it emphasises the will at the expense of the substance. ... The positive counterpart of the anarchist is the Anarch. The latter is not the adversary of the monarch but his antipode, untouched by him, though also dangerous. He is not the opponent of the monarch, but his pendant. After all, the monarch wants to rule many, nay, all people; the Anarch, only himself.⁴⁹

⁴⁸E. Jünger, *Eumeswil*, New York, NY: Marsilio Publishers, 1994.

⁴⁹Jünger, *Eumeswil*, pp. 42–3.

The city of Eumeswil, perhaps not dissimilarly from our contemporary world, exists in a state of perennial civil war, in which traditional authority has expanded into all-encompassing biopower, while the emptying of all meaning and possible alternatives complements total-policing in ensuring absolute political stillness. At that stage, any attempt at open resistance would be suicidal, at best futile, and in any case immediately swallowed by its opponent – as it is too often the case in today's late capitalism. In the perfectly hedonistic emptiness of Eumeswil, rebels are not those who parade their anarchist garments, but those who are able to disappear completely. Through his/her vanishing, the Anarch reclaims the necessary space – mental, if not physical – to be able to retain the autonomy to access the inner 'wilderness' of his own Stirnerian 'creative nothing' – as well as to violently strike back at power, whenever opportune.

Happy ending

Every reader who makes it to the last chapter of a book deserves a happy ending. I have always struggled to accept that a film or a book would draw me in for hours, only to conclude my journey with a catastrophe – or even worse, without a resolution. It is as if somebody made me walk for miles to reach their house, only to let the roof collapse once I finally got in. So, in line with the narrative/mythological tone of this book, I too would like to offer a happy ending to my reader. But what can it be, from the perspective of an existential experience of Magic in today's world? Perhaps, and also to sum up one last time the main differences between the two systems, we should begin by looking at the notion of a 'happy ending' according to Technic – so to be able to then compare it more closely with Magic's equivalent.

'And they lived happily ever after' is thus the starting point of this final section. One might be tempted to seek the difference between Technic's and Magic's approach, in the first part of the formula, particularly in the word 'happily'. But in fact, it is on the latter part that we should focus: 'ever after'. Let us observe how the 'ever after' of a happy ending takes a different shape according to Technic's and to Magic's reality-systems. In the one case, we shall consider it

as the product of 'safety', while in the latter as the consequence of 'salvation'.

If one was to draw a list of the *maxima desiderata* of our contemporary age, 'safety' would certainly make it to the very top. Technic's world has a morbid fascination with the idea of safety, and its securitarian drive is immediately apparent at every level of our social life. Safety is placed as the ultimate justification for the removal of political and civil rights, for the disintegration of empathy and solidarity, for the total medicalization of our bodies, for a paranoid attitude towards sexuality, for the sacrifice of one's best years to wage-labour, for the transformation of universities into centres to constantly upgrade one's employability, for the obsessive encrypting of one's accounts and communications, and so on and so forth. While from the perspective of Technic as a cosmogonic force, the 'good' consists in the endless expansion of serial production, from the existential perspective of 'abstract general entities' (such as us humans) this same 'good' takes the shape of achieving 'safety'. In other words: the limitless production of linguistic units constitutes the overall cosmological goal of Technic's system, while safety acts as its ideological equivalent at the existential level of the individuals inhabiting Technic's world. As we shall see, these two principles are not in contradiction or even in competition with each other, but they are in fact just different perspectives on the ethics of Technic.

'Ever after' means 'forever', and 'forever' implies the subject in question achieving stability. In the case of Technic, however, such a claim to eternity seems to escape the possibility of anybody inhabiting its world; first, as we said in the first part of this book, because Technic destroys the possibility of anybody being a subject, or an object; and secondly, perhaps more importantly in this context, because Technic's world relies entirely on an ontology of 'becoming'. The dichotomy between what is stable and eternal, and what 'becomes', is a constant feature in the history of philosophy. At least since the time of Plato, the attributes of stability and eternity have been assigned to the transcendent realm, while the material world that can be perceived through the senses supposedly falls into the realm of becoming. From the perspective of Technic, however, the division doesn't rely on the traditional difference between materiality/immateriality or rationality/sensuousness, but it is structured in terms of Technic's own peculiar ontology. What is stable and eternal, and thus immune from becoming, is what escapes

the possibility of being inserted into the serial chain of production. Absolute language relies on becoming, since every position in its series takes place exclusively as an instrument for the production of another serial position. As we discussed in the sections dedicated to Technic, its entire cosmology relies on the notion that the only mode of presence in the world is as an instrument – that is, as something which is never ‘for itself’ but always ‘for something else’. Technic’s world is inescapably made of becoming: nothing stable or eternal in itself can ever be allowed in it.

So far so good in terms of what we previously said about Technic. However, as the reader will recall, at the end of Technic’s chain of emanations we found something that stubbornly resisted Technic’s annihilation to mere instrumentality. That something – which also figured in Magic’s system as the origin of its alternative cosmogony – emerged as a scream of pain running through all living forms in Technic’s world. While this something was the lowermost border of Technic’s cosmogony, it is a central (though painfully illegitimate) part of an individual’s existential experience of Technic’s world. This something – which we called ‘life’ – refuses to accept Technic’s absolute embrace of becoming and challenges its rejection of any form of eternity and stability. Life seeks to escape its pulverization into the whirlpool of endless becoming, and its pain resounds also as a request to find a place of stability to call its own. Life, even mortal life, always seeks to partake of eternity. For this reason, Technic’s governance of the world has to take into account this impossible request, which, if accepted, would imperil the entire cosmological structure. But how is Technic going to resolve this seemingly insoluble riddle?

Here, the notion of ‘safety’ comes as the perfect response. Through its securitarian ideology, Technic manages to accommodate – at least in part – the irrepressible request for stability, while not renouncing its instrumental ontology of becoming. Of course, this is achieved at a cost – an important cost that burdens a large part of our experience of the contemporary world. Let us see how this solution unfolds. As we said, becoming cannot be transcended or avoided, since doing so would imply accepting a space outside Technic’s field of serial production. What cannot be avoided or overcome, however, can still be regulated. Safety is the ideological framework that allows Technic’s world to regulate the flow of its own becoming. A becoming made safe, is a becoming that is not

denied or transcended, but that is suspended. Securitarian ideology promises to the inhabitants of Technic's world, a flow of becoming that is made frictionless, as if it was suspended in a vacuum. This promise might sound paradoxical in the context of contemporary hyperactivity and of Technic's push to accelerate productive activity beyond any limit. Yet, the speed of production and that of becoming should not be confused as one and the same thing. Becoming refers to the existential temporality of the 'things' that inhabit Technic's world (i.e. productive units, or abstract general entities); slowing down becoming to the point of suspending it, means allowing for the virtually endless presence of productive units and abstract general entities in the world. Indeed, endlessly present positions of production in no way contradict Technic's relentless speed of production – on the contrary.

But how can becoming be suspended? And how could we describe this state of suspension? In other words, what does a 'safe' world look like? The existential 'happy ending' offered by Technic is not unlike that which we found at the end of its chain of cosmogonic emanations. There, we saw how Technic's response to life's unavailability to be reduced to absolute language, consisted in its being presented as a 'possibility' for Technic's expansion. Here, the same move is repeated at an existential and ideological level. A thing made safe, that is a becoming that is suspended, is reduced to a state of pure potentiality. If becoming takes place at the level of actuality – where one thing actually turns into another – conversely at the level of potentiality it is at once retained as a principle, and defused as a threat. A becoming turned into its potential to become, is at the same time expanded and intensified (since it is, at least potentially, open to even more directions), while it is also contained in a state of paralysis.

An instrument is always, as such, a form of potentiality rather than of actuality – in that, its status as an instrument consists exactly in its potential to bring into presence other entities. In the case of Technic, however, we noticed how said instrumentality is intensified to the utmost degree. Things exist in Technic's world only inasmuch as they are instruments, and all the more so, the more they are capable of activating (that is, bringing into presence) an ever-larger number of other productive positions. Only, we should keep in mind that Technic's notion of an instrument is not merely functional, but also ontological. In its world, abstract general entities (i.e. 'things'

including human individuals) are at the same time the operators, the material and the instruments of production; 'things' take place only as instruments, in the most absolute sense. And since potentiality (rather than actuality) is the mode of presence of an instrument, so their perfect presence in Technic's world consists in their transformation in the purely potential version of themselves. In this sense, the perfect 'thing' becomes the safest 'thing', and vice versa: anything that is perfectly safe is reduced to a state of pure potentiality to become anything else.

Our everyday life gives us plenty of opportunities to observe this continuous push to turn 'things' into a state of pure potentiality. Letting alone natural resources – already amply described by Heidegger as nothing more than 'standing-reserves' – we can feel this process at work in our very own, human lives. From healthcare to education, all forms of activity seem to be geared to expanding one's own potential: one's potential employability through the acquisition of new skills, one's potential life-span through the adoption of a strict diet, one's potential for social protection through the acquisition of a new citizenship, the potential productivity of an industrial plant through the implementation of efficiency measures, the potential strike-back power of a country through the development of a pre-emptive nuclear arsenal and so on. What truly counts is not what we can do today, but what we could do tomorrow, if only we applied ourselves to our self-improvement. More precisely, what truly counts is not what we are today, but what we could become tomorrow. The way that a 'thing' can expand its own potential, is through its activity. Even in macroeconomics, the quantification of a country's overall activity (GDP) is primarily valued in terms of its potential rather than its actuality – potential to further expand production, to take on new investments, to guarantee dividends on shares from said country, to allow for greater national debt, etc. – likewise, in our own individual lives. Coherently with its overall cosmological structure, Technic presents activity as aimed primarily, if not exclusively, at increasing the instrumental potential of the world and of all its inhabitants. In this sense, activity becomes the regulator of the speed at which becoming takes place in Technic's world: by managing the expansion of potentiality, it manages the flow of becoming.

Yet, this particular form of action also displays some surprising peculiarities. Let us briefly recapitulate, before discussing it. We saw

how Technic's ontology rejects anything stable, eternal or 'in itself', in favour instead of an instrumental ontology of endless becoming. But while this position is uncontroversial in general cosmological terms, it encounters serious difficulties in its existential application in the world. The painful 'something' – life – that inhabits Technic's world, despite Technic's efforts to eradicate it, still resists its reduction to pure instrumental becoming. As part of its governance of the world, and as a gesture towards the concerns of its living inhabitants, Technic thus develops the ideology of safety. Safety proposes to render bearable such a generalized state of becoming, not by transcending it, but by regulating its flow to the point of suspension. Seemingly paradoxically, this regulation happens through a particular use of activity: the frantic pace of Technic's production is in fact adopted as a means to slow down the rhythm of becoming that devours the presence of anything in the world. Activity is able to regulate the pace of becoming, by expanding the potentiality of each single thing (i.e. of each single becoming) rather than by focusing on implementing its actuality. In other words, contemporary hyperactivity in virtually all fields of production is ideologically geared towards endlessly expanding the potential of the world and of its inhabitants, rather than to bringing such potential to a state of defined actuality. By doing so, 'things' are allowed to indeterminably suspend their actual becoming, while at the same time fostering within themselves an ever-growing range of potential becomings. As shaped by contemporary activity, each 'thing' in the world hosts within itself the potential to become any other 'thing' (or in Technic's parlance, each position can become any other position), while never actually being forced to become anything at all. The perfect and 'safest' state in Technic's world is that in which a thing is nothing at all in itself, while remaining available to be rapidly transformed into anything else; this is the state of the perfect instrument, which is at once its own material, instrument and product.

So, what is the peculiarity of this kind of activity? Its peculiarity, perhaps surprisingly, is that such form of activity is entirely ineffectual. Indeed, it focuses on expanding potentiality, not on bringing about any actualized form. It focuses on making it possible, at least in theory, to bring any new linguistic position (i.e. any 'thing') into presence, while not actually doing so in practice. The actuality of the world, with its actual degradation and

renewal by the hands of the process of becoming, is supplanted by its potential form: it is made 'safe'. Said in other terms, activity in Technics' world is metalinguistic rather than linguistic; it produces a massive theoretical expansion of the field of language, while not actually saying anything. The apparent layer of bustling hyperactivity, as on our busy streets and telematic highways, is just the fluorescent coating of a sleeping entity. Technic's world is a world in which everything can happen, yet nothing does. Nothing is stable, yet nothing becomes. Technic's world, in its perfection, has fully internalized becoming, which takes places not as a movement between different 'things' (or positions), but as a sinking spiral *within* each 'thing' (or position). Technic's reality is an endless flow that lies still, as if it were congealed; perfectly efficient in its potentiality, yet utterly inefficacious in its actuality.⁵⁰

Such ineffectuality of action in Technic's world is the opposite, specular image of the supreme effectiveness of ritual action, as it's been conceived since the dawn of time. As we saw at the end of Chapter 3, looking at the ritual of libation in the Vedas, ritual action seeks effectiveness over efficiency or scale, regardless of the means at its disposal. Even the minuscule ritual sacrifice of a cup of milk, is capable of re-establishing the order of the whole universe. What is the difference between such ritual action, and the form that activity takes in Technics' world? Considering this difference means considering the difference between Technic's idea of 'safety' and Magic's notion of 'salvation'. The 'happy ending' is the perfection and conclusion of the whole chain of actions that have unfolded throughout a narrative – let us observe now how Magic suggests to wrap up its 'likely story'.

We can start moving towards Magic's 'happy ending' by stepping into a territory that has very little happiness to it. In a 1973 interview, Emile Cioran famously remarked that: 'What saved me is the idea of suicide. Without the idea of suicide I would have surely killed myself. What allowed me to keep on living, was knowing

⁵⁰How ... could we cope with ineffective death / ... which is like a sea, / where everyone is an Icarus, ... / and besides, so much happens all around us / and everything is equally unimportant, yes, unimportant / although so difficult, so inhumanly difficult, so painful!' Aleksander Wat, *Before Breughel the Elder*, in *Selected Poems*, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 27.

that I had this option, always in sight.’⁵¹ We can find much in Cioran’s quote that is revealing of our reaction to Technic’s world. In a world that is supposed to lie in a state of embryonic coma, its living inhabitants strive for a way out of the desert of its suspended becoming. Sadly, for thousands of people every year, this way out materializes as suicide. Even worse, for millions of others, this same desire to escape paralysis takes the form of political support for environmentally catastrophic policies and for the development of apocalyptic nuclear arsenals. Yet, neither of these darkest desires should be taken entirely at face value. Rather than originating from an authentic wish for the annihilation of one’s own or of other people’s life, both of them reveal a desire for the annihilation of the ‘world’ – where a world is the product of a certain reality-system. Both forms of suicidal tendency actually function as strategies of hope, pointing towards the need to move out of the present reality-system and of the world that it has brought about. Indeed, this is the first lesson that Magic takes from life’s scream of pain, as found at the bottom of Technic’s cosmogony and at the heart of its world. Such lesson says that life doesn’t wish for a suspension of its becoming or for a virtualization of its disintegration, but that it actually seeks an ‘outside’ from the world – precisely, so to be able to inhabit the world. To be able to sustain itself in the world, life needs to keep a foot outside of the world. Here, Magic opposes the ideology of ‘safety’, through its own ideology of ‘salvation’. Like in the case of Technic, salvation acts as the existential equivalent of Magic’s cosmogonic principles, considered from the perspective of their application in the world.

Let us observe a few crucial dissimilarities between safety and salvation. Firstly, safety is a negative concept: one is safe from a threat, not in itself. As we saw, safety refers in particular to protecting the presence of ‘things’ in Technic’s world of becoming, from their rapid degradation by the hand of the very process of becoming. Conversely, salvation is a positive notion in itself. True, one might be saved from a shipwreck, but this doesn’t imply a negative opposition to the shipwreck-event, rather a movement *outside* of it. Said otherwise, safety has a ‘pathological’ approach

⁵¹Emile Cioran in conversation with Christian Bussy, 1973, online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhR536ao_cg (last accessed 30 April 2017).

in that it constitutes itself in negative opposition to a hostile agent, while salvation operates 'therapeutically' in that it is built around a notion of 'health'. A 'saved' entity in Magic's world, is an entity that is made 'healthy' – where a thing's 'health' consists in its assuming the paradoxical form of existing at the same time ineffably and linguistically, eternally and within becoming, actually and potentially. Magic's therapy consists precisely in helping the inhabitants of its world to exist at once inside and outside of the world, like its cosmogony created a universe that is at once in and out of language. Salvation thus takes place first of all as the opening of the world of becoming to a dimension that transcends its temporality, and equally as the interweaving of unmeasurable temporality and the worldly spectacle of becoming.⁵²

On this basis, salvation aims at actuality, unlike safety's focus on potentiality. The point of salvation is not to reduce entities in the world to a state of absolute language, in which they can potentially activate each and every linguistic position in any series of production. Rather, salvation refers to the rescue of an entity from its exclusive identification with its linguistic dimension, and to its acceptance also of the living, ineffable dimension of its existence. Indeed, it is from the standpoint of their ineffable life that they can claim to *actually* exist, while at the same time being able to manage the potential that is implicit in their linguistic dimensions. Regardless of the range of one's potential to take on various linguistic positions in the world, every existent is always *actually there* in its ineffable dimension. As such, it is also always stably there, and eternally so. In its living dimension, every single thing in Magic's world is a manifestation of that stable, eternal, ineffable existence that runs uninterrupted throughout and beyond the world. And from that position, it is capable of enduring the process of becoming, which

⁵²A weak and continually foundering Tikkun, but also one that frees both from the brothels of historicism and from the subtle charm of soothsayers Not a vision of what is to come, but redemption ('*salvezza*', that is 'salvation', in the original Italian edition) of every moment in its capacity to name itself as that instant, that meantime in which the symbolic primacy of the word can represent itself, and do so precisely at the height of the allegorical, amid its ruins. That shadow of eschatological "reserve" projects itself onto every event, strong enough to free us ... from every chrono-latry.' In M. Cacciari, *The Necessary Angel*, translated by M. E. Vatter, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994, p. 53.

takes hold of and devours its linguistic dimension. It is only on the basis of one's eternity, that one is capable of growing old and dying. This is not the traditional distinction between an immortal soul and a perishable body; rather, it is a distinction, *within one's very soul or body*, of an eternal dimension and a perishable one. The linguistic dimension of existence always truly becomes, changes and vanishes, while the ineffable kernel of its existence always truly remains stable, eternal and in perfect unity with that of any other existent. In Magic's world, these two dimensions take place together and at the same time – although according to different temporalities – and they are inseparable in practice. Like in our earlier mention of the notion of hierophany, in which a sacred stone is at once just a stone and the place of epiphany of the ineffably divine, so in Magic's world every instance of becoming is at once just that, perishable and decaying, while at the same time also partaking of eternity. Borrowing from Mulla Sadra, we could call this, a state of 'unity in multiplicity' (*al-wahda fil-kathra*).

In this sense, Magic's world doesn't really require salvation, because everything in it is always-already saved.⁵³ At the very heart of Magic's cosmogony lies the tenet that the world and all its inhabitants take place as paradoxes of ineffability and language, eternity and becoming. Thus, Magic's world comes to presence as already 'healthy', already saved.⁵⁴ So, what is Magic's 'salvation' for? Once again, we have to operate a distinction between the cosmological aspect of a world, and the existential experience that its inhabitants have of it. Even though the world, as it emerges through Magic's reality-frame, is already saved in itself, yet such character might not be immediately apparent to the existential experience of an individual inhabiting it. On the one hand, this is because Magic's cosmogony requires a process of constant re-creation of its world, as discussed at the end of Chapter 3. And from this angle, salvation consists exactly in the continuous process of structuring the linguistic dimension of the world (and of oneself)

⁵³'What is salvation, if there is no threat?' A. Zagajewski, *Selected Poems*, London: Faber & Faber, 2004, p. 156.

⁵⁴'To understand dogma as ... a symbol, is to "unravel" its dogmatism, and that is the meaning of Resurrection, of the other world, or rather, this understanding is already Resurrection.' Henry Corbin, *Alone With the Alone*, op. cit., p. 200.

in a symbolic form. On the other, the same world acquires different appearances if seen from the angle of its cosmogonic force, or from the perspective of its populations – that is, from the first or from the last hypostasis. What is clear and composed from the viewpoint of the principle of the ineffable as life, might well be confusing and unclear if seen through the eyes of a living paradox as we are. Such a living individual, although already cosmologically ‘saved’ in themselves might require salvation at the level of their perception of life in the world.

This is particularly true, when Magic’s reality-system lies in a state of utter marginality at the level of the social narration of the world, as it is the case in today’s age of Technic. In a world such as that of our contemporary age, a living individual struggles to acknowledge, let alone embrace, their condition as always-already-saved. On the contrary, Technic’s world tends to confine the living experience of the individual in a particular field of psychopathology, which we could define as the ‘impostor syndrome’. In Technic’s world, inasmuch as something is alive, it is always somehow resisting Technic’s attempt to annihilate it to the condition of a pure linguistic position in a series of production. The living dimension of an individual (human or non-human), and of the whole world as such, is thus condemned as illegitimately present. Its resistance to not vanishing entirely into the thin air of productive language amounts to the crime of imposture; as long as something is alive and yet part-takes to the various available positions in Technic’s world, it is an impostor. Yet at the same time, such imposture cannot really be redeemed, since Technic is both unable to remove entirely the ineffable dimension of existence, and unwilling to allow it to exceed into any ‘outside’ to Technic’s world. A living individual is thus stuck in a condition that is at once of captivity and of exclusion, much like a stateless person in the deadlock of border bureaucracy. Indeed, what might sound like an abstract condition relating to cosmology is in fact an increasingly frequent symptom of psychopathological malaise, throughout our contemporary world. In most cases, this malaise takes the apparent form of depression, while in fact being just the symptom – the necessary, unavoidable symptom – of a far deeper, metaphysical condition.

In the face of this painful situation, Magic’s proposes ‘salvation’ as the successful outcome of its therapy – a therapy that aims to cure the malaise at the fundamental level of a person’s

reality-system. In this sense, 'salvation' is also the symptom of a realized escape from the metaphysical hegemony of Technic's world-making form. Thus, even though a person wouldn't really need to be saved at a cosmological level, they still need to be aware of their salvation; in other words, they need to be *consoled*. Magic's reality-system aims to console those who adopt it, by rebuilding their experience of themselves and of the world in a way that reveals to them their condition of eternal and preexisting salvation. This aspect of Magic's entire project might sound reminiscent of gnostic doctrines, in which the acquisition of a certain type of knowledge almost automatically leads to salvation. However, apart from the obvious theological differences between Magic and Gnosticism, the two systems differ also in the power that they attribute to the knowledge of their respective tenets. In Gnosticism, such initiation had effects in absolute terms: the world that it described was supposedly the only real world, and thus the ontological transformation produced by initiation was fully and absolutely 'real'. Conversely, Magic's reality-system is only one possible reality-system. Getting to know it produces an ontological transformation that is epistemologically bound in that it depends on the adoption of Magic's reality-system as one's own. Within Magic's cosmology, a person and the world are always-already saved, and thus being initiated to it amounts to little more than a form of consolation. However, outside of Magic's cosmology – that is in any other possible reality-system – such salvation is not operative and it is often impossible, as it is the case with Technic's reality-system. Thus, while within Magic salvation doesn't have any ontological effects, the passage from one reality-system to another – in this case, from that of Technic to that of Magic – has indeed authentic ontological consequences.

In a sense, Magic's happy ending is always-already inscribed in the very first passages of its cosmogonic narrative. Nothing could be less surprising in a cosmology that has the figure of the paradox as its perfect symbolic form. Yet, before ending this last page of this volume, we should offer a final image, a final resolution to Magic's own world-making story. What does salvation look like, in practice? What is the closing frame that fades out, as Magic's narrative finally sets? The Russian poet Fëdor Ivanovič Tjutčev offers us a beautiful image of Magic's finale, which he presents in the form of a wish.

My soul would like to be a star,
But not when, like living eyes,
From the midnight sky,
They stare upon our sleepy world.
No, but during daytime when, hidden
By the searing haze of sunlight,
Like ever-brighter deities
They burn unseen in the pure ether.⁵⁵

⁵⁵F. I. Tjutcev, 'My soul would like to be a star', my translation from Tommaso Landolfi's version, in F. Tjutcev, *Poesie*, Milano: Adelphi, 2011, p. 52.

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