

# Explaining Mantras

*Ritual, Rhetoric, and the Dream of a  
Natural Language in Hindu Tantra*



Robert A. Yelle

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# EXPLAINING MANTRAS

## RITUAL, RHETORIC, AND THE DREAM OF A NATURAL LANGUAGE IN HINDU TANTRA

Robert A. Yelle

Routledge  
New York & London

Published in 2003 by  
Routledge  
29 West 35th Street  
New York, NY 10001  
www.routledge-ny.com

routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

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Published in Great Britain by  
Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane  
London EC4P 4EE  
www.routledge.co.uk

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Yelle, Robert A.

Explaining mantras: ritual, rhetoric, and the dream of a natural language in Hindu tantra/by Robert A. Yelle.

p. cm. —(religion in history, society & culture; 3)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-96635-3 (Print Edition) (Hardcover: alk. paper)

1. Hindu mantras. 2. Tantras—Criticism, interpretation. I. Title. II. Series.

BL1236.36.Y45 2003

294.5'37—dc21

2003006793

ISBN 0-203-48338-3 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-57850-3 (Adobe eReader Format)

*This book is dedicated to my wife, Lynda, in  
love and gratitude*

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## Series Editors' Foreword

*Religion in History, Society, and Culture* brings to a wider audience work by outstanding young scholars who are forging new agendas for the study of religion in the twenty-first century. As editors, we have two specific goals in mind.

First, volumes in this series illumine theoretical understandings of religion as a dimension of human culture and society. Understanding religion has never been a more pressing need. Longstanding academic habits of either compartmentalizing or ignoring religion are breaking down. With the entry of religion into the academy, however, must come a fully realized conversation about what religion is and how it interacts with history, society, and culture. Each book in this series employs and refines categories and methods of analysis that are intrinsic to the study of religion, while simultaneously advancing our knowledge of the character and impact of particular religious beliefs and practices in a specific historical, social, or cultural context.

Second, this series is interdisciplinary. The academic study of religion is conducted by historians, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, psychologists, and others. Books in the series bring before the reader an array of disciplinary lenses through which religion can be creatively and critically viewed. Based on the conviction that the instability of the category itself generates important insights, "religion" in these works encompasses and/or informs a wide range of religious phenomena, including myths, rituals, ways of thought, institutions, communities, legal traditions, texts, political movements, artistic production, gender roles, and identity formation.

In the present volume (the third in the series), Robert Yelle develops a bold new understanding of *mantras*—magically charged verbal formulas used in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions to achieve a broad range of goals, including many that are extremely pragmatic and immediate. In order to accomplish his purpose,



Yelle focuses on the ways in which *mantras* are presented and used in a corpus of ritually oriented esoteric texts that were written in Sanskrit by Hindu scholars situated in northern India (primarily Bengal) during the medieval period.

Yelle begins by brilliantly exposing the emic theories of reality and language that inform how the authors of these texts understood the character and effectiveness of the *mantras* they deployed. In the process of pursuing his very specific study of Hindu *mantras*, Yelle makes important advances in semiotic theories of poetry and religious rhetoric that have implications far beyond the boundaries of Indological research. Scholars of religion who seek to explain the efficacy of ritual practices from the standpoint of either traditional practitioners or outside observers will need to take account of Yelle's arguments.

Frank Reynolds and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan

# Acknowledgments

In the course of writing a book, one accumulates so many debts that it is difficult to acknowledge or even to recall properly all of them. This is especially true in the case of a first book, which builds on many foundations previously laid. I would therefore like to begin by thanking all of my teachers, past and present, for their instruction and example. Special thanks go to the readers on my dissertation committee, Wendy Doniger, Sheldon Pollock, and Michael Silverstein, who, after teaching me most of the Sanskrit and semiotics I know, strove admirably to correct some of the errors and excesses of my first efforts to combine these two fields. My advisor, Frank Reynolds, played an instrumental role throughout my graduate education at the University of Chicago. I can only hope to achieve his combination of critical insight, breadth of knowledge, and generosity of spirit. Many others contributed to the formation of this project through conversation. For their bravery and patience in these verbal contests I award Purple Hearts first to Steve Lindquist, who has also made helpful comments on drafts, and to Christopher Lehigh, Spencer Leonard, Aditya Dev Sood, and Ananya Vajpeyi.

Several organizations supported the research and writing of this dissertation. The Bangladesh Fellowship Program of the Social Science Research Council funded a predissertation research trip to Dhaka and Rajshahi in 1998. The U.S. Department of Education awarded a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship for a year in Calcutta during 1999–2000. The Martin Marty Center of the University of Chicago Divinity School underwrote the first year of dissertation writing, and alleviated the inevitable isolation of that year through the stimulating conversations at the Center. The Committee on Southern Asian Studies of the University of Chicago provided a grant for my final year of dissertation writing.

Many people in South Asia contributed their knowledge, material assistance, and camaraderie to this project. The beginnings of this

project in Bangladesh were aided by Professors Anisuzzaman and Dulal Bhoumik of Dhaka University, by Syeeda Farida Parvin of the Dhaka University Library, by Dr. Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury of the Independent University of Bangladesh, by Saidur Rahman, by Director Saifuddin Chowdhury and Md. Abdul Kuddus of the Varendra Research Museum in Rajshahi, and by the *ojha* Abu Taleb. In Calcutta, my research on Tantra was aided by Professor Debabrata Sen Sharma of the Ramakrishna Mission, by Professor Ratna Basu of Calcutta University, by Hena Basu, and by the staffs of the Sanskrit Sahitya Parisad, Asiatic Society, and National Library. The USEFI staff at the American Center, led by Dr. Sunrit Mullick, rendered important practical assistance. The greatest debt is owed to my friend and *guru*, Professor Satyanarayan Chakraborty, for his scholarly guidance, assistance in reading the Tantras, and general good humor. I will treasure forever the times spent with his family near Shyambazar. Last but not least come the many friends who made Calcutta hospitable for this foreigner, including: Bhaskar Laha and family, Debashish Datta, Sarbani Sen, Abesh Choudhury, Pratiti Basu Sarkar, Neela Majumdar, Abhijeet Paul, Sreyashi Sen, and Tapas Ray. Please forgive any omissions.

The transformation of the dissertation into a book was facilitated by the editors at Routledge, Damian Treffs and Paul Johnson. The reviewer for Routledge made several valuable suggestions for improvement. Jason Howell of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, helped me to rethink the tables. Some material in chapters four, five, and six is reprinted, in revised form, from two earlier articles, with permission from Oxford University Press and Elsevier, respectively: "Rhetorics of Law and Ritual: A Semiotic Comparison of the Law of Talion and Sympathetic Magic," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 (2001): 627–47; and "Poetic Justice: Rhetoric in Hindu Ordeals and Legal Formulas," *Religion* 32 (2002): 259–72.

Thanks are due also to my family, starting with those without whom the author himself would not have been authored, Louis and Judith Yelle, who, as parents ought, have always accepted, even before understanding. To my wife Lynda I owe a thousand unnamed debts, and a little one named Maya.

# Abbreviations

References to Sanskrit texts by abbreviation are to the editions listed in the Bibliography.

<i>ĀDh</i>	<i>Āpastamba Dharmasūtra</i>
<i>ĀT</i>	<i>Āgamatattvavilāsa</i>
<i>AU</i>	<i>Atharvaśikhā Upaniṣad</i>
<i>BĀU</i>	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>
<i>BhST</i>	<i>Bhūtaśuddhi Tantra</i>
<i>BNiT</i>	<i>Bṛhannīla Tantra</i>
<i>BS</i>	<i>Brahmasūtra</i>
<i>CU</i>	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>
<i>DT</i>	<i>Damara Tantra</i>
<i>GauT</i>	<i>Gautamīya Tantra</i>
<i>GDh</i>	<i>Gautama Dharmasūtra</i>
<i>GT</i>	<i>Gandharva Tantra</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>Hevajra Tantra</i>
<i>HYP</i>	<i>Haṭhayogapradipikā</i>
<i>JT</i>	<i>Jñānārṇava Tantra</i>
<i>JUB</i>	<i>Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>KĀ</i>	<i>Kaulāvalī</i>
<i>KDhT</i>	<i>Kāmadhenu Tantra</i>
<i>KT</i>	<i>Kulārṇava Tantra</i>
<i>KU</i>	<i>Kauṣītāki Upaniṣad</i>
<i>KubT</i>	<i>Kubjikā Tantra</i>
<i>LSN</i>	<i>Lalitā Sahasranama</i>
<i>LT</i>	<i>Lakṣmī Tantra</i>
<i>MMA</i>	<i>Mantramahārṇava</i>
<i>MMT</i>	<i>Muṇḍamālā Tantra</i>

<i>MMU</i>	<i>Mantramahodadhi</i>
<i>MNT</i>	<i>Mahānirvāṇa Tantra</i>
<i>MS</i>	<i>Manusmṛti</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>Māyā Tantra</i>
<i>MU</i>	<i>Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad</i>
<i>MVT</i>	<i>Mālinīvijāyottara Tantra</i>
<i>MYS</i>	<i>Mantrayogasamhitā</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>Nirukta</i>
<i>NeT</i>	<i>Netra Tantra</i>
<i>NiT</i>	<i>Nīla Tantra</i>
<i>NT</i>	<i>Nirvāṇa Tantra</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Prāṇatoṣiṇī</i>
<i>PĀ</i>	<i>Padārthadarśa</i>
<i>PH</i>	<i>Pratyabhijñāhṛdaya</i>
<i>PT</i>	<i>Prapañcasāra Tantra</i>
<i>PurA</i>	<i>Puraścaryārṇava</i>
<i>PurR</i>	<i>Puraścaraṇarasollāsa</i>
<i>RT</i>	<i>Rudrayāmala Tantra</i>
<i>ṚV</i>	<i>Ṛg Veda</i>
<i>ŚĀ</i>	<i>Śāktānandatarangīni</i>
<i>SB</i>	<i>Saubhāgyabhāskara</i>
<i>SDT</i>	<i>Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra</i>
<i>ŚK</i>	<i>Śāktakrama</i>
<i>SMT</i>	<i>Sam̐mohana Tantra</i>
<i>SpK</i>	<i>Spandakārikā</i>
<i>ŚS</i>	<i>Śivasūtra</i>
<i>ŚT</i>	<i>Śāradātilaka Tantra</i>
<i>SUT</i>	<i>Sarvollāsa Tantra</i>
<i>TRT</i>	<i>Tantrarāja Tantra</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Bṛhat Tantrasāra</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>Toḍala Tantra</i>
<i>VaDh</i>	<i>Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra</i>
<i>VB</i>	<i>Vijñānabhairava</i>
<i>ViDh</i>	<i>Viṣṇu Dharmasūtra</i>
<i>VR</i>	<i>Varivasyārahasya</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Viśvasāra Tantra</i>
<i>YT</i>	<i>Yoginī Tantra</i>

## Note on Translation

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Sanskrit texts are my own, except for quotations from the Upanisads, which are from Patrick Olivelle, ed. and trans., *The Early Upaniṣads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Word and the World

Language belongs in its origin to the age of the most rudimentary form of psychology: we find ourselves in the midst of a rude fetishism when we call to mind the basic presuppositions of the metaphysics of language—which is to say, of *reason*. It is *this* which sees everywhere deed and doer; this which believes in will as cause in general; this which believes in the “ego,” in the ego as being, in the ego as substance, and which *projects* its belief in the ego-substance on to all thing—only thus does it *create* the concept “thing.”...Being is everywhere thought in, *foisted on*, as cause; it is only from the conception “ego” that there follows, derivatively, the concept “being.”...At the beginning stands the great fateful error that the will is something which *produces an effect*—that will is a *faculty*.... Today we know it is merely a word.... Nothing, in fact, has hitherto had a more direct power of persuasion than the error of being as it was first formulated by, for example, the Eleatics: for every word, every sentence we utter speaks in its favor!—Even the opponents of the Eleatics were still subject to the seductive influence of their concept of being: Democritus, among others, when he invented his *atom*.... “Reason” in language: oh, what a deceitful old woman! I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar....

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*<sup>1</sup>

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT LANGUAGE AND RITUAL, AND THEIR INTERSECTION IN POETRY OR, to use a more highly charged term, *rhetoric*. Above all, it is about the dream of a natural language, one that has a direct and immediate connection to, and is therefore capable of influencing, reality. This dream is a

response to a set of problems: the problem of reference, or the meaning of words; the (im)possibility of translation and communication; and, last but not least, the gap (both existential and practical) between the “word” and the “world.” We begin by examining the dream of a natural language as embodied in the *mantras*, or verbal formulas, of Hindu Tantric ritual. However, later chapters show that the dream of a natural language has been shared by many cultures, and potentially bridges another gap, that between “West” and “East,” or “Self” and “Other.”

Mantras have been a distinctive feature of the Hindu religious tradition since the time of its most ancient texts, the Vedas (c. 1500–1000 BCE) and earliest Upaniṣads (c. 800–500 BCE), but became even more central in the later Hindu movement known as *Tantra* (c. 600 CE–present).<sup>2</sup> According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *mantra* signifies “a sacred text or passage, esp. one from the Vedas used as a prayer or incantation.”<sup>3</sup> Mantras are used for both mundane and spiritual purposes, and span the continuum of function between spells and prayers. In colloquial English, *mantra* may be used for any repetitive slogan, such as is found in politics or advertising. The meaning of *mantra* according to the Tantric tradition is described in detail in subsequent chapters.

Tantric mantras, as noted, are an important example of the cross-cultural idea of a language that, having a direct connection to reality, is both true and effective: what I have called a “natural language.” By this term I do not mean what is commonly meant: a language that arose spontaneously in a living culture, as opposed to a created “artificial language.” Many natural languages (in the sense in which I use the term), including Tantric mantras, are highly artificial, deliberate attempts to remedy the failures of our ordinary language to correspond to reality. Other terms that have been used to describe such attempts, including “universal language” and “perfect language,” might have avoided some confusion, but at the expense of accuracy.<sup>4</sup>

Sir John Woodroffe, the pioneer of Tantric studies who published under the pen name “Arthur Avalon,” understood that the Tantras, following the Vedas, present a theory of “natural name.”<sup>5</sup> He embraced this theory with all the fervor of a convert:

The test of a natural name is ultimately experimental, that is the sound (*śabda*) being given, the object (*artha*) is evolved: the object being given, the sound is evolved. In absolutely natural names these relations are at once established. In relative names they are established in varying measure

through *Krama* and *Japa* [repetitive chanting]. Ultimately the question whether Veda is a system of approximate natural names is thus a question of fact.<sup>6</sup>

Woodroffe faithfully reflected the idea that mantras have an indexical or causal relation to reality, a relation reinforced through repetition (*japa*). This relation is also a type of metonym or synecdoche, in which a part represents the whole (*pars pro toto*): the most famous mantra, *om*, manages in a single syllable to stand in for not only all language, but the entire cosmos itself, which emerged from and depends upon language. *CU* 2.23.3 explains that “As all the leaves (of a book) are bored through by a pin, so all words (*vāk*) are bored through by *om*. This whole world is nothing but *om*.”<sup>7</sup> *JUB* 1.10.3 gives a different version of this saying: “As leaves might be stuck together with a pin, so these worlds (*lokāḥ*) are stuck together by this syllable *om*.”<sup>8</sup> In this condensation of meaning is also a sleight of hand, a substitution of language for reality, or the “word” for the “world.” Language both contains and governs reality in a hierarchical relationship of control. This metaphor of containment is succinctly expressed by the Tantric conception of the alphabet as the “mother” (*mātṛkā*) of the cosmos, which emerges from her womb, only to return in death. If such a generative relation exists, then reality may be influenced by manipulating language.

In the Tantric tradition, the Sanskrit language or alphabet itself constitutes a “canon,” according to Jonathan Z. Smith’s fruitful definition: “the radical and arbitrary reduction represented by the notion of canon and the ingenuity represented by the rule-governed exegetical enterprise of applying the canon to every dimension of human life is that most characteristic, persistent, and obsessive religious activity.”<sup>9</sup> Tantra takes this idea one step further. Not only all sacred literature, but the world itself arises from the alphabet:

(The alphabet) beginning with the letter “a” and ending with the letter “kṣa” is the highest *kuṇḍalinī* itself. The whole (world) of mobile and immobile (beings) arises directly from the letters, and various (types of texts:) *Sāstras*, *Purāṇas*, and histories, beautiful one, and *Vedas* and *Smṛtisastras*, and whatever else there is, all that arises from the syllables, even the highest Brahman itself....<sup>10</sup>

The Tantric alphabet allows not only the exegesis, but also the manipulation of the cosmos. Language becomes a tool of

production as well as prediction. The “word” is used to leverage the “world.” The reduction to canon may, as Smith argues, be arbitrary. However, the Tantric tradition regards the language of its mantras as entirely natural or “motivated,”<sup>11</sup> a status evidenced by the resemblance between this language and reality. This resemblance, of course, is not natural, but artificial and constructed: a form of imitation. Tantric ritual converts mantras into mimetic diagrams of several forms of creation simultaneously: the general cycle of evolution and involution of the cosmos; the cycle of in- and out-breaths; the act of verbal creation that traces the path of speech from the back of the throat to the front of the lips, and outside the body to the world beyond; and the cycle of sexual reproduction, including the birth and death of the mantra itself regarded as a living being or form of the deity. These forms of linguistic mimicry reinforce, virtually and rhetorically, the indexical or causal relation between the domains of language and reality. When a mantra resembles creation, it is believed to be more creative and effective in producing a real-world result.

The Vedas and Upaniṣads extolled the creative power of language, which was held to express the secret connections (*bandhu*) among the sacrifice, the cosmos, and the microcosm of the human body, knowledge of which connections rendered the sacrifice effective.<sup>12</sup> Resemblances between words were taken as evidence of a connection both between the things to which these words referred, and between the “word” and the “world.” Further developing and applying these speculations, the Tantras construct a virtual connection between language and reality within the text of the mantra itself. Tantric mantras even borrow the very language of some Upaniṣadic formulas and attempt to improve upon its cosmogonic potential.

Although mantras, like the spells and ritual languages of other cultures, exhibit a variety of forms of repetition and other rhetorical devices, the function of such devices has generally been ignored by Western scholars. This lacuna contrasts with some recent theories of ritual proposed by anthropologists, linguists, and semioticians, who have argued in different ways that such devices reinforce the pragmatic, performative, or persuasive function of ritual. Building from such theories, I will demonstrate how poetry contributes to the effectiveness of ritual by constructing a virtual bridge between language and reality, and conjuring the persuasive illusion of a natural language.

The present study in part confirms, and in part disputes, Jonathan Z. Smith’s claim that ritual is primarily a way of

recognizing or asserting difference.<sup>13</sup> Accepting that ritual is a rule-governed behavior differentiated from other behaviors by its formal characteristics, or, as Catherine Bell has put it, by techniques of “ritualization,”<sup>14</sup> it nevertheless appears that the form and function of many rituals establishes their convergence, their inhabitation of a scale of forms, with the genres of poetry and rhetoric. Many rituals employ devices based on repetition, similarity, or imitation (*mimesis*) to augment the force of their discourse. Therefore, a rhetorical theory of ritual coincides with some older Western ideas regarding poetry and rhetoric. Theories of ritual as a genre marked exclusively or primarily by its difference are no better able to explain these convergences than are theories of poetry and literature as also constituted primarily by their difference from ordinary modes of discourse.<sup>15</sup> Or perhaps two differences may make a similarity?

A number of recent theories, including Smith’s, that define ritual in terms of a purely conventional or arbitrary difference derive, more or less explicitly, from Émile Durkheim’s earlier characterization of the Sacred as merely that which is opposed by society to the Profane.<sup>16</sup> Collective representations, and primordially those established in the ritual process as the “elementary forms” of religion, were in Durkheim’s view strictly arbitrary and nonrepresentational in form. What invests them with effective force and social function is the contagious sentiment of solidarity the social group experiences on ritual occasions, which sentiment is only recalled and refreshed, not constituted by such ritual signs. This view of ritual is circular, as it bypasses any account of the contribution of the form of ritual to its function. This view has been reinforced recently by the appropriation of structural linguistics in religious studies. The structuralist axiom that signs, being arbitrary, are invested with value in relation to other signs, including the relation of binary opposition, appears to confirm Durkheim’s view of the Sacred as merely the opposite of the Profane. However, the Sacred (or ritual) cannot be distinguished in this respect from any other social category.

We are all structuralists (and poststructuralists) now. However, granting the gap between language and reality that is entailed by the arbitrariness of the sign, the question becomes instead, as was already partially foreseen by Ferdinand de Saussure:<sup>17</sup> how does language (attempt to) bridge this gap? This question becomes all the more pointed in the case of ritual, which is often a response to a situation of pragmatic crisis. Through a semiotic analysis of the form and function of ritual, I will demonstrate that ritual often constructs an artificial resemblance between its

discourse and reality, or between the “word” and the “world,” so that manipulations of the former will produce effects in the latter. Ritual uses various rhetorical devices to reinforce or naturalize its discourse and virtually alter the world in its own image. Therefore, ritual represents less a “realistic” recognition of the difference between discourse and reality, as Smith has claimed,<sup>18</sup> than the repression of that recognition and the substitution of an illusion of continuity between these domains.<sup>19</sup>

This book consists of two parts. The first part, [chapters one](#) through three, focuses on Tantric mantras. [Chapter one](#) indicates, through a stylistic analysis of mantras, the contribution of the poetic form of mantras to their function, and it describes the neglect of this contribution by earlier scholars. [Chapter two](#) performs a careful reading of Sanskrit ritual texts and reconstructs the emic or “inside” view of the Tantras regarding what makes a mantra effective. As previously indicated, mantras are made effective by being converted into mimetic diagrams of creation. [Chapter three](#) shows that the linguistic ideology of the Tantras is a further development of the Vedic quest to produce a language that not only corresponds to reality but is capable of bringing into existence various material goals and even the absent divinity.

The second part of this book places the analysis of mantras in a comparative perspective. Chapters [four](#) and [five](#) advance a “science of illusion,” or a general theory of poetic imitation and its contribution to the pragmatic function of ritual. “Pragmatic function” means a range of things. From the emic or “inside” view, mantras are magically powerful utterances capable of effecting a real-world goal. However, from an etic or “outside” view, mantras are a persuasive form of rhetoric that reinforces the belief in its own efficacy. [Chapter four](#) shows how poetry uses resemblances within discourse to construct a virtual bridge between discourse and reality, and the illusion of a natural language. My analysis, implicitly throughout this study and explicitly in later chapters, draws heavily on Michael Silverstein’s integration of the structuralism of Saussure and Roman Jakobson with the semiotic pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce.<sup>20</sup> Silverstein has demonstrated that ritual is often an extreme manifestation of poetry, in which poetic form, and particularly so-called “indexical icons,” contribute to an increase in pragmatic function. [Chapter five](#) extends this crucial insight into a theory of the rhetorical force of ritual, which frequently employs the devices of repetition and exhaustion, or the complete enumeration of a set or paradigm class. Ritual functions in an economy of signs governed

by principles of exchange, substitution, and accumulation. The accumulation of rhetorical force in the text of ritual is a response to a pragmatic context in which the arbitrariness of ritual as an indexical sign of its prospective goal means the actual (present) absence of that goal. The accumulation of rhetorical force increasingly indexes or signals this goal, virtually bringing it into existence.

The conclusion of this book in [chapter six](#) moves from the synchronic, cross-cultural analysis of ritual to uncover certain Western genealogies that have operated to repress our recognition of the rhetoric of ritual. Both iconophobes and iconophiles, from Plato to Durkheim to Mircea Eliade, have misrecognized the rhetoric of ritual and postponed an effective critique of this rhetoric. However, earlier movements, including Plato's attack on imitation (*mimesis*) and the Reformation war against idolatry, remain important resources for an ongoing critique of the rhetoric of ritual.

This book confirms the importance of a renewed discipline of rhetoric to the human sciences, and especially to the history of religions. A rhetorical theory of ritual signals another challenge to the insistence on the separateness of religion from other human phenomena, or the *sui generis* status of the Sacred. By further developing the rhetorical method, the history of religions may remain both constructive and critical. The study of rhetoric aims at a knowledge of fictions rather than truths. Although there may be no single truth upon which all human beings agree, the devices different cultures employ to construct and reinforce their own stipulated truths are remarkably similar to each other. What we may discover, possibly as a consolation prize for the absence of any absolute human truths, is a science of illusion, of the relativity of all "truth." This is not only a recognition of fundamental epistemological limits long ago expressed gnomically by Protagoras as "Man is the measure of all things," a claim at once more ambitious and more skeptical than Terence's competing "Nothing human is foreign to me." It is also an ethical or moral lesson: an invitation to a deeper humility regarding the possibility of both human knowledge and knowledge of the human, and a challenge to be more critical of the deception that all too often underlies our thought and behavior.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Opening the Puzzle Box

### Mantras, Poetry, and Magic

THIS SHORT CHAPTER ASKS US TO BEGIN TO CONNECT THE FORM OF MANTRAS WITH their *function*. A stylistic analysis of mantras forces us to recognize the convergence between mantras and poetry. The poetic form of mantras has generally been ignored by Western scholars. However, existing scholarship, as discussed below, has already noted the occurrence in mantras of certain devices, such as palindromes, that provide a key to the Tantric theory of what makes mantras effective.

*Mantras*, verbal formulas of special power, are the heart of the ritual tradition of Hindu Tantra, also called “the science of mantras” (*mantraśāstra*). Originally designating any Vedic hymn,<sup>1</sup> the term *mantra* in the Tantric tradition refers also to formulas of a special sort distinguished from Vedic mantras. The most distinctive feature of Tantric mantras is the apparently meaningless “seed” (*bīja*) mantras, syllables such as *hrīm*, *kṛīm*, and *sṛīm*, although there is precedent for these in some Vedic formulas,<sup>2</sup> especially the most famous mantra of all, the syllable *oṃ*, called the *praṇava* (proclaimer).

A common Tantric etymology for *mantra* is: “As a result of contemplation (*mananāt*), it preserves (*trāyate*) (a person), therefore it is called ‘mantra.’”<sup>3</sup> A more plausible etymology derives *mantra* from the verbal root *man*-(to think, contemplate) and the agentive or instrumental suffix *tra*,<sup>4</sup> so that *mantra* would mean “an instrument of thought.” Both etymologies emphasize an important feature of mantras, their instrumentality or pragmatic function. To these definitions I would add one based on orthopraxy: according to many Vedic and Tantric texts, a mantra should be preceded and followed by the pronunciation of *oṃ*.<sup>5</sup>

If we want to know what mantras are, or how they work, we may begin by observing their formal characteristics. The most obvious fact about mantras is that they are repeated many, even countless times. This fact has been incorporated into the meaning of the word *mantra*, along with its translations “spell,” “chant,” and



“incantation.” Our intuition that such formulas become more powerful through repetition is shared by the Tantric tradition. André Padoux notes that a greater number of repetitions of the mantra may be prescribed in order to achieve a more difficult objective:

It appears also (and this is of a more practical nature) that the number of repetitions is smaller in the obligatory, daily, or occasional rites than in the *kamya* [optional]<sup>6</sup> rites. This appears normal, as the efficacy of the mantra (or, what amounts to the same thing, the belief of the user in this efficacy) increases with its repetition. Now the *kamya* rites have in view the obtaining of a result that is particular and especially desired. The greater the difficulty of attaining this goal, the more the number of repetitions tends to be elevated (thus *Sardhatrisatikalottaragama* 16.11–16, for the *vasikaraṇa* [subjugation] of various persons).<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most notorious of the optional rites are the six (magical) rites (*ṣṭkarmāṇi*) including subjugating, banishing, killing, etc., in which the goal of the rite is eminently practical.<sup>8</sup> Padoux states that, for subjugation of more important persons, a greater number of repetitions of the mantra is required.<sup>9</sup> The mantra must do more work in order to achieve a more challenging goal, and what makes the mantra work is, first and foremost, repetition, or more of the same. Regardless of the goal, the number of repetitions required may depend on whether the mantra is favorable or unfavorable to the user of mantras, as determined by the practices for selecting or purifying mantras.<sup>10</sup> Increasing the repetitions is a means of compensating for a mantra that is less potent vis-à-vis the user. If all else fails, there is an even more basic directive that the mantra must be repeated until effective.

The “word” may substitute for the “deed” in another way. The rites of *purascaraṇa*, which means literally “doing certain things before” using a mantra in order to make it effective, are generally said to consist of five parts: repetition, consecration, lustration, fire sacrifice, and the feeding of Brahmin priests. The texts sometimes specify that sacrifices ought to be performed to one-tenth the number of repetitions of the mantra, and that Brahmins ought to be fed to one-tenth the number of sacrifices.<sup>11</sup> However, if the other rituals cannot be performed, perhaps for reasons of impecunity, then one may substitute for them by increasing the repetitions of the mantra.<sup>12</sup>

Mantras are not only repeated, but repetitive. An individual mantra often exhibits in its internal structure various forms of repetition or poetic devices similar to those found in the spells, chants, and ritual languages of other cultures. These devices include alliteration, especially of the *bījas* and other rhythmic, apparently nonsensical vocables; reduplicated or repeated words, including imperatives; the repetition of similar phrases with the progressive addition of intensifiers; and the exhaustive enumeration of synonyms, some portion of the Sanskrit alphabet, or the phonetic shape of the mantras, often in the form of palindromes.

Following is a brief overview of some of the most common types of repetition in Tantric mantras. Of course, no complete survey of mantras is possible. According to some statements within the tradition, there are 70 million mantras.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, certain devices appear with such frequency that we can safely refer to them as figures or tropes. The following survey draws extensively on the *MMU* (*Mantramahodadhi*, “Great Ocean of Mantras”), a popular sixteenth-century compendium.<sup>14</sup> This text is an anthology of mantras for every deity and purpose. Additional examples have been cited from elsewhere in Hindu as well as Buddhist Tantra. The names used for the figures in this survey are drawn primarily from the Western rhetorical tradition. [Chapter two](#) interprets the Tantric terms for several of these figures.

Perhaps the most common figure in mantras is alliteration, which I will extend to mean the repetition of similar sounds anywhere in contiguous words. *Sahasranamas* or lists of names of the deity,<sup>15</sup> which are closely related to mantras,<sup>16</sup> provide the most extreme examples of alliteration: in many cases, all of the names begin with the same letter as the primary name of the deity they praise. A popular Buddhist mantra to the goddess Tara runs “oṃ tare tuttare ture svaha.”<sup>17</sup> Alex Wayman noted a plausible explanation of the meaning of this mantra within the tradition.<sup>18</sup> Such explanations are common even in the case of clearly meaningless *bījas*.<sup>19</sup> The Buddhist *dhāraṇī* (a type of mantra), “ine mine dapphe daḍapphe,” is supposed to articulate the Four Noble Truths in Dravidian, that is foreign or barbarian language.<sup>20</sup> However, in neither Sanskrit nor Pali do these Truths rhyme in this way. Similar *bījas* are found in other mantras: “ili mili phuḥ phuḥ”,<sup>21</sup> “cheli mili”,<sup>22</sup> “hili hili mili mili”,<sup>23</sup> “hili hili”,<sup>24</sup> “hili hili,” “kili kili,” “cili cili”,<sup>25</sup> and, last but not least, “laha laha hala hala.”<sup>26</sup> These *bījas* are similar to the magic words, such as “abracadabra,” found in other traditions.

Often a *bīja* beginning with the same letter or syllable as the name of a deity is repeated immediately before the name, which is in the dative case as an object of praise: e.g., “oṃ gaṅgaṃapataye svaha” (oṃ gaṃ, (homage) to Gaṇapati (the elephant-headed god), svāhā).<sup>27</sup> Such “acronymic” bijas can be multiplied, altering the included vowel each time so as to enumerate the short or long vowels in sequence: e.g., “gaṃ giṃ güṃ gaṇpataye,”<sup>28</sup> which enumerates the three simple long vowels, “a, i, u.” These patterns are obviously deliberate. *LT* 21.22–25 directs: “When there is no *bīja* in a mantra, the *bīja* should be formed by taking the first sound and joining ṃ to it; in this way the (mantra) can be made into a complete formula.”<sup>29</sup>

Less common is the reduplication of the parts of a single word or name. A rain-making mantra treats the name of the god Heruka in this way: “He he ru ru ka.”<sup>30</sup> Another mantra reduplicates the name *Sudughā*, which means “abundant (in milk)”: “hraḥ su su du du ghe ghe va va hrīṃ svaha phaṭ.”<sup>31</sup> Some mantras include a more random-seeming stream of *bījas* resembling glossolalia: e.g., the fifteen-syllabled *Śrividya kūṭa* mantra: “ka e ī la hrīṃ, ha sa ka ha la hrīṃ, sa ka la hrīṃ.”<sup>32</sup> However, many mantras of this type turn out to be anything but random in sequence.

Other mantras repeat the same word, synonyms, or near-synonyms, incorporating semantic equivalences rather than, or in addition to, phonetic ones. Most common is the repetition of synonymous imperatives in couplets. An example is “banish, banish the victim, burn, burn, kill, kill, terrify, terrify, destroy, destroy, cause, cause his head to tremble, obey my command, accomplish, accomplish the conjuration of all things desired by me, do all, do all, svaha.”<sup>33</sup> Other mantras incorporate variations of a name or word. An example is the repetition of names beginning with “all-” (*sarva*): “sarvamantrasvarūpiṇi, sarvayantratmika, sarvatantrarupa” (Who has the true form of all mantras, yantras, and Tantras).<sup>34</sup>

“Augmentation” is the term I use for the repetition of a word or concept with progressive increase of intensity.<sup>35</sup> One of the more well-known examples of this figure is the Buddhist *vidya* (a type of mantra) that closes the *Heart Sūtra*: “oṃ gone, gone, gone beyond, gone entirely beyond, svaha.” Another Buddhist example is: “oṃ sage sage great sage svāhā.”<sup>36</sup> A Hindu example is “rosary rosary great rosary.”<sup>37</sup> In some cases a noun is augmented; in other cases a verb: “oṃ homage to the Reverend Goddess with a Garland of Flames, Cause of the Destruction of All Beings, She of Fire, Burning (*jvalanti*), Blazing (*prajvalanti*), burn burn blaze hūṃ

raṃ raṃ hūṃ phaḥ.”<sup>38</sup> In this mantra, repetition of the *bīja* of fire, *raṃ*, further intensifies the augmentation of the imperative “burn.”

The *historiola*, a device found in the spells of many cultures, is a reference to a mythical or historical figure on whose authority or example, often as paradigmatic agent of the action sought to be brought about, the spell is grounded.<sup>39</sup> In some cases this is a simple statement that “so-and-so used this spell.” Mantras to Garuḍa, the snake-destroying winged mount of Viṣṇu, are prescribed for use against snake-bite or poison.<sup>40</sup> A *historiola* of the monkey-god Hanuman recounts his exploits in Laṅka and other *bona fides* before invoking him to perform the same feats for the user of the mantra.<sup>41</sup>

The device I call “exhaustion” is the enumeration of all, or nearly all, of a set or paradigm class, whether semantic or phonetic.<sup>42</sup> In the Tantric tradition, exhaustion of the entire alphabet, a particular subset of the alphabet such as the vowels, or a different version of the alphabet, such as the fifty letters (*pañcāśat lipi*) or the script of the elements (*bhūtalipi*), is a common means of making the mantra successful. Often it is specified that these vocables must be added in forward order at the beginning of the mantra, and in reverse order at the end (*anulomavilomena*, *kramotkramāt*). This converts the mantra into a sort of palindrome, which exhausts not only the alphabet, but also the directional possibilities of language. Chapter two explains the significance of these practices.<sup>43</sup>

The mantra segment “gāṃ gīṃ gūṃ gaṇapataye” given earlier is an example of exhaustion of the three simple long vowels in order. A similar example is the Buddhist *dhāraṇī* of Vimalośṇiṣa: “kṣaṇa kṣaṇa kṣiṇi kṣiṇi kṣuṇu kṣuṇu.” Alex Wayman noted that these apparently meaningless phonemes were explained by a commentary as imperatives meaning “guard, rescue, and nourish,” respectively.<sup>44</sup> Although reduplicated imperatives are common in mantras, a far more likely explanation in this case is suggested by the pattern of enumerating the first three simple short vowels in order, which may be combined here with an imitation of imperative or onomatopoetic form. Other mantras exhaust the possible combinations of letters or phrases in another mantra. The three sacred exclamations (*vyāhṛti*) *bhūḥ*, *bhuvah*, and *svah* that are part of the Vedic *Gayatri* mantra appear both individually and as a set: “oṃ bhūḥ svaha, oṃ bhuvah svāhā, oṃ savah svāhā, oṃ bhur bhuvah svā ḥ svāhā.”<sup>45</sup>

Many mantras exhaust a semantic set, such as the three “powers” (*śakti*) of desire, knowledge, and action;<sup>46</sup> or the ten avatars (*avātara*) of Viṣṇu.<sup>47</sup> An example of logical exhaustion, or the enumeration of all logical semantic alternatives, is the Vedic

*Aghora* mantra, parts of which are incorporated into various Tantric mantras: “oṃ, be there adoration to thy reassuring manifestations, Rudra, and to the terrific ones, to the (manifestations) which are (at the same time) reassuring and terrific, Sarva, to all these (manifestations) in all respects.”<sup>48</sup> The original Sanskrit also includes several purely phonetic repetitions.

Palindromes are phrases that read the same forwards and backwards. An example is the one referring to Napoleon, “Able was I ere I saw Elba.” Although English palindromes like this one are reckoned letter by letter, Tantric mantras include many near-palindromes reckoned (in keeping with Sanskrit language and linguistics) syllable by syllable: monosyllabic *bījas* are repeated before and after the central part of a mantra in forward and reverse order, in the pattern “a-b-c-x-c-b-a.” An example is: “hriṃ gaṃ glauṃ gaṇapataye glauṃ gaṃ hriṃ.”<sup>49</sup> The simplest, and perhaps most important, palindromic mantra is the *haṃsa* mantra, “haṃsaḥ so haṃ” (I am that divine *haṃsa*-bird), which on the level of the syllable is nearly a palindrome and is explicitly understood to be one, as [chapter two](#) explains.

Lastly, there are figures based on the arrangement of the syllables of the mantra into shapes other than palindromes, including round robin and other formations. The lists of ways of arranging (*vinyāsa*) the mantra in order to make it effective, by interspersing the root mantra (*mūlamantra*) or portion of the mantra declaring its objective (*sādhya*) with added *bījas*, seemingly exhaust all possible arrangements of the syllables of the mantra.<sup>50</sup> A Tamil mantra exhausts all possible combinations of “namaḥ sivaya” (homage to Siva) in round-robin form: “na maḥ śi vā ya, maḥ si va ya na, si va ya na maḥ, va ya na maḥ si, ya na ma ḥ śi vā.”<sup>51</sup> The directions for one mantra add one more word to the mantra with each utterance: i.e. “oṃ, oṃ śrīṃ, oṃ śrīṃ hrīṃ,” etc.<sup>52</sup> A mantra can be reduced to its phonetic form and then used to produce an exhaustive set of musical variations.

The obvious or intuitive function of many of these stylistic devices is to heighten or intensify the language of mantras, thereby making them magically effective.<sup>53</sup> Such poetic devices are a common feature of the spells, chants, and ritual languages of many cultures.

*Bīja* mantras are very similar in form to the “magic words” (*voces magicae*) found in the spells, chants, and ritual languages of many other traditions. Apart from the most familiar modern examples, “hocus pocus,” “mumbo jumbo,” and “abracadabra,” numerous examples of these can be found in ancient Greek spells, including the so-called “Ephesian words” (*ephesia grammata*) that

began: “aski kataski.” In other traditions, as well as in Hindu Tantra, such alliterative magic words are coordinated with various other poetic devices. These facts already suggest the need for an explanation of the contribution of poetic form to the function of ritual.<sup>54</sup> Such an explanation will be proposed in [chapter five](#). However, first we have to interpret the significance of such devices in light of the Tantric texts. A number of these devices remain untheorized in Tantra, as in folk magical traditions. Yet several of them are part of a deliberate and self-conscious discourse of the pragmatics of mantras, or of what makes a mantra effective. The palindromes in particular are understood to make mantras effective by converting them into a natural language, one that is directly connected with and capable of influencing reality.

These observations highlight a serious omission in the Western scholarship on mantras. Although Tantric mantras, like the spells of other cultures, must be repeated in precisely correct form in order to be effective, little attention has been paid to this form.<sup>55</sup> This has naturally precluded any serious consideration of the contribution of the form of mantras to their function. One reason for this omission is the opinion of some, especially earlier scholars that mantras are meaningless hocus pocus. Even some within the Sanskrit tradition, including Kautsa in Vedic times<sup>56</sup> and the fifth century Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu,<sup>57</sup> argued for the meaninglessness of mantras.<sup>58</sup> In modern Bengal as well, the phrase *mantra-tantra* (or *tantra-mantra*) is frequently used in the pejorative or dismissive sense of “mumbo jumbo.”<sup>59</sup> Such views for many years discouraged the careful examination of mantras: if they are merely gibberish, then there is no need to inquire further into their meaning and function.

The *bījas*, which have no apparent semantic value, have posed the greatest puzzle for scholars. They are most often found at the beginning and end of the mantra. Many texts prescribe that all mantras should begin and end (or at least begin) with *om*,<sup>60</sup> and most mantras do begin with this syllable. There are also several standard endings including *phaṭ* and *svāhā*. This already suggests part of the function of these vocables. They serve as magic words signaling the boundaries of the ritual formula or spell; they are equivalent to statements that “Here beginneth (or endeth) the mantra.” In this way, they reinforce the differentiation of the ritual use of language from its ordinary use. However, this initial observation does not go very far towards explaining the complexity of patterns observed in Tantric mantras.

Of course, even among Western scholars, mantras have found their defenders. Woodroffe argued:

[S]trictly the Bija is of one letter as the seed from which the mantra springs.... [A] mantra may, or may not, convey on its face its meaning. Bijas have no meaning according to the ordinary use of language and for this reason they have formed the subject of ridicule to those ignorant of the Mantrasastra. The initiated however know that their meaning is the own form (Svarupa) of the particular Devatas [divinities] whose Mantra they are.... <sup>61</sup>

As we shall see in the next chapter, Woodroffe's emphasis on the meaning of *bīja* as "seed" of the mantra and the divinity it represents provides an important clue to the function of these syllables. However, he did not extend this insight into an analysis of the linguistic form of mantras, and consequently reinforced a purely subjective standard of the meaning of mantras.

More recently, some scholars have attempted to recover a sense of the meaning and function of mantras by declaring them "performative utterances" or "speech acts," in the related and respective senses of the philosophers J.L. Austin and John Searle.<sup>62</sup> As discussed in [chapter five](#) below, such an approach generally ignores the contribution of the internal structure of an utterance to its performance. It fails to match poetic form to pragmatic function. Yet this approach does have value as a corrective. Like Austin, the interpreters of mantras who appropriated his theory sought to find meaning or function in utterances thought to lack these under prevailing theories of language. However, without producing an account of the connection between the form and function of mantras, we can never advance beyond the view that mantras are performative only through convention, simply because they are believed to be so. Nor can we account for the similar forms of repetition found in the spells of other cultures.

There have been a few brief stylistic or semiotic analyses of Tantric mantras.<sup>63</sup> Aghananda Bharati developed a simple "formal classification" of mantras based on the presence or absence of two stylistic features: 1) a mantra that has "the exact inverse arrangement of constituents on both sides of its centre" is "symmetrical," and one that does is not is "asymmetrical"; 2) a mantra that contains multiple repetitions of the same *bīja* (e.g., "krīm krīm krīm hrīm hrīm phaḥ") is "isomorphic," and one that does not is "heteromorphic."<sup>64</sup> He contended that a random survey of a hundred mantras revealed that twelve were symmetrical, and that perhaps half were isomorphic. Although Bharati denied that there were any Indian terms for these



categories, the previously mentioned Tantric rite of “enveloping” (*samputa*) the mantra by adding *om* and other *bijas* in forward and reverse order at the beginning and the end of the mantra respectively is one of the most common rites for making mantras effective.<sup>65</sup> In hindsight, this was a crucial error on Bharati’s part, as it prevented him from discovering the significance within the Tantric tradition of those objective formal features of mantras his analysis had correctly identified.

Contrasting with, or even contradicting, his objective analysis of the linguistic form of mantras, Bharati advanced a subjective interpretation of the meaning of mantras that is both common and highly problematic:

*[M]antra* is meaningful not in any descriptive or even persuasive sense, but within the mystical universe of discourse; that is, it constitutes a particular phase of literary expression belonging to that discourse. *Mantra* is verifiable not by what it describes but by what it effects: if it creates that somewhat complex feeling-tone in the practising person, which has found its expression in the bulk of mystical literature such as tantra, then it is verified; or in other words, the principle of verification lies in its emotive numinous effect as well as the corroboration of such effects in religious literature.<sup>66</sup>

The claim that mantras are effective on an emotional or psychological level has become a popular means of saving them from the charge of meaninglessness, especially in modern India.<sup>67</sup> Variations argue that mantras produce “positive vibrations,” or induce a mental state in which the body can, for example, heal itself. However, this is not the claim asserted within the Tantric tradition, which attributes all sorts of real-world results to the repetition of mantras, not limited to the control of disease. The magical use of mantras will always be an embarrassment for those who wish to reduce mantras to the sphere of the aesthetic or parasympathetic. On the other hand, as explained below, the view of this study is that claims for the magical effects of mantras are rhetorical in nature, and that the real effect of mantras is to support these claims, by persuading of their efficacy on a psychological or cognitive level. The rhetorical devices in mantras, including those identified by Bharati, contribute to this persuasion.

In the most sophisticated and provocative attempt thus far to conduct a formal linguistic analysis of mantras, Frits Staal has



argued for the “meaninglessness” of mantras, and compared them with baby-talk, nonsense language, music, and bird songs.<sup>68</sup> The crux of his argument is that many mantras, like these other forms of “pre-linguistic language,” possess some of the features of language, especially syntax, but lack other features, including semantic value.<sup>69</sup> He establishes a sliding scale of forms of mantras, from highest to lowest ordinary language content and semantic value. He describes the very complex forms of repetition, including embedded recursive patterns and palindromes, employed in both mantras and the sequential structure of rituals.<sup>70</sup> Like the syntax of a generative grammar, these patterns can be produced, recognized, and repeated indefinitely. However, they lack meaning or reference in any ordinary sense. Mantras share these features with several other paralinguistic forms, including the “languages” of babes and birds. Given the antiquity of ritual, the implication is that mantras may also be a pre- or proto-language.<sup>71</sup> Although Staal is primarily concerned with Vedic mantras and ritual, he has extended his interpretation to Tantric mantras,<sup>72</sup> and his syntactic analysis has been applied to Tantric rituals by other scholars.<sup>73</sup>

Staal’s formal linguistic analysis of ritual, which is explicitly inspired by the conviction in a human science, is an important step forward from the simple description and presentation of emic views with which the disciplines that study other cultures, including anthropology and the history of religions, too often content themselves. In place of a shallow (or even a thick) relativism, Staal would substitute a human science beginning from its most scientific component, linguistics, to which, as he notes, the ancient Indian grammarians and philosophers of language have made important contributions.

However, I have a few objections to Staal’s theory. First, like Bharati, he ignores the existence of an indigenous discourse that connects the function of mantras directly with some of the syntactic structures he identifies. Although there may be no emic term for the palindromes that appear in Vedic ritual,<sup>74</sup> the Tantric practice of “enveloping” (*samputa*) the mantra in forward and reverse order is, as we shall see, a direct development of some of the most important Vedic mantras and mantric practices. And in Tantra at least, such patterns are part of an emic pragmatics or discourse about what makes mantras effective.

Staal’s chapter on “Performatives, Pragmatics, and Performance” begins by noting that “In Sanskrit, the performative force of an entity is called its *siddhi*.”<sup>75</sup> He does not note that derivations of this word are used in Tantra to denote a mantra that

is “effective” (*siddha*)<sup>76</sup> and the central portion of the mantra that declares “what is to be effected” (*sādhya*) by the mantra. The *sādhya* consists of semantic or referential language, and is clearly meaningful. When enveloped (*sam̐puṭita*) by *bijas*, it also becomes effective (*siddha*).

These preliminary observations regarding the emic pragmatics of mantras show that the etic linguistic theory Staal applies is not adequate to account for the patterns he observes in mantras. An analysis of syntax alone, in isolation from any concept of the function of syntactic forms, is incomplete and misleading. As discussed in chapters four and five of this study, repetition in the syntagmatic axis is the hallmark of the “poetic function” as elucidated by Roman Jakobson, and can contribute, as Michael Silverstein has shown, to the pragmatic function of language, particularly in ritual. Staal’s linguistic analysis ignores these important theories and, more fundamentally, misrecognizes the poetic function of mantras. The most appropriate analogy for mantras is neither baby-talk, nor bird songs, nor even music, but *poetry*. And poetry is no “pre-linguistic language,” but language *par excellence*, heightened, augmented, and therefore communicative and effective. On this point, the etic theories of Jakobson and Silverstein agree with the emic Tantric discourse on what makes mantras effective, to which we now turn.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Chanting the Cosmogony**

#### **Mantras as Diagrams of Creation**

WE NOW TURN TO THE QUESTION OF WHAT MAKES A MANTRA EFFECTIVE ACCORDING to the Hindu Tantric tradition, or the “emic pragmatics” of mantras. The answer to this question can be found in the ritual prescriptions relating to mantras, which have too often been ignored in favor of more abstract statements of Tantric philosophy.<sup>1</sup> This reflects a general scholarly bias favoring theory over practice. However, in this case the theory of how mantras work is embedded in the practices relating to mantras, and must be extracted through an analysis of those practices.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, it will be demonstrated especially through an analysis of the rite of enveloping, which converts the mantra into a palindrome as described in the last chapter, that Tantric mantras are often alphabetic diagrams of several forms of creation simultaneously: the general cycle of evolution and involution of the cosmos, the process of sexual union and reproduction, the cycle of in- and out-breaths, and the act of speech, which traces a path from inside the body to the outside world (and back again). Within the Tantric tradition, the belief in the efficacy of mantras is reinforced by their imitation of the natural order. When a mantra is made to resemble creation, it is believed to be more creative and effective in achieving a real-world result. As is made more explicit in certain ritual practices, such as enveloping the mantra with the script of the elements, mantras diagram the transition from language to non-linguistic, physical reality from within language itself, therefore virtually and figuratively. Poetic devices, including palindromes, are employed in an effort to bridge the gap between language and reality and convert the mantras into a natural language, one that directly reflects and can even influence reality.

The emic pragmatics of mantras is not a single hegemonic theory reflected in a uniformity of ritual practice. It is a common understanding implicit in a variety of practices. Complementing accounts of the flaws or defects of mantras (*mantradoṣa*), or of what makes mantras ineffective, are several different categories of

rites for making mantras effective (*siddha*).<sup>3</sup> The preliminary rites (*purascaraṇa*), which include chanting or repetition of the mantra (*japa*), have already been mentioned. Many Tantras use the simile: “Just as a body devoid of life is incapable of any activity, so too is a mantra devoid of the preliminary rites.”<sup>4</sup> Initiation (*dikṣa*) and conferral of the mantra by an authorized teacher (*guru*) are also a necessary prerequisite. Chanting without initiation is fruitless “like a seed (*bīja*) sown on stone.”<sup>5</sup> This is a double-entendre referring also to the “seeds” (*bīja*) that are regarded as the especially effective portion of mantras. Other methods of making mantras effective, including the several patterns of arranging (*vinṛyāsa*) the syllables of the mantra, involve adding *bījas* to an existing mantra. The ways of making mantras effective (*mantrasiddhyupāya*) and the rites for perfecting mantras (*mantrasaṃskāra*) combine chanting with manipulation of the written mantra. The womb sign (*yonimudrā*)<sup>6</sup> and the flame of the mantra (*mantrasikhā*) combine chanting with *yoga*. Still other methods involve worship of, or sexual intercourse with, a female consort.

### Enveloping as a Diagram of the Cosmic Cycle

Despite this variety of techniques, a certain overlapping or convergence is apparent. Yogic methods such as the *yonimudrā* often involve a “backwards and forwards” motion, and are explicitly combined with chanting.<sup>7</sup> They therefore coincide with the verbal method of enveloping. This method appears also in several other rites for making mantras effective, most commonly as one of the ways of arranging the syllables of the mantra, but also in the *mantrasiddhyupāya*<sup>8</sup> and in the *mantrasaṃskāra*, the latter of which, in some texts, consist mostly or entirely of enveloping with different *bījas*.<sup>9</sup> Enveloping is also frequently recommended on its own as a method of making mantras effective:

He should chant the mantra for one month, enveloped by the script of the elements (or the syllables of the alphabet)<sup>10</sup> forward and backward, one thousand times. (Then) the mantra will be successful for him.<sup>11</sup>

Like other ways of arranging the mantra, enveloping involves adding *bījas*, the letters of the entire alphabet (*mātṛka*), or a special version of the alphabet such as the fifty letters (*pañcāśat lipi*) or the script of the elements (*bhūtalipi*), to the original mantra

enveloping with a single <i>bīja</i>	oṃ-(mantra/sādhya)-oṃ
enveloping with several <i>bījas</i>	oṃ-hrīṃ-śrīṃ-(mantra/sādhya)-śrīṃ-hrīṃ-oṃ

(*mūlamantra*) or to the central portion of the mantra naming “what is to be effected” (*sādhya*, *sādhyanāma*).<sup>12</sup> The *sādhya*, which is also called simply the “name” (*nāma*, *abhidhāna*), incorporates a statement of the objective of the mantra, including the name of the intended (victim), which in the instructions for a mantra may be filled by the placeholder name “John Doe” (*devadatta*) or “so-and-so” (*amuka*). The *bījas* most commonly added to the *sādhya* are the *praṇava*, i.e. *oṃ*, and the *māyā*, *kāma*, *śrī*, and *vagbhava* *bījas*, which are respectively *hrīṃ*, *klīṃ*, *śrīṃ*, and *aiṃ*. In the rite of enveloping, these *bījas*, which in this context may be referred to simply as *mantra* to distinguish them from the *sādhya*, are added to the latter at the beginning and the end in forward and reverse order respectively.<sup>13</sup> The resulting pattern is graphically represented in the following table:

An understanding of the significance of the method of enveloping, and of its forward and reverse order, is crucial to an understanding of Tantric mantras. At the beginning and the end of the mantra are two “impurities” (*sūtaka*):

At the beginning (of the mantra) is the impurity of birth, and at the end, the impurity of death. A mantra which is joined to these impurities does not succeed. Having removed the (impurities of) beginning and end, the wise one should chant the mantra. A mantra which is released from this pair of impurities grants all success.<sup>14</sup>

A number of Tantras, after quoting versions of this verse, recommend enveloping with *oṃ* as the remedy for the two impurities of birth and death.<sup>15</sup>

What is meant by the birth and death of mantras, and how do these processes relate to the rite of enveloping? The Tantras regard a mantra as alive, just as any other form of the deity, such as a statue (*mūrti*). A mantra must first be born, and then live, and then die. Yet it will not come to life without the proper ritual. Remember that a mantra that has not first been prepared by repeated chanting and other rites is said to be like a corpse. The rite of enveloping, in particular, is prescribed as a means of

bringing a mantra to life. The first of the rites for perfecting mantras is the birthing (*janana*) of the mantra from the alphabet, the word for which, *mātṛkā*, literally means “mother.”<sup>16</sup> The second such rite is enlivening (*jīvana*), and consists of enveloping with *om*.<sup>17</sup> Another text also prescribes enveloping with *om* as a means of bringing the mantra to life, and says that without this, the mantra is a “corpse.”<sup>18</sup>

The *praṇava* (*om*) is often referred to as a dam (*setu*) that must be placed at the beginning, or the beginning and end, of the mantra.<sup>19</sup> The following analogy appears in a number of Tantras: “Just as, without a dam, water flows downhill instantly, a mantra without a dam slips away from its user.”<sup>20</sup> The appending of the *praṇava* at the beginning, or the beginning and end, of a mantra is prescribed already in various Dharmasutras: “The syllable *om* is the beginning and end of the Vedas; all that consists of speech is *om*. Therefore, one should repeat *om*.”<sup>21</sup> MS 2.74 declares: “He should always say *om* at the beginning and at the end of (reciting) the Veda, for (the recitation) slips away without *om* before it and dissolves (without *om*) after it.”<sup>22</sup> CU 1.4 explains such practices:

*Om*: one should venerate the High Chant as this syllable, for one begins the High Chant with *om*. Here is a further explanation of that syllable. When the gods feared death, what they did was to enter the triple Veda. They covered it with meters... But death saw the gods there in the *Ṛ* verses, in the *Saman* chants, and in the *Yajus* formulas, just as one sees a fish in water. When the gods discovered this, they emerged from the *Ṛ*, *Saman*, and *Yajus*, and entered into that very sound. So, when one finishes a *Ṛ* verse, or a *Saman* chant, or a *Yajus* formula, one makes the sound *om*. This syllable, the immortal and the fearless, is that very sound. Upon entering that syllable, the gods became immortal and free from fear.

This passage explains that one should end a mantra with the *praṇava* as a means of avoiding death. The Tantric practice of enveloping with the *praṇava* or other *bijas* in order to bring the mantra to life or remove the impurities of birth and death appears to follow these earlier sources.

These associations suggest the significance of the Tantric practice of enveloping. The Hindu tradition divides the cosmic cycle into three stages: creation (*sṛṣṭi*), preservation (*sthiti*), and destruction or dissolution (*samhara*, *laya*, *pralaya*). An alternative translation is “evolution, stability, and involution.” The cosmic

cycle is conceived as a process of emission and reabsorption of manifest creation from an unmanifested absolute. The *praṇava* diagrams this cosmic cycle of creation. *MU* divides *om̐* into four portions, corresponding to its three constituent phonemes “a,” “u,” and “m” (or “ṁ”)<sup>23</sup> plus a “half” phoneme pronounced after these. These phonemes correspond respectively to four states of being: waking, (dreaming) sleep, deep (dreamless) sleep, and a fourth state beyond these. The letter “a” designates being first (*ādimattva*), the letter “u” designates being intermediate (*ubhayatva*), and the letter “m” designates measurement (*miti*) or dissolution. The *praṇava* is also said to be the whole world, past, present, and future. Its three letters were later correlated with the gods Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Rudra (Siva),<sup>24</sup> who are traditionally associated with the three phases of the cosmic cycle. *Om̐* is, among other things, a map or diagram of cosmic evolution and involution, that contains the birth and death of the universe.

The connection of *om̐* with the cosmic creation is reinforced by *ṚV* 10.90, which describes creation as proceeding from the mouth (*mukha*) of the primal man, Puruṣa or Brahma, outward and downward. Although this text does not specify the sound emitted by the cosmic creator, certain later texts indicate that this sound is *om̐*: “He (Prajapati) incubated these syllables, and, when they had been incubated, the syllable *om̐* sprang from them.”<sup>25</sup> “These two words *om̐* and *atha*, having long ago pierced the throat of Brahma and issued forth, are therefore both auspicious.”<sup>26</sup> *Om̐*, followed by the three sacred exclamations and the *Gīyatrī* mantra, is said to be the “mouth of Brahman.”<sup>27</sup>

The Tantric practice of enveloping follows such precedents by using *om̐* and other *bījas* to construct a palindromic diagram of evolution and involution around the original mantra, thus ushering it into and out of existence.<sup>28</sup> Enveloping is a microcosmic version of the cosmic cycle, which is still further condensed in *om̐*. The structural parallels among the phases of the cosmic cycle, the stages in the life cycle of a mantra, and the sequence of enveloping are displayed in the following table:

A mantra that resembles creation is believed to be more creative and effective in achieving a real world result. This may be why, before describing the rites for making mantras effective, one text declares: “Next I will tell the most wonderful means of making (mantras) effective, by the performance of which the one who knows mantras becomes the agent of evolution, stability, and involution (*sṛṣṭiśtithyaṁtakārah*).”<sup>29</sup>

cosmic cycle	evolution	stability	involution
	▼		▲
<i>praṇava</i> (oṃ)	a	u	ṃ
enveloping	oṃ-hrīṃ-śrīṃ ---->	(mantra/sādhya)	----> śrīṃ-hrīṃ-oṃ
life cycle of the mantra	birth	life	death

### The Diagram of Breath

Another important Tantric mantra that diagrams creation is the *haṃsa* mantra, “haḥsaṃ so ‘haṃ.” The literal meaning of this mantra is “I am that *haṃsa* bird.” The *haṃsa* is an ancient symbol of the deity and of the individual soul (*ātman*). As important as the meaning of this mantra is the fact that, on the level of its syllables, it is nearly a palindrome, and is understood as such. The first half of the mantra consists of the two syllables “haṃ” and “saḥ” (*haṃsa* bird), and the second half of “saḥ” (he, the, that) and “ahaṃ” (I (am)), which coalesce in Sanskrit to form “so ‘haṃ.” Haṃ” and “saḥ” are the *bijas* that represent, respectively, Śiva and Śakti, the male and female principles. The first half of the *haṃsa* mantra follows the evolution from Śiva to Śakti, and the second half the return to Śiva and, as the meaning of the mantra indicates, the recognition that “I am God.” As in the rite of enveloping, these two directions also correspond to life and death, which agrees with the following pun: “Śiva, without Śakti, is a corpse (*śava*).”<sup>30</sup> In one text the statement that “the beginning of *japa* is birth, and the end death” appears in reference to the *haṃsa* mantra.<sup>31</sup>

The *haṃsa* mantra also depicts the cycle of breath:

With “sa” the (breath) goes out, and with “ha” it comes in again. A living being chants this mantra, “haṃsa, haṃsa,” constantly, 21,600 times in (the course of) a day and night. This chant of the goddess (here) taught is easy, but difficult for the foolish.<sup>32</sup>

“Ha(ṃ)” is the in-breath, and “sa(h)” the out-breath.<sup>33</sup> These syllables are regarded as onomatopoeias for breath, an association facilitated by the phonological system of Sanskrit, in which “ha” is



articulated at the back of the throat, and “sa” toward the front of the mouth, at the teeth. The *haṁsa* mantra is therefore called the “unchanted” (*ajapā*) mantra, because it is naturally chanted by all living creatures with every breath: ‘This mantra is repeated by all living beings (*prāṇinām*: literally, ‘beings with breath’), from Siva down to worms, with the cycle of breath consisting of exhalation and inhalation. Just as without wind clouds do not revolve in the sky, without the mantra of highest grace the world (does not revolve).’<sup>34</sup> Already in certain Upaniṣads, the practice of meditation on the out-and-in-breaths is recommended as a method of achieving union with god.<sup>35</sup>

The *haṁsa* mantra is a gloss on or expansion of the *praṇava*:

The *haṁsa* arises from the *praṇava*.... Having separated the “ha” and “sa,” then one should combine them (euphonically), then there is the *praṇava*, this is the great mantra.... That man who always chants the great mantra that ends with the *praṇava*, his wind (or breath) will be perfected...,<sup>36</sup>

The euphonic combination of “saḥ” and “aham” produces “so ’ham,” which includes *om*, phonologically speaking. The identification of the *praṇava* with the breath occurs already in the Upaniṣads: “It is the breath here within the mouth that one should venerate as the High Chant, for as it moves it makes the sound *om*.”<sup>37</sup> The syllables of the *haṁsa* mantra, like the phonemes of the *praṇava*, are in some Tantras identified with the phases of the cosmic cycle:

The highest soul, in the form of the *bindu*,<sup>38</sup> is expressed by the *haṁsa bija*. The *haṁsa bija* should be understood as evolution, stability, and involution. At the knowledge of “haṁ sa,” there is evolution, and at the knowledge “so ’haṁ” (I am that (God)), there is stability. At the knowledge “naḥaṁ” (I am not (that)),<sup>39</sup> there is involution, the awakening to the non-being of being (or the destruction of existing things) (*bhāvābhāvaprabodhakam*).<sup>40</sup>

Through its palindromic form, the *haṁsa* mantra provides a more explicit diagram of the cosmic cycle than does the *praṇava*. These relationships are expressed in the following table:

A lack of the Śiva and Śakti *bījas*, either separately, or together in the *haṁsa* mantra, is part of the definition of a number of the flaws of mantras (*mantradoṣa*).<sup>41</sup> Adding these *bījas* is a method of

haṁ-	saḥ	so (saḥ)	'haṁ (ahaṁ)
Śiva	Śakti	Śakti	Śiva
(in-breath)	out-breath	(out-breath)	in-breath
	▼ evolution		▲ involution

making mantras effective: for example, by adding the first two syllables (“haḥsaṁ”) at the beginning of the mantra and the remaining two (“so ‘haṁ”) at the end, in a form of enveloping.<sup>42</sup> The *haṁsa* mantra or its component syllables are used also in the closely related rites of installing breath and vital force *prāṣṭapratihā* into images of deities on occasions of worship. For example, one such mantra, “āṁ hrīṁ kroṁ ya ṁ raṁ laṁ vaṁ śa ṁ ṣaṁ saṁ hoṁ haṁsaḥ,” ends with the first two syllables of the *haṁsa* mantra.<sup>43</sup> This is an attempt to coordinate the mantra with the natural cycle of the breath.

### The Alphabetic Diagram of Speech

Tantric mantras also diagram the act of speech or verbal creation. The key to this diagram is, once again, the syllable *om*, which, as we have seen, is said to be the essence of all speech and even of the world itself.<sup>44</sup> *Om* is a synecdoche of speech, in which the part represents the whole (*pars pro toto*). *Om* is also a metonym of speech due to the temporal priority expressed in its designation as the “beginning of the Vedas” (*vedādi*) and, in Tantra, as the *vedādi bīja*. These designations coincide with suggestions that *om* was the primal utterance at the beginning of cosmic creation. Recall that *om* and *atha* were said to have been uttered by the creator Brahma. *Atha*, which means “here,” “now,” or “then,” is a word used to begin discourses. *Om* similarly stands at the head of language in a double sense: as the first utterance, and as a necessary prelude to the recitation of any mantra or sacred utterance. *Om* is therefore both a metonym and an index of (sacred, effective, creative) speech.

It is no coincidence that *om* and *atha* start with the letter “a,” which is at the beginning of both the Sanskrit alphabet and the path of speech at the back of the throat. The Hindu tradition divides the *praṇava* into its constituent phonemes “a,” “u,” and “m” (or “ṁ”) and theorizes additional levels of resonance following the nasal. The significance of this division depends on the precise value and sequence of these phonemes in the Sanskrit language.

The structure of the Sanskrit alphabet is depicted in the table on the following page. First come the vowels, which are formed without closure of the vocal passage, but through the shaping of its different regions. Then come the consonants, which are formed by closure of the vocal passage. The simple vowels come before the diphthongs. The consonants are divided into five groups (*varga*) defined by their place of articulation (*utpattisthāna*) in the vocal passage, from the throat to the lips. Last come the semivowels and sibilants. This arrangement of the phonemes is one of the most scientific in any language. It also converts the alphabet into a diagram of speech itself, for the alphabet, like speech, moves from “inside” the throat to “outside” the mouth, and finally manifests in the form of sound:

Now I declare the manifestation of the letters in the speech of men. Impelled by wind eternally out of the *suṣumna* (the central channel) by the organs (of articulation), beginning with the throat, the letters appear in sequence...,<sup>45</sup>

The path of production of speech is diagrammed in simplified and condensed form in the *praṇava*, which consists of the three sounds “a,” “u,” and “m,” and therefore moves from the back of the throat to the front of the mouth, from inside to outside. Like the alphabet, *om* represents the transition from vowels to consonants, embracing everything from the first vowel, “a,” to the last consonant of the fifth *varga*, “ma.” *Om* is therefore a metonym for all language, which may explain the traditional interpretation of its first letter as the source of all speech: “the letter ‘a’ is speech itself, which, being manifested by consonants and sibilants, assumes various forms.”<sup>46</sup>

The *praṇava*, not to mention the Sanskrit alphabet, is much older than the Tantras, which further develop these ideas. The Tantric practice of enveloping uses *om*, other *bījas*, or the entire alphabet interchangeably, separately or together. The palindromic structure of enveloping, particularly when it involves the entire alphabet, emphasizes the directional sequence of language, and applies this emphasis for rhetorical or pragmatic effect.

## The Sanskrit Alphabet and Phonological System

### The Vowels

Place of Formation	Simple (short, long)	Diphthongs ( <i>guna</i> , <i>vrddhi</i> )
Throat	a, ā	
Palate	i, ī	e (= a + i), ai (= a + e)
Lips	u, ū	o (= a + u), au (= a + o)
Soft Palate	r, ṛ	
Teeth	l, ḷ	

### The Consonants, etc.

Place of Formation	Unvoiced Unaspirated	Unvoiced Aspirated	Voiced Unaspirated	Voiced Aspirated	Nasals	Semi- vowels	Sibilants
Throat	ka	kha	ga	gha	ṅa		ha
Palate	ca	cha	ja	jha	ña	ya	śa
Soft Palate	ṭa	ṭha	ḍa	ḍha	ṇa	ra	ṣa
Teeth	ta	tha	da	dha	na	la	sa
Lips	pa	pha	ba	bha	ma	va	

Enveloping converts the mantra into a diagram of the path of speech or verbal creation and, presumably, clears this path for the mantra, enhancing its power of expression.

Woodroffe rejected a similar, although less sophisticated, interpretation of the *praṇava*:

A European Sanskritist told a friend of mine that Om said before a Mantra is simply the “clearing of the throat” before utterance; and I suppose he would have said—the clearing of the throat after utterance; for Om both precedes and follows a Mantra. Why however should one clear the throat then? Om has nothing to do with hawking sounds, or the throat. Om is, according to Indian belief, a sound actually heard by Yogis as

above described. If moreover, the learned man had ever heard the Mantra Om recited he would have felt that it could not be explained in so shallow and materialistic a way. For Om is sounded as from the navel with a deep rolling and continuous Sound ending at the upper part of the nostrils where the Candra-bindu is sounded. Moreover, how are we to account for the other Bija Sounds on this hypothesis, such as Am, Em, Om and so forth, except by supposing that the unpleasant and unmannerly act of clearing the throat had undergone an unaccountably varied development? Be the doctrine true or false, it is more profound than that.<sup>47</sup>

Although *om* is certainly not a mere clearing of the throat, part of the value of this and other *bijas* depends precisely on the location of their letters on the path of speech, beginning in the throat. Incidentally, we have already seen why, as a diagram of the cosmic cycle, *om* must be pronounced at the end of a mantra as well as at its beginning. Position enables direction, and whether or not the Sanskrit alphabet originally signified the path of production of speech, its systematic organization of the phonemes in terms of their places of articulation in the throat and mouth provided a framework which was developed by the Tantras into a powerful means of indexing speech to the order of creation, for rhetorical or pragmatic effect. This interpretation explains the fungibility of the entire alphabet with *om* or, in the following passage, the letter “ka,” which as the first of the consonants is an appropriate choice for a metonym of speech:

Upon the mere contemplation of the letter “ka,” all success arises. By chanting the letter “ka,” beautiful one, there is (success) in everything, by chanting the entire alphabet or only the letter “ka,” which is the original cause of all the letters...,<sup>48</sup>

Several other formulations reveal that the significance of individual letters, whether used singly or in combination, is in terms of their position in the alphabet. A common Tantric interpretation of the first person singular pronoun *aham* breaks this into “a” and “ha,” the first and last letters of the standard alphabet.<sup>49</sup> The rosary used for chanting in Tantra, called the *akṣamālā* (garland of *akṣa* seeds), is interpreted as containing all of the letters (or syllables: *akṣara*) from first (“a”) to last (“kṣa”), in terms of the Tantric version of the alphabet called the “fifty letters” (*pañcasat lipi*).<sup>50</sup> All sacred literature and the world itself arise from this alphabet.<sup>51</sup>

The question remains whether this analysis can illuminate the structure of other *bījas*. There are some indications that it might, although on this point the evidence is more suggestive than definitive. Some of the principal *bījas* are the *māyā*, *kāma*, *śrī*, and *vāgbhava* *bījas*, which are, respectively, *hrīm*, *klīm*, *srīm*, and *aiṃ*. Each of these, as indeed most *bījas*,<sup>52</sup> ends in the letter “ma,” or rather *anusvara*, a generic nasal. This is the letter that “ends” *om* and, in the form of the five nasals, each of the five groups of consonants. Several of these *bījas* also begin with letters that “begin” different parts or special versions of the alphabet. This is obviously true of *klīm* and *aiṃ*, which begin with the first consonant (“ka”) and vowel (“a”) respectively. *Hrīm* begins with “ha,” which is articulated in the throat, is consistently associated with Siva, the element of ether or space (*vyoman*, *ākāśa*), and the beginning of the cosmic emanation, and in this capacity appears as the first non-vowel of the script of the elements (see below). An analogous pattern may be at work in the *Srividya kūṭa* mantra, the first bunch of letters (*kūṭa*) of which is “ka e ī la hrīm.” *Kūṭa* means “peak” or, possibly, “heaped up,” as *kūṭa* mantras are sometimes said to be one-syllabled.<sup>53</sup> VR interprets this *kūṭa* in terms similar to the *praṇava*, and indicates that it both condenses and diagrams different forms of creation.

However, the value of other letters seems to be based on different factors. The letter “ra” included in a number of important *bījas* is often glossed as the *bīja* of fire, and interpreted as kindling the mantra. Perhaps the most mysterious element of the phonology of the *bījas* is their common inclusion of the long vowel “i.”<sup>54</sup> This vowel is a palatal which, on the path of speech, falls between the two vowels “a” and “u” that coalesce in *om*. As for *srīm* and *strīm*, these may be just the words *sri* (glory) and *stri* (woman) turned into *bījas*.

There is an analogy between the structure of *bījas* and other mantras as described above, and the ancient grammatical device known as “contractions” (*pratyāhāras*). Pāṇini (c. 600 BCE) employed these as a kind of shorthand for articulating grammatical rules with the greatest possible economy. *Pratyāhāras* condense a subset of the alphabet into a single syllable. The subsets of the alphabet are those recognized by the grammar itself and formulated within separate “threads” (*sūtras*), e.g., the *sūtra* “aiuṇ” designates the first three vowels, followed by the retroflex nasal “ṇ” as a conventional marker, and “hal” designates all of the consonants. *Pratyāhāras* consist of two letters corresponding to, respectively, the first letter of one *sūtra* or alphabetic subset and the last letter of another. By this device,

they represent the entire sequence of letters contained in both *sūtras*, and everything in between: e.g., the *pratyāhāra* “aṅ” designates only the first three vowels, whereas “al” designates the entire alphabet, all of the vowels (described by the *sūtras* “aiuṅ,” “ṛḷk,” “eoṅ” and “aiauc”) plus all of the consonants (“hal”). This device closely resembles what we observe in *bījas* such as *om*, where, however, the value of the individual letters depends not on their position in some conventional groupings developed especially for the formulation and communication of grammatical rules, but rather upon the basic structure of the alphabet and some rearrangements thereof peculiar to the Tantras. Certain Tantras use the word *pratyāhāra* in its technical, grammatical sense to describe the manner in which, e.g., *aham* comprehends all of the letters of the alphabet.<sup>55</sup> Another word that appears as a synonym of *pratyāhāra* in these explanations is “enveloping” (*samputīkārḍ*).<sup>56</sup> Although the argument should not be pushed too far, it is clear at least that in the Tantric tradition the value of certain mantras, *bījas*, and *kūṭas* depends on the manner in which they diagram the sequence of language or of some version of the alphabet.

### The Diagram of Sexual Reproduction

Mantras also diagram another type of creation, namely sexual union and reproduction. Although sexual depictions of the cosmogony are very ancient in the Hindu tradition, they receive special emphasis in Tantra, according to which everything is a dialectic between the male and female principles. The Tantras absorbed from the ancient philosophical system of Saṃkhya the idea of a passive, unmanifested, absolute male principle (*puruṣa*), and an active, manifesting, relative female principle (*prakṛti*). Different Tantric systems name these principles differently. In Saivite Tantra, they are identified with the god Śiva and his consort, Parvati or Śakti. *Śakti* also means “power” or “force,” and is the motivating power that brings Śiva into manifestation. Without this power, Śiva would remain lifeless and inert, and the cosmos would not exist. Hence the pun that “Śiva, without Śakti, is a corpse (*śava*).” This dialectic is not only the underlying philosophy of the Tantras, it is also a structural principle that informs Tantric texts from their macro-level down to the sequence of individual mantras and *bījas*. Most Tantras are written as dialogues between the female and male principles, in which the female “asks” and the male “answers.”<sup>57</sup>

The most obvious reflection of this dialogical structure on the level of the mantras is the *haṁsa* mantra, the sexual significance of which is emphasized in the following passage:

This entire world of mobile and immobile (beings) is in essence drop (*bindu*) and roar (*nada*).<sup>58</sup> *Bindu* is male, and *nada* is regarded as female..., Without sexual intercourse nothing at all would be productive. There the two (*bijas*), “haṁ” and “sa(h),” arise, which are male and female The mantra “haṁ” is male (*puruṣa*), and the letter “sa(h)” is female (*prakṛti*)....<sup>59</sup>

We have seen that mantras lacking the *haṁsa* mantra or its component *bijas* are defined as flawed, and that the addition of these *bijas* is a means of making mantras effective. This suggests that the efficacy of mantras depends also upon a metaphor of sexual creation. The very terms employed to describe the letters of mantras encode this sexual metaphor. The Tantric term for the alphabet, *matṛka*, is cognate with “matrix” and “mother,” and signifies the fertile sound that is both source and destination of all speech and less subtle forms of creation. The word *bīja* means not only the peculiar Tantric syllables but also seed and human semen. All of these meanings appear in the following analogy: “Śiva joined with Śakti is manifestly endowed with ego (or individuation: *ahaṁkāra*). Without Sakti, this creation is not established, just as without a field the growth of a seed does not occur.”<sup>60</sup> This invokes the ancient symbol of woman as the “field” and man as the “knower of the field,” who contributes the seed.<sup>61</sup> Another type of mantra less well known than the *bija* is called *pinḍa*, which means clump but also fetus or embryo.<sup>62</sup> Both *bijas* and *pinḍas* are regarded as especially effective in bringing a mantra to life.<sup>63</sup> Particular *bijas*, including the *praṇava*, are also identified as wombs (*yonī*): “*Om* should be joined at the beginning of all mantras because of its being the beginning of the Vedas; it is the womb in every body.”<sup>64</sup> As we have seen, most of the principal *bijas* contain the vowel “i.” This vowel, either alone or, more commonly, combined with “a” in the diphthongs “e” and “ai,” the written form of each of which resembles a downward-pointing triangle, are frequently identified as wombs.<sup>65</sup> Enveloping with “iṁ” is called the “womb mantra.”<sup>66</sup> *Bijas* infuse life into the mantra by enveloping it in the womb.

Individual letters are sometimes explained as corresponding to Siva and Sakti, so that copulation occurs on the level of the syllable: “(The letters) are divided into two types according to their



essential nature as seed or womb: vowels are seed (*bija*) and (consonants) 'ka,' etc., are womb (*yonī*)”<sup>67</sup> This may reflect the phonological conception that the vowels are *svara* or self-manifesting, whereas the consonants are incapable of articulation without being combined with some vowel: “Whereas without the vowels truly no manifestation of the other (letters, i.e. the consonants) occurs, the wise say that the letters are made of Siva and Sakti.”<sup>68</sup>

There is precedent in the Vedas for such Tantric ideas. The Savitri mantra, speech, etc. are called “wombs” (*yonī*).<sup>69</sup> *MU* calls the third letter of *om* “the womb (*yonī*) of all, for he is the origin and the dissolution of beings.”<sup>70</sup> *CU* 1.1.5–6 states: “The *Ṛ* is nothing but speech; the *Saman* is breath; and the High Chant is this syllable *om*. Speech and breath, the *Ṛ* and *Saman*: each of these sets, clearly, is a pair in coitus. This pair in coitus unites in the syllable *om*.” Elsewhere the word for the *Sāman* chant is decomposed into *sā* and *ama*, or “she” and “he,” in a prefiguration of the Tantric analysis of the *haṁsa* mantra.<sup>71</sup>

The sexual significance of the rite of enveloping may now be understood. In the dictionary *Śabdakalpādruma* under “enveloping” (*samputa*) we find two meanings: the first is the Tantric rite involving mantras, and the second is sexual union. This second meaning of enveloping also attaches to the Tantric practice.<sup>72</sup> The rite of enveloping, which mirrors and occasionally employs the palindromic and explicitly sexual *haṁsa* mantra, surrounds the mantra with vocables that represent semen, or the fructifying copulation of the male and female principles, or the alphabetic matrix of creation. This metaphor also refers to the manner in which the womb envelops life as both receptacle for the male penis and container for the embryo. The palindromic structure of the rite of enveloping represents the cosmic cycle with its phases of evolution and involution, which, at the level of the individual person or mantra, correspond to life and death. This is also the meaning of the two interlocking triangles, the downward pointing *yonī* and upward pointing *liṅgam*. The Tantras correlate the cycle of cosmic evolution with what we colloquially refer to as “the old in-and-out,” which becomes a master metaphor figuratively embracing every phase of life from conception and birth, to death and the “little death” of orgasm in sexual intercourse. Hence the contention that “From the mother’s womb to the funeral pyre, a Hindu literally lives and dies in mantra.”<sup>73</sup>

These correspondences may be better appreciated by consulting the following table:

enveloping (forward direction)	(mantra/sādhya)	enveloping (backward direction)
hamsaḥ		so 'ham
out-breath		in-breath
Śiva ----> Śakti		Śakti ----> Śiva
evolution ▼	stability	▲ involution
exit womb		return to womb
birth	life	death, orgasm

The sexual significance of enveloping coincides with another important method of making mantras effective, the *yonimudrā* (womb sign). Several Tantras include the following verse: “Whoever does not know the meaning of the mantra, the consciousness of the mantra, and the *yonimudrā*, even if he should chant a hundred crore (one billion) times, there will be no success for him.”<sup>74</sup> The *yonimudrā* is specifically prescribed as a cure for the two impurities of birth and death.<sup>75</sup>

What is this mysterious *yonimudrā*? *Yoni* denotes the female sexual and reproductive organs, and is best translated as “womb,” as long as this is taken to refer to the external sexual organs and vagina in addition to the womb. *Mudrā* is difficult to translate, as it has a number of meanings. The primary one is a “seal” or “sign,” which underlies its use to denote a kind of symbolic hand gesture. *Mudrā* is also the term for one of five substances or practices beginning with the letter “m” (*pañcamakāra*),<sup>76</sup> in which context it is usually translated as “parched grain.” The *yonimudrā* is in part a gesture involving the complete interlacing of the fingers in an all-encompassing embrace resembling that of the womb. However, it is also, and more fundamentally, a form of yoga.<sup>77</sup> Yoga is distinguished by a concentration on restraining the breath and raising the *kundalini* through various psychic centers (*cakra*) and channels (*nāḍi*) within the body. The *kundalinī* is the supreme Śakti, often depicted as a serpent, which, coiled at the base of the spine, through yogic practice is made to straighten and extend to the highest *cakra* in the cranium.

The *yonimudrā* and other yogic methods of making mantras effective often prescribe a backwards and forwards motion through

the *cakras* and *nāḍī*.<sup>78</sup> These two directions correspond to the two subsidiary channels of *iḍa* and *piṅgala*, which must be balanced or coordinated in the central channel, or *suṣumna*, in which the *kundalini* moves.<sup>79</sup> When this coordination occurs, the mantra will be effective: “Mantras established in the (inferior) creaturely state are mere letters. (But) pronounced with the resonance (*dhvani*) of the *suṣumnā*, they attain mastery.”<sup>80</sup> “When the breath has gone to both channels, then all (mantras) awaken; being awakened, they always achieve results for those using them.”<sup>81</sup>

The *kundalinī* is identified with the alphabet itself as the source of all *bījas* and speech, as “That which, having attained the form of a serpent inside the bodies of living beings, becomes manifest in the form (*atman*) of the letters divided into prose and verse.”<sup>82</sup> The *kundalini* is frequently depicted as a serpent covered with the letters of the alphabet. The rosary (*akṣamālā*) in which each bead is supposed to represent a different letter of the alphabet in order, is also described as having the shape of a serpent.<sup>83</sup>

When the yogic methods describe the backward and forward motion of the *kundalinī*, they are also implicitly referring to the palindromic pattern of enveloping. Yoga often explicitly incorporates chanting in forward and reverse order, as in the following description of the *yonimudrā*: “Having bound the *yonimudra*, making the letters of the mantra that have arisen from the *mūlādhāra* (the lowest *cakra*) proceed up to the *brahmarandhra* (the highest *cakra*) and return (*gatagatani kurvataḥ*), having held his breath, he should chant a thousand times.”<sup>84</sup> The yogic method represents, within the body, the same process represented verbally in enveloping.

Descriptions of the *yonimudrā* elucidate the connection between the image of the womb and the backward and forward motions of enveloping: “She, in whose womb (*yonī*) creation is born, and is again absorbed (*pralīyate*)...is indeed the highest *yonimudrā*”<sup>85</sup> The *yonī* is the *womb* of creation, the beginning and end of the cosmic evolution and involution.<sup>86</sup> The backward and forward motions of enveloping and the *yonimudrā* represent, from a microcosmic perspective, the departure from and return to the womb, as well as, from a macrocosmic perspective, the creation and destruction of the universe. These motions also assimilate each form of creation to the act of sexual intercourse. Other methods of making mantras effective by ritual intercourse now appear less incongruous, as does the practice of writing the letters of the mantra on the *yonī* of the consort, which is understood as a kind of lower mouth.<sup>87</sup> Different variants of these methods are specifically said to grant eloquence and poetic ability.<sup>88</sup> The

symbolic fusion of the sexual and vocal openings, functions, and emissions is suggested in the previously noted designation of *aiṃ*, the speech-source (*vāghbava*) *bīja*, as the *yonī bīja* or *yonī mantra*. It is further reflected in the depiction of the *kundalīnī* which, having risen from a triangle representing the *yonī* in the *mūlādhāra cakra*, becomes erect in the head at the *brahmarandhra cakra*, from whence it emits verbal “seeds.”

There is some precedent for these ideas in the cosmogonic account of *RV* 10.90, in which creation proceeds from the mouth of the primal man outward and downward. The mouth and its creative power of speech are identified with the *Brahman* power, and the caste of *Brāhmaṇas* associated with this; the other castes are associated with different, and lower, parts of the body.<sup>89</sup> Following such an ancient association among creation, the mouth, and the power of speech, a metaphorical equation of the genital and oral openings appears to be an obvious further possibility. A later account says the primal man “churned like this and, using his hands, produced fire from his mouth as from a vagina (*yonī*). As a result the inner sides of both of these, the hands and the mouth, are without hair, for the inside of the vagina is without hair.”<sup>90</sup> The Tantras appear to have developed such notions into a sexual interpretation of speech and mantras.

The sexual metaphor underlying Tantric ideas of the creative power of speech is sometimes presented as a “secret of secrets.” Versions of the following injunction appear in a number of Tantras: “This is not to be revealed to anyone, Parvati, as if it were your own vagina (*yonī*)”<sup>91</sup> One text uses this analogy for the *yonimudrā*.<sup>92</sup> Although it is presented as a simile through the use of the particle *iva* or the indeclinable suffix *-vat* meaning “as” or “like,” this line has a hidden meaning that is more literal. The mantra is brought to life through the womb of the primal Śakti, Śiva’s consort, another name for whom is Pārvatī.

### **The Sequence of Creation and the Sequence of Mantras**

So far it has been demonstrated that various mantras, particularly *bījas* and mantras enveloped by these, are often diagrams of creation. The present section will demonstrate that mantras not only diagram physical processes of creation, thereby harmonizing language with reality: they also diagram, from within the language of the mantra itself, the transition from language to non-linguistic, physical reality, virtually bringing into being the goal stated within the mantra or *sādhya*.

According to the basic cosmogony of the Tantras, which developed from much older sources, speech is the most subtle form of creation and primary evolute, from which all grosser forms of creation, including the physical, were (and are) produced. The significance of the alphabetic matrix (*mātrkā*) enveloping the mantra has just been described. The forward and backward arrangement of the *praṇava*, other *bījas*, or the alphabet at the beginning and the end of the mantra signal the order of generation, and the priority of speech as that womb from which everything arises and to which everything returns. Although the entirety of the mantra is of course composed of language, it is these front and back portions consisting of *bījas* that most particularly represent speech itself. These *bījas* stand prior to the remainder of the mantra in the same way in which speech is conceived to stand prior to the rest of creation. The appending of these *bījas* to the mantra is believed, by analogy, to render the mantra creative and effective.

The relationship between the “outside” portions of the mantra and the “inside” is taken as analogous to the relationship between language and physical reality: instead of simply stating that “the word was made flesh,” mantras actually diagram this transition by degrees. The simplest illustration of this is in the relationship between the *mantra* (meaning, in this context, the outside portions of the mantra consisting of *bījas*) and the *sādhya*. As previously explained, the *sādhya* means literally “what is to be effected,” and includes a statement of the mantra’s goal, often with reduplicated imperatives and the name of the victim or other intended object. This segment of the mantra refers directly to the world by commanding some physical result, such as those characterizing the six magical rites of subjugating, killing, etc.<sup>93</sup> A stripped-down example is the following mantra for subjugating (*vaśīkaraṇa*): “oṃ hriṃ kliṃ, reverence to Goddess Kamakhya, make, make Devadatta (i.e. John Doe) my slave, kliṃ hriṃ oṃ, svaha.” The *mantra* (i.e. *bīja*) in this case is “oṃ hriṃ kliṃ,” and the *sādhya* is “make, make Devadatta my slave.” The relationship between the *mantra* and the *sādhya* parallels that between language and reality. By literally leading up to the declaration of what is to be done, the *mantra* virtually leads up to the real-world goal of the ritual.

A similar pattern can be observed in acronymic *bījas* that convert the first letter of the name of a deity into a *bīja*, and append this before the name, which is expressed in the dative case as an object of praise. An example is “oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye namaḥ” (oṃ gaṃ homage to Gaṇapati (the elephant-headed god)).

sequence of mantra:	(bīja) mantra	invocation	sādhya
without sādhya	om gaṃ	gaṇapataye (reverence to Gaṇapati)	
with sādhya	om hrīm klīm	reverence to Kāmākhyā	make Devadatta my slave
sequence of creation:	language ---->		----> material goal or incarnation of deity

Such alliterative formulas express the idea that language is ontologically prior to the world. The alphabet, and each of its letters, precedes that which it names, not merely verbally but in reality. The deity comes “alive” out of the alphabetic matrix, and more precisely, out of that letter with which its name begins: “The body of the divinity arises immediately from the *bīja*”<sup>94</sup>

These patterns are displayed in the following table:

The mantras for installing breath and vital force (*prāṣṭapraṭiṇhā*), especially into images of the deity, represent the transition from language to physical creation in a different way. One such mantra noted above includes the semivowels “ya,” “ra,” “la,” and “va,” which are consistently interpreted as *bījas* of the elements wind, fire, earth, and water respectively; the sibilants; and “ha,” which is the fifth element, space. These letters are also identified with the sheaths (*kosa*) or layers of physical matter of which the body is composed.<sup>95</sup> With the articulation of the mantra, there is a progressive “putting on of flesh,” and the body gradually receives all of its component parts. The rites of *nyasa* show an analogous use of the letters of the mantra, which are laid on the limbs of the ritualist in order to establish a perfected body.

Such ideas are evident in the following passage from *LT*, which analyzes the sequence of a mantra into four parts:

Sometimes it [the mantra] is *bīja*, sometimes it is *piṇḍa*, sometimes it is *saṃjñā* and at other times it is *pada*. O lord of the gods, (the four stages of development of the individual soul, viz.) *turya*, *suṣupti*, *svapna* and *jagrat* [i.e. respectively the fourth state, deep (dreamless) sleep, normal (dreaming) sleep, and wakefulness] are respectively represented by *bīja* [,

*pinḍa*,] etc. A *bija* (-mantra) may contain either one vowel or two vowels; it may be formed by coupling a vowel with a consonant, or it may even contain several vowels. The *haris* (consonants) inserted between (the *bīja* and the remainder of the mantra) are known as the *pinḍa* section in which the consonants are sometimes connected with vowels. The *saṃjñā* is the name of a particular deity addressed in association with (the words) *namas* and *praṇava*. A laudatory and vocative combination of verbal utterance with nominal concepts, fraught with recollections from the past and used to further the purpose envisaged, is the essential form of the *pada-mantra*. Together these four (sections) of mantras make up a whole that bears relation to the nature of the deity addressed. The latter, approached by means of a mantra composed of these four sections grants (the adept) the fulfilment of his desire. O lord of the gods, the wise should refrain from applying these mantras until they can clearly distinguish between *kṣetra* and *kṣetrajñā* mantras (those pertaining to the body and those pertaining to the soul)... ... (In mantras containing a *bīja*) the *bīja* refers to the soul (*jīva*, life principle, i.e. *kṣetrajñā*); the rest of the mantra refers to the body. In the case of mantras without a *bīja*, the first sound represents the soul and the rest represents the body. (In the case of mantras consisting of only) a *bīja* or a *pinḍa* section, the *a* is regarded as the soul and the rest as the body. In cases of (mantras) without an *a*, another vowel is taken to represent the soul. In the case of (mantras containing) only vowels, the first *mātrā* (*mora*, prosodic unit) refers to the soul, whilst the body is represented by the second etc. When there is only one *mātrā* in a mantra the *saṃskāra* (i.e. the subtle sound: *madhyamā*), characterized as transcendental, is considered to represent the soul, while the uttered sounds relate to the body. In the case of *pinḍa* mantras that contain no vowel, the first (letter) represents the soul and the rest the body. Thus I have revealed which portions of a mantra relate to the body and which to the soul. ...When there is no *bīja* in a mantra, the *bīja* should be formed by taking the first sound and joining *m* to it; in this way the (mantra) can be made into a complete formula.<sup>96</sup>

The final line of this passage makes clear the purpose of *bījas*, which was already suggested by the class of acronymic mantras such as “oṃ gaṃ gaṇapataye.”<sup>m</sup> Vowels representing language precede and lead up to concrete, substantial reality. Multiple



overlapping metaphors are used to express this basic idea. The sexual metaphor suggested by the terms *bīja* and *pinḍa* is further developed: the seed (*bīja*) precedes the embryo (*pinḍa*) just as vowels precede consonants and the soul precedes the body. The sexual metaphor in which woman and man are respectively the “field” and the “knower of the field,” who contributes the seed, is also correlated with this sequence. The sequence of a mantra represents an awakening (*jagrat*) in terms of the four stages of consciousness correlated with the letters of the *praṇava* in *MU*: *om* and other *bījas* represent the fourth (*turiya*) stage in the direction of involution, but the first stage of evolution when placed at the beginning of the mantra.

The sequence of *bīja* and *pinḍa*, then *saṃjñā*,<sup>97</sup> which last is only a formula of the sort “namo gaṇapataye” (reverence to Gaṇapati), ends in the *pada* mantra,<sup>98</sup> which is somewhat confusingly described as “a laudatory and vocative combination of verbal utterance with nominal concepts...used to further the purpose envisaged.” This is what we have seen referred to elsewhere as the *sādhya*, the semantic portion of the mantra declaring its objective goal, which, as this definition relates, uses both nouns and verbs. *LT* clarifies that the earlier portions of the mantra, including the *bīja* and *pinḍa*, stand in relation to the later, including the *pada* or *sādhya*, as the transcendent form of speech stands to its earthly manifestation,<sup>99</sup> and as the soul stands to the body. Therefore, the mantra represents a “putting on of flesh” leading to the attainment of bodily substance just at the point where the concrete purpose of the mantra is articulated.

The script of the elements (*bhūtalipi*)<sup>100</sup> represents perhaps the most elaborate extension of these ideas. This script is a particular rearrangement of the Sanskrit alphabet to bring it into correlation with, among other things, the sequence of evolution of the elements. Descriptions of this script name the letters “ha, ya, ra, va, la” by the elements associated with these, and categorize the rest of the letters according to these elements.<sup>101</sup>

As in the normal alphabet, the vowels precede the consonants, which precede the sibilants. However, the semivowels are placed before rather than after the consonants, and there are fewer letters (only 42), the long vowels having been omitted. The strangest feature is the reordering of the four semivowels together with “ha,” and of the letters within each group of consonants, in accordance with a uniform pattern explained in the verse as “last (fifth), first, second, fourth, and middle (third).”<sup>102</sup>



*The Script of the Elements*

Space	Air	Fire	Water	Earth
a	i	u	ṛ	ḷ
e	ai	o	au	
ha	ya	ra	va	la
ña	ka	kha	gha	ga
ṇa	ca	cha	jha	ja
ṇa	ṭa	ṭha	ḍha	ḍa
na	ta	tha	dha	da
ma	pa	pha	bha	ba
śa	ṣa	sa		

Although the script of the elements almost certainly contains other symbolic patterns that are more obscure, its name already provides a clue to one of the central functions of this peculiar rearrangement. The order of letters “ha, ya, ra, va, la,” which precedes and serves as the template for the rearrangement of the consonants, is designed to mirror the order of evolution of the elements: space, air, fire, water, and earth (*vyomerāgnijalam dharā*). The sequence in which the five elements are often learned is just the reverse, i.e. in the order of *involution*. Of course, the rite of enveloping often uses the script of the elements in both forward and reverse order. The script of the elements appears to be a gloss on the *hamṣa* mantra: its first consonant is “ha” and last “sa,” the letters identified with Siva and Sakti.<sup>103</sup> Above “ha” in the first row is the letter “a” which, like “ha,” is articulated in the throat and associated with Siva. Below “ha” in the first column are the nasals of each group of consonants, uncharacteristically placed at the beginning rather than the end of each group of five. The nasals, especially the generic nasal or *anusvara*, represent Siva, and combine with “ha” to form “haṁ” the portion of the *hamṣa* mantra that signifies Siva. One could find other patterns: the letters in the first, third, and eighth rows of the first column spell out the first person singular pronoun *aham*, which is part of the *hamṣa* mantra, and is interpreted as containing all the letters of the standard alphabet. Apart from these devices, there are likely some

phonological reasons underlying the structure of the script of the elements. It is possible that the placement of the semivowels between the vowels and consonants, or the reorganization of the consonants so as to place the two aspirated ones, unvoiced and voiced, next to each other, are some sort of attempt to balance and perfect the alphabet, to maximize its smoothness of flow or euphony.

What is evident, in any case, is that the script of the elements diagrams the sequence of evolution of the elements from space to earth.<sup>104</sup> Incidentally, this provides another demonstration that the palindromic form of the rite of enveloping, which often uses this script, is an attempt to represent the cosmic cycle. The script of the elements diagrams the evolution of the elements in their normal or natural order, from abstract to concrete, or least to most tangible: space-air-fire-water-earth. When, in order to make a mantra effective, the script of the elements is appended in forward order at the beginning of the *sādhya*, this script ends with solid, physical creation just at the point at which the *sādhya* expresses the real-world goal of the mantra. In this way, the script leads up to and reinforces the goal of the mantra.

The *hamṣa* mantra, which moves from “ha(ṁ),” the first non-vowel of the script of the elements, to the last, “sa(h),” diagrams the same transition in simplified form. The principal movement is from Śiva to Śakti, male to female, and back again. However, this is also the movement toward physical creation. Recall the line, “This mantra is repeated by all living beings, from Śiva down to worms...,”<sup>105</sup> This expresses the transition from the abstract source of creation to its grossest manifestation, and with this the unity of the entire creation in its dependence on the cycle of breath or wind.

There is a further layer of significance in such diagrams. The five elements are often correlated with the five senses and their objects.<sup>106</sup> The first element, space, is associated with sound, the sense of hearing, and the faculty of speech. This reinforces the idea that speech is the primary evolute and source of all creation. When the script of the elements diagrams the transition from space to earth, it is at the same time diagramming the transition from speech to extra-linguistic reality: the “word” becomes the “world.” Of course, this diagram occurs within the confines of speech itself, and is therefore both virtual and recursive.

These relationships are displayed in the following table:

script of the elements . . .				. . . etc. ---->	<i>sādhya</i>
space ----> (abstract)	air ---->	fire ---->	water ---->	earth -----> (concrete)	material goal
language . . .				. . . etc. ---->	reality

### Conclusion

Tantric mantras often attempt to diagram and coordinate at least four different forms of creation simultaneously: the general cycle of evolution and involution of the cosmos; the cycle of in—and out-breaths; the path of speech from the back of the throat to the front of the lips, and from there to manifestation outside the body in the form of sound; and the cycle of sexual reproduction, including the birth and death of the mantra itself regarded as a living being or form of the deity. By converting mantras into mimetic diagrams of creation, Tantric ritual aims to produce a natural language, one that is directly connected with and even capable of influencing reality.

# CHAPTER THREE

## The Linguistic Ideology of the Tantras

### Language, Canon, and Idolatry

TANTRIC MANTRAS ARE A DIRECT DEVELOPMENT OF SOME EARLIER VEDIC IDEAS regarding the power of ritual language. A key concern especially of the Brahmanas and earliest Upaniads was to uncover the hidden correspondences that obtain among the sacrificial ritual, the cosmos, and the microcosm of the human body.<sup>1</sup> These correspondences, called “relations” or “counterparts” (*bandhu*), “equivalences” (*sampad*), and “secret connections” (*upaniṣad*), were believed to be evidenced by a variety of forms of resemblance between the things held to be related, including phonetic similarities between the words for these things, and their division into sets with a similar number and arrangement of members. Other *bandhus* were stated directly in propositional form, most famously in the Great Sayings (*mahavakya*) in which some later Hindu philosophies located the essence of the Upaniṣadic teachings: “I am Brahman” (*aḥam brahmāsmi*),<sup>2</sup> “That thou art” (*tat tvam asi*).<sup>3</sup>

Such identifications constituted a philosophy, but one with an emphasis on pragmatics. The perennial refrain in the Upaniṣads was that the sacrifice will be effective only for one who knows (*ya evaṁ veda*), and can name, the *bandhu* on which it depends. In this conception of the relation between knowledge and effective action, speech played a vital role as the medium that both evidences and articulates a *bandhu*. BAU 4.1.2 explains:

“What constitutes knowledge, Yajñavalkya?” “Speech itself, Your Majesty,” he replied. “For surely, Your Majesty, it is through speech that we come to know a counterpart (*bandhu*). *R̥gveda*, *Yājurveda*, *Samaveda*, the *Atharva-Aṅgiras*, histories, ancient tales, sciences, hidden teachings (*upaniṣad*), verses, aphorisms, explanations, and glosses; offerings and oblations; food and drink; this world and the next world; and all beings—it is through speech, Your Majesty, that we come to know all these. So clearly, Your

Majesty, the highest *brahman* is speech. When a man knows and venerates it as such, speech never abandons him, and all beings flock to him; he becomes a god and joins the company of gods.”

Given the view of language maintained in the Vedic ritual tradition, resemblances between words were taken as evidence of a direct connection between the “word” and the “world.” Patrick Olivelle points out that these were not “folk” etymologies produced by those too unsophisticated to know the true etymologies of these words; they instead reflected a quest for “deeper and hidden connections” to which the surface forms of language were thought to give clues.<sup>4</sup> In deference to his argument, I will call such devices “fictitious (alliterative) etymologies,” which leaves open the question of the degree of sincerity with which they were advanced.<sup>5</sup> Much later the Tantras continued to employ such etymologies. An example is the definition of *mantra* quoted in [chapter one](#): “As a result of contemplation (*mananat*), it preserves (*trayate*) (a person), therefore it is called ‘mantra.’” *KT 17* contains a large number of such etymologies.

Padoux has argued convincingly that Tantra represents an expansion of Vedic ideas regarding the creative power of language.<sup>6</sup> Several of the rites for making mantras effective, including the sexual rites, find precedent especially in the cosmogonies of the two earliest Upaniṣads, *BĀU* and *CU*. The Tantras present alternative readings of these earlier texts that call into question the manner in which they have been read, not only in the West but also in parts of the Sanskrit tradition, as purely “philosophical” texts, in disregard of their poetic and pragmatic dimensions. The Tantric *hamṣa* mantra and the rite of enveloping develop Upaniṣadic formulas, borrowing and attempting to improve upon their language and its creative potential. Tantric mantras are, in some cases, performances and pragmatic applications of Upaniṣadic cosmogonies.

*BĀU* 6.4, which includes a number of forms of sexual magic, is an obvious precedent for Tantric rites.<sup>7</sup> The ritual for begetting a son culminates at 6.4.20ff.:

Then he embraces her, as he says:  
I am he (*ama*), you are she (*sa*); you are she, I am he.  
I am the *Sāman* chant, you are the *R̥g* verse;  
I am the sky, you are the earth.  
Come, let us unite,

deposit the seed,  
to get a son,  
a male child.  
Then he spreads apart her thighs, saying: "Spread apart,  
earth and sky." He slips his  
penis into her....

The mantra for conception is a palindrome moving from male (*ama*) to female (*sa*), sky to earth, and back again: "amo 'ham asmi sa tvam sa tvam asy amo 'ham." The Tantric *hamṣa* mantra, "haḥsaṃ so 'ham," shares all of these features, and even bears a phonological resemblance to the *ama* and *sa* of this formula, which are already understood as the parts of the name of a mantra, the *Sāman* chant, as explained at *BĀU* 1.3.22:

And it [the breath] is also the *Sāman*. The *Sāman*, after all, is Speech. "It is both she (*sa*) and he (*ama*)"; this gave the name to and discloses the true nature of the *Sāman*. Or maybe it is called *Sāman* because it is equal in size (*sama*) to a gnat or mosquito, on the one hand, and to an elephant, to these three worlds, or even to the entire universe, on the other.<sup>8</sup>

The *Sāman* chant is both breath and speech, and it combines and mediates between male and female and the smallest and the largest. This coincides with the Tantric interpretation of the *hamṣa* mantra as the breath that moves everything "from Śiva down to the worms," and that establishes a continuity throughout the cosmic cycle of evolution and involution.

Both the *hamṣa* mantra and *BA U* 6.4.20 recall the myth of creation in *ṚV* 10.90, which has already been mentioned as a possible source for Tantric ideas regarding the creative power of speech. The fifth verse of this hymn, "From the Man came *Virāj*, and from *Virāj*, the Man" (*tasmad virāḥ ajayata virajo adhi puruṣaḥ*), expresses in chiasmic form the same basic idea that creation is a movement from male to female, and back again. Moreover, as in later texts, this movement is already identified with the path of speech.

Olivelle has corrected the earlier mischaracterization of the Upaniṣads as a pure "philosophy" devoid of pragmatic considerations:

The final *upaniṣad* or equation is between Ātman, the essential I, and Brahman, the ultimate real. Even though this

equation played a significant role in later developments of religion and theology in India and is the cornerstone of one of its major theological traditions, the Advaita Vedanta, it is incorrect to think that the single aim of all the Upaniṣads is to enunciate this simple truth. A close reader of these documents will note the diversity of goals that their authors pursue, chief among which are food, prosperity, power, fame, and a happy afterlife. There are rites to secure greatness, to win a woman's love, to harm the lover of one's wife, to ensure pregnancy, to guard against pregnancy, to assure a safe childbirth—the list can go on. Many scholars ignore these and similar passages in their search for the “philosophy” or “the fundamental conception” of the Upaniṣads. But are we justified in doing so? If the compilers of the Upaniṣads thought them significant enough to be included in these collections, who are we to reject them? These passages, I believe, are as important to uncovering the religious history of the period as the passages proclaiming the oneness of Ātman and Brahman.<sup>9</sup>

I suggest that the Tantric readings of the Upaniṣads expose a deeper level of the problem diagnosed by Olivelle. These texts do not merely mix “philosophy” with “ritual.” In the Tantric *haṃsa* mantra, it is precisely the “philosophical equations” of the Upaniṣads that are employed in ritual toward pragmatic ends. “I am that haṃsa-bird” (*haṃsaḥ so 'ham*) mimics the form of such equations, including “I am Brahman” (*aham Brahmāsmi*) and “That thou art” (*tat tvam asi*), while also repeating the palindromic form of *BĀU* 6.4.20, and developing further the cos-mogonic symbolism that already appears to characterize this earlier formula.

A related example is the sequences of elemental evolution and involution diagrammed in Tantra by the script of the elements and by the mantras for establishing breath and vital force (*praśṭapraṇa*). These follow the same pattern as those Upaniṣadic texts which inquire in progressive fashion on which principle the world was “established” (*pratiśṭhita*) until an ultimate principle is reached, as at *BĀU* 3.9.26:

“On what are you and your self founded (*pratiśṭhita*) [,  
Yājñavalkya]?”  
“On the out-breath.”  
“On what is the out-breath founded?”  
“On the in-breath.”

“On what is the in-breath founded?”

“On the inter-breath.”

“On what is the inter-breath founded?”

“On the up-breath.”

“On what is the up-breath founded?”

“On the link-breath. About this self, one can only say ‘not...,  
not...’”

Such interrogations follow the order of involution, which is diagrammed also by the second half or backwards (*vilomena, utkramāt*) motion of the palindromic pattern of many Tantric mantras. In Tantric ritual, of course, the goal is not simply a knowledge of Brahman, but the “establishing” of the mantra and the pragmatic goal it articulates. Tantric mantras are, among other things, performances of Upaniṣadic cosmogonic and philosophical speculations which literalize these in poetic (and diagrammatic) form, and apply them toward pragmatic ends.

This Tantric appropriation and development of the Upaniṣads is not an anomaly, but a direct continuation of these earlier texts, which followed the Brahmaṇas in identifying the goal of knowledge, particularly knowledge of the *bandhus*, as the proper and effective performance of the ritual. This underscores the point that the Upaniṣads have too often been misread as a purely philosophical semantics (*atman=brahman*), rather than as a ritual pragmatics and poetics. Of course the Upaniṣads also constitute a philosophy with a semantic or denotative content. Yet the poetic form, and pragmatic function, of these texts has been erased in the quest for something that resembles our preexisting conception of what philosophy is: an abstract concept expressed in propositional form. To improve our reading of these texts is also to interrogate, challenge, and improve our conception of philosophy (and poetry) itself.

This tendency to repress or deny the poetic and pragmatic function of language may be to some extent characteristic of philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Paul Griffiths has argued that philosophy often represents a kind of “denaturalized discourse,” in which terms are stripped of their metaphorical content and abstract logical relations predominate, in an attempt to produce a universal (izable) language.<sup>11</sup> This concept helps to illuminate certain readings within the Sanskrit tradition, such as those provided by Advaita Vedānta, of the philosophical equations and cosmogonies of the Upaniṣads. However, the preceding analysis of Tantric ritual illustrates precisely the opposite phenomenon: the attempt



to construct a natural language by means of imitation and other poetic devices.

One device employed in the Tantras to naturalize mantras, or reinforce the appearance of their naturalness, is onomatopoeia.<sup>12</sup> As we saw, the *haṃsa* mantra and *om* are explicitly conceived as onomatopoeias for breath and speech, a conception facilitated by the phonological system of Sanskrit. Frits Staal has endorsed a similar interpretation of *om* as the most primitive utterance:

Actually, as far as *om* is concerned, we are on firmer ground [in asserting that ritual utterances are primitive language or even “pre-linguistic” language]. According to [Roman] Jakobson, “the most natural order of sound production is an opening of the mouth followed by its closure.” This is a very apt description of the mantra *om*. As for ontogeny, Jakobson informs us that the child first passes through a babbling stage in which precisely such sounds are produced, and then arrives at the “first acquisition of conventional speech” in which it clings to the model “consonant plus vowel.” Then *repetitiveness* comes into operation—the most basic element of ritual syntax—resulting in what in linguistics is called *reduplication*. Consonants formed by a complete oral closure predominate, and this leads first to *mama*, which does not, however, refer to the mother but is a general expression of affection. Language comes into being only when purely referential mechanisms begin to operate, when there is, in Jakobson’s words, “the transition from affective expression to designative language.” Thus *papa* arrives on the scene—“the first distant, merely deictic, rudimentary cognitive attitude in the child’s verbal behavior.” The importance of *om* and its priority to language is inherent in this scenario, which depicts how *om* comes before *mama*, and *mama* before *papa* who introduces language. Variations of *om*, with repetition, survive in Western Asia: *am-en*. Another universal mantra answers the general description of “opening the mouth followed by its closure” equally well: the mantra *hiṃ* with its variant *huṃ*, both common in Vedic and Tantric contexts. The occurrence of “h” in these mantras may be due to their onomatopoetic representation of breathing.<sup>13</sup>

Staal’s theory is not very different from those texts that claim that the sound emitted at the original birth by Puruṣa or Brahma was none other than *om*. Similarly, some Tantras contend that the first cries and later babbling of a child are the sounds of *kundalini*.<sup>14</sup>

which, as we have seen, is the personification of the alphabet. Despite such accounts, the issue is, of course, not whether *om* is “natural” in some sense, but rather the use and function of the appeal to nature, or gesture to spontaneity, within the scripted discourse of Tantric ritual. The “naturalness” of *om*, the *haṁsa* mantra, and the Sanskrit alphabet is appropriated and rhetorically heightened as a means of naturalizing the discourse of ritual and reinforcing the belief in its efficacy.

Part of the power of ritual is to produce a persuasive illusion of control over what cannot be controlled. This often means presenting the artificial as the natural, or the scripted as the spontaneous. At the very moment that the Tantras prescribe the chanting of the *haṁsa* mantra, they claim that this mantra is “unchanted” (*ajapā*) because it is repeated with every in- and out-breath over the course of a day.<sup>15</sup> Although *all* speech necessarily traverses the path from throat to lips and beyond, Tantric mantras render this path explicit by adding phonological diagrams of speech in a form that is condensed (*om*) or expanded (the entire alphabet). If no one can control his manner of coming into the world, the Tantras at least prescribe various sexual practices or verbal surrogates thereof as a means of controlling one’s exit, which is understood to be, simultaneously, sexual orgasm, death, the end of the cosmic cycle, and the return to Śiva. By practicing such methods, one not only achieves success in the use of mantras but also becomes *jīvanmukta*, liberated (even) while alive, which is to say “dead” even while alive, as the Indian tradition has since ancient times equated liberation with final death and exit from the cycle of rebirth. Everyone dies, but the Tantras promise a method of control over this natural process.

As we see, ritual frequently elevates the quotidian to the extraordinary, substituting an illusion of control in response to perennial human quandaries and the punctuations of pragmatic crises that highlight these. Lacking direct control over reality, human beings fall back on what is at hand, over which they do have control, namely language, and attempt to leverage reality from within the confines of discourse. Given the impossibility of constructing a direct connection between language and reality, various poetic devices are applied to produce the appearance of such a connection. Language becomes a substitute for reality.<sup>16</sup>

Underlying such devices is the idea that the surface of language discloses deeper realities. Phonetic echoes may provide clues to, or even proof of, meanings contained (and hidden) in language. This metaphor of containment is expressed in Tantra by the word for the alphabet, *mātṛkā*, which also means “mother” and

“matrix.” Language contains reality as a mother’s womb contains the embryo. Not only all sacred texts, but the cosmos itself proceeds from the letters of the alphabet.<sup>17</sup> This parallels the ancient Greek designation of the letters of the alphabet as *stoicheia*, which also means the “elements” that were the most basic constituents of the cosmos. Johanna Drucker relates:

The notion that the letters were a finite set of elements capable of infinite combinations was frequently commented on by classical authors. The Roman philosopher Lucretius, for instance, noted that if all the letters in the Homeric epics were set free from their literary form, jumbled in a sack, and then poured out, they would reconstruct the universe.<sup>18</sup>

As noted previously, in Tantra language, and especially mantras, are a form of what Jonathan Z. Smith has called a “canon”: a “radical and arbitrary reduction” to a limited set of elements that is then applied to every dimension of life. However, within the tradition this reduction appears not arbitrary but natural, due to the (artificially constructed) mimetic relationship between language and reality.

The lists, common in Tantra, of one hundred or one thousand names (*śata-*, *sahasranāma*) of a deity, which often employ massive alliteration, further illustrate this idea of the canonical status of language. Each such list provides an exhaustive enumeration of the names and attributes of a deity. There is (supposedly) no repetition, and every name can be divided in different ways owing to the nature of Sanskrit, which is written in a continuous line that may be carved up in different ways permitted by the polysemousness of compounds and the euphonic combination (*sandhi*) of words.<sup>19</sup> The various letters of individual names are pulled apart and put back together again, decomposed and recomposed, becoming the source of additional meanings. The pieces of various mantras also are distributed throughout the text of the *LSN*, to be recovered and reconstructed through exegesis. The exegete can “find” one mantra in the text of another, as *VR* does for the *Śrīvidyā kūṭa* mantra.<sup>20</sup> This practice is not idiosyncratic:

It may be observed, by the way, that while the *Lalitasahasranama* does not give the syllables of the *Pañcadasak arī* [the 15 syllabled *Śrīvidyā kūṭa* mantra], the *Lalitātrisati*, which contains only three hundred names, has

twenty names beginning with each of the syllables and thus gives the mantra indirectly.<sup>21</sup>

Behind these Tantric developments, of course, lies a long tradition of reading the many in the few, which goes back to the interpretation of the single syllable *om*, in the Brahmaṇas and Upaniṣads, as containing all speech and even the entire world. Behind every visible manifestation may ultimately be read this single, abbreviated text.

The words “dismembering” and “remembering” aptly describe this process. *Sahasranāmas* are employed not only for praising, but also for invoking the deity and establishing its presence or connection to the worshipper. The alphabet as mother (*mātrkā*) is identical with the goddess herself. Recall that the body of the deity arises from a mantra as if from a seed (*bīja*). If the parts of various mantras are scattered through the text of the *LSN*, the same is true of the limbs of the goddess, which need to be put back in order through the manipulation of the letters of her names, just as the rites of *nyasa* establish a perfected body for the ritual practitioner by laying the letters on his limbs in order. Many of the names in the *LSN* describe in glorious detail from head to foot the charming figure of the deity. With the chanting of the names, the deity is “re-membered” and (for this is often the suggestion) brought to life, in diagrammatic fashion. The goddess is the source of language and composed of language, as indicated by such names as no. 577: “Who has the form of the letters of the alphabet” (*mātrkāvarṇanūṇī*); no. 204: “Who has the true form of all mantras” (*sarvamantrasvarīṇī*); and nos. 366, 368, 370–71: “Who has the form of the four levels of speech” (*para, paśyantī, madhyamā, vaikharīnūṇī*)<sup>22</sup> Then by recomposing language, and especially the words of her names and mantras, which are nearer to her, one may arrive finally in her divine presence. Both the method and the goal of this exegesis resemble those found in the physical worship of the goddess through pilgrimage to the fifty *piṭhas*, the places in India where the various pieces of the dead goddess Sati’s corpse reside. A pilgrimage to these may reconstitute, through serial recuperation, the full holiness of her divine presence, which is most densely concentrated in Kamakhya or Kamarupa (“the essence of desire”), the purported site of the goddess’ sexual organ. The goddess is the sum of all of her parts, as name no. 833 indicates: “Who has the form of the fifty places of pilgrimage” (*pañcasatpiṭhanūṇī*). *SB* in interpreting this name explicitly identifies the *piṭhas* with the “fifty letters” of the Tantric alphabet,<sup>23</sup> suggesting that the exegesis of the names is a kind of

linguistic pilgrimage that can bring the goddess back to life through the reconstruction of the true form of the alphabet, her proper name.

The text of the *Sahasranāma*, therefore, proclaims quite openly on its surface a message that the exegete also attempts to decode and decrypt underneath that surface. The activity of the exegete is actually a double (duplicitous?) movement of simultaneously mystifying and demystifying, or encrypting and decrypting, in that the surface or obvious meaning of language is called into question and a different, hidden meaning substituted in its place. In the case of Tantra, such efforts are entirely consistent with the tradition's obsessive practices of encryption. The search for a meaning hidden in language, a deeper significance that is somehow nevertheless exhibited on the surface in the phonemic shape of words and phrases, is in these examples shown to be a search for the deity, the proper name and the touchstone of ultimate reference. Linguistic ideology is a form of verbal idolatry, and canon reduces to the hidden deity who is simultaneously revealed and concealed by language. The dream is for a glimpse through the transparency of the sign to what it covers and covers for, as both veil and substitute. This dream proves to be an illusion. The body of the text, which is the palpable form of the deity, can be de-crypted only if it is already a crypt: the sign is a tomb.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Science of Illusion, Part One

### Poetry and the Dream of a Natural Language

PREVIOUS CHAPTERS RECONSTRUCTED THE “EMIC” OR INSIDE VIEW OF THE TANTRIC tradition regarding what makes a mantra effective. Now we shift to the “etic” or outside view.<sup>1</sup> This is also a movement from “interpretation” to “explanation.”<sup>2</sup> Although humanists have often confined themselves to the task of interpreting the subjective meaning of particular traditions, one of the goals of any science, including the human sciences, ought to be explanation, a rational account of a phenomenon that articulates general principles which may then be affirmed, rejected, or modified on the basis of further evidence. Indeed, the moment we advance beyond simple description, such an account is already implicit, and should therefore be made explicit in furtherance of one of the goals of academic discourse: public knowledge.

Of course, there is a major difference between the inside and the outside views of ritual. In the post-Enlightenment West, we do not believe the various claims made for the efficacy of ritual. Instead, those claims themselves stand in need of explanation, and become the focus of our analysis. In other words, we are interested not only (or even primarily) in *what* people believe, but also in *why* they believe it. From inside the Tantric tradition, mantras are powerful utterances capable of effecting even real-world objectives. From the outside, they constitute a species of rhetoric: their poetic form contributes to the belief in their efficacy.

The preceding analysis demonstrated that mantras attempt to diagram various tropes of creation and produce a correspondence between language and reality so that the latter may be controlled by the former. Together with the obvious poetic devices [chapter one](#) identified in mantras, these more elaborate diagrams of creation reinforce the conclusion that mantras are a type of poetry, which in Classical Western theories was regarded as a form of imitation (*mimesis*). This is related to the idea of a natural language with a direct connection to reality, as evidenced by some

form of resemblance purported to obtain between the two domains.<sup>3</sup> In ritual traditions, the claim for a natural language is often of a stronger form: language not only accurately reflects reality, but may also influence reality prospectively. Tantric mantras are one of the most complex illustrations of this cross-cultural phenomenon.

Instead of merely reconfirming a preexisting theory of poetry, Tantric mantras point us toward a radical reinterpretation of the concept of imitation. Although this is usually conceived as an imitation of reality by (poetic) language and other forms of art, closer analysis reveals that often, for example in rhyme, words imitate other words and, by so doing, appear to imitate reality. Poetic imitation constructs a virtual bridge between language and reality, the illusion of a natural language.

This fundamental mechanism of rhetoric may be better illustrated by an example. In a Sanskrit story, Vālmīki, the first poet, witnesses a hunter kill one of a pair of lovebirds and creates poetry in response to the *pathos* of this scene.<sup>4</sup> The *Rāmāyaṇa* states that Vālmīki's "grief (*śokaḥ*) became verse (*ślokatvam āgataḥ*)." <sup>5</sup> The poet's verse is a curse of retribution for the hunter's crime. One import of the story is clear: poetry is a natural expression of emotion, a medium uniquely connected with reality, and even (if curses are effective) a means of influencing the world. Such claims are found in many traditions. However, further reflection on this story reveals a problem: the connection asserted between poetry and reality is nowhere solid, and is in fact severed at certain crucial junctures, so that instead of establishing poetry on firm ground, the story of Vālmīki calls that ground into question.

The surface of the story shows these points of disjuncture or gaps, the most immediate of which, working backwards, is between the emotion of the poet and its verbal expression, which differ qualitatively in several ways: emotion is embodied, internal, and (relatively) natural, whereas poetry, like all speech, is verbal, external, and artificial. Moreover, Vālmīki's emotion is already borrowed and sympathetic: it is an imitation of the grief of the bereaved lovebird. This original grief is itself a reaction to a loss, the separation from the lovebird slain by the hunter. There is also a leap forward from the cry of the lovebird to human speech, and even to speech *par excellence*, namely poetry, which is expressive either as an improvement on an inarticulate, animal cry or as a continuation of songbird musicality. When we move beyond the frame of the story, we find additional gaps. Whereas Vālmīki's poetry is founded on this primal scene of trauma and

	---->	---->	---->	---->	
Agent:	dead lovebird	grieving lovebird	Vālmīki (as patient)	Vālmīki (as agent)	audience
Action/ reaction:	(absence/ loss)	grief ( <i>śoka</i> ) (original)	grief ( <i>śoka</i> ) (sympathetic)	verse ( <i>śloka</i> )	grief ( <i>śoka</i> ) (sympathetic)

partial healing of the breach through the revelation of verse, subsequent poets can only copy this revelation and achieve “originality” in faithfulness to it. The story also points to an audience that will, through the medium of poetry, re-experience an emotion that is already a form of sympathetic or “referred” pain on the part of the poet.

Bridging these gaps are echoes, some of which are recognizable as rhetorical devices. The story of the birth of poetry is already poetic, and not merely by being included, self-referentially, within Vālmīki’s poem, the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The sympathetic transfer of emotion from lovebird to poet, and potentially to audience, is an act of imitation. The story serves as a charter myth for poetry by depicting Vālmīki as the “first poet” (*ādikavi*) both temporally and qualitatively, and therefore as a metonym and a model for subsequent poets. The genealogy of poetry traces the genre back to an historical, baptismal moment of revelation, which is the type that guarantees the value of each of its later tokens. The most obvious device in the story is the use of rhyme to reinforce the crucial juncture between the poet’s emotion of grief (*śoka*) and its verbal expression in verse (*śloka*). The phonetic resemblance between these two terms is represented as a causal or indexical connection, a connection in fact. Such rhetorical devices substitute for the absence of any solid relation between poetry and reality; they fill in the gaps to create a reasonably smooth surface, at least to casual inspection.

The following table depicts these gaps and rhetorical bridges:

*The Birth of Poetry: A Copy of a Copy...*

Although these devices are on the surface, they reveal something deeper about the strategies and tactics of poetry: from within its own domain, namely that of language, poetry argues beyond itself for a connection to reality. The argument is analogical in form: emotion:poetry::*śoka*:*śloka*, The first relation, that between



language	---->	reality
poetry	---->	emotion
“poetry” ( <i>śloka</i> ) ----> “grief” ( <i>śoka</i> )		

emotion and poetry, is inaccessible to us: we cannot *directly* experience the emotions of others, nor communicate our own emotions, as both remain internal. Yet this first, indeterminable relation is ascertained through the second relation, the rhyme between *śoka* (grief) and *śloka* (verse), which is on the surface level of language, and therefore accessible to us in at least two ways: it is perceived through hearing, and it is manipulated through speech. This artificial and constructed second relation stands in as a substitute for and guarantee of the first, supposedly natural one. It is also recursive of the first: what was merely the second member of the first relation, namely poetry or language, becomes the entire domain of the second relation, the linguistic connection of rhyme. Just as Vālmīki’s grief precedes and is supplemented by the verse he utters, poetry appears as a series of substitutions or signs necessitated by the fact that there can be no access to the ultimate reality it signifies. The simplicity of Vālmīki’s story retreats upon closer inspection, as if in a hall of mirrors. Instead of a stable ground of connection to reality, poetry creates the illusion of its own ground by substitution or sleight-of-hand. This is illustrated by the following table:

Claims for a particular language or genre enjoying an especially close relationship to reality are nothing new, as the story of Vālmīki already illustrates. Various versions of such claims in Western traditions have been scrutinized by Gérard Genette and Umberto Eco.<sup>6</sup> Genette calls such beliefs “mimologism” or “Cratylism” after Plato’s *Cratylus*, which addressed the question of whether language depends on nature (*physis*) or, alternatively, on convention (*nomos*). Socrates appeared to reject an extreme version of each thesis. Although he dismissed the possibility that words directly represent nature, he did allow that some sounds, like the flowing “r’s” in “river,” may have a direct connection with particular meanings, which would be a type of onomatopoeia or “sound symbolism.”<sup>7</sup> And he further suggested that some words may represent indirectly the nature of that which they denote, through other words which they resemble phonetically. His

examples recall the fictitious etymologies we observed in the Hindu tradition.<sup>8</sup>

One of the more well known of the *Cratylus*' etymologies is that given for "body": "some say that the body (*soma*) is the grave [or tomb] (*sema*) of the soul which may be thought to be buried in our present life, or again the index [or sign] (*sema*) of the soul, because the soul gives indications to the body."<sup>9</sup> The form of the word for body is grounded in its function, that of being both an outward sign and a tomb for the soul within. The body is a present monument that memorializes, and perhaps compensates for, the absence of the soul. Socrates also suggests a more disturbing possibility: that the body is the "prison" of the soul, which is, as it were, buried alive.<sup>10</sup> Under the surface of his pun may be a serious claim about the nature of language and other signs. In the old definition, a sign is "something (that) stands for something else" (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*).<sup>11</sup> The fundamental condition necessitating recourse to the sign is the absence of that to which it refers. Otherwise one might dispense with the medium of signs and simply observe or point at various referents directly, a vain philosophical hope Jonathan Swift parodied with his sages of Lagado, who attempted to purge language by carrying around in large sacks on their backs as many objects as they could, so that they could wave them around instead of having to use words.<sup>12</sup> Every sign is, in some sense, a response to and compensation for the absence of its referent. If this absence is interpreted as a death, then the sign can readily be imagined as a tomb, the monument of the loss of being of its referent.

There may be more in common between Socrates' and Vālmīki's puns than their use of rhyme in the context of different accounts of the "origin" of language or poetry. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the birth of poetry is the ultimate response to an original loss in death, the slaying of one lovebird by a hunter. Everything that follows is a reaction to and sign of that event. The bereaved lovebird's visible (or audible) grief (*śoka*) is communicated to Vālmīki, and becomes the guarantee of the expressiveness and adequacy of poetry or verse (*śloka*), just as in the *Cratylus* the status of the body as both sign (*sema*) and tomb (*sema*) becomes the guarantee of the appropriateness of the word for body, *soma*. In each case, the connection between reality and language is in question; and again in each case, a purely linguistic connection is drafted to serve in its place. Language picks itself up by its own bootstraps to meet reality.

A more central theme of Plato's philosophy than the *Cratylus*' linguistic speculations demands consideration here. As is well

known, Plato criticized poetry, art, and rhetoric as forms of imitation (*mimesis*).<sup>13</sup> Following its rehabilitation in Aristotle's *Poetics* as the central principle of art, the concept of imitation has served an important role in Western aesthetic theory down to the modern period. *Mimesis* has generally been interpreted as the imitation of nature by the work of art, and therefore coincides with the conception of poetry as a natural language. Indeed, the *Cratylus* also presented the question of the basis of language as the question of whether language is, or can be, a *mimesis* of nature.<sup>14</sup> For Plato, the imitative character of art was the reason for condemning it as only "a copy of a copy," which is therefore twice removed from reality: art is a copy of the phenomenal world, which is itself only a copy of the world of the ideal forms to which the philosopher ascends through contemplation.<sup>15</sup>

Later philosophers developed the theory that truth is the correspondence of our words or ideas to reality, frequently called the "correspondence theory" of truth. Truth itself is a copy, but close to ultimate reality, and therefore more valid than other forms of thought at further remove. This distinction, at the same time, appears to associate truth with other forms of correspondence, including the imitation of the poet. In this connection, we may recall Aristotle's famous opening statement of the *Rhetoric*. "Rhetoric is the counterpart of Dialectic."<sup>16</sup> He compared the modes of reasoning of these two arts, respectively the *enthymeme* and the *syllogism*, and only grudgingly attended to the stylistic features of rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in the *Poetics*, he raised the question of the difference among the modes of *mimesis* in the different arts,<sup>18</sup> but largely ignored the role of imitative sound in poetry, and focused instead on the properties of dramatic narrative. The restriction of rhetoric to avoid its more disturbing attributes, especially by focusing exclusively on the semantic level of language, is a recurring move that will be noted, and opposed, more than once during the remainder of this study.<sup>19</sup> Even without Aristotle's acknowledgment of the kinship between philosophy and rhetoric, the vehemence of Plato's attack on rhetoric and poetry would suggest that these are serious competitors of philosophy in the "truth business," or in creating something that, at any rate, appears sufficiently like truth to be represented as and accepted as a substitute for it. Poetry and rhetoric are not merely "copies of a copy": they are also, in some sense, doubles of philosophy.

Friedrich Nietzsche attacked Plato at this crucial point. Beginning with *The Birth of Tragedy*, he attempted to undo Plato's valuation of philosophy (a.k.a. "science," "truth," and the "concept") over poetry (a.k.a. "myth," "art," and "metaphor").

Nietzsche simultaneously abolished and inverted this hierarchy by arguing that philosophy too is a form of poetry, and even a less truthful form, because it is disguised.<sup>20</sup> In the essay “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense,” he stated:

What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned, and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation. Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they *are* illusions....<sup>21</sup>

This thesis, which echoes throughout Nietzsche’s work, here depends on a specific linguistic argument for the disjunction between language and reality:

The various languages, juxtaposed, show that words are never concerned with truth, never with adequate expression; otherwise there would not be so many languages. The “thing-in-itself” (which would be pure, disinterested truth) is also absolutely incomprehensible to the creator of language and not worth seeking. He designates only the relations of things to men, and to express these relations he uses the boldest metaphors. First, he translates a nerve stimulus into an image! That is the first metaphor. Then, the image must be reshaped into a sound! The second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of spheres—from one sphere to the center of a totally different, new one.<sup>22</sup>

The conditions of language mandate the impossibility of truth or, at least, of its expression in words. There is a qualitative difference (or more than one) between the substance of language, namely sound, and experience, which is already irremediably removed from the “thing-in-itself.” Nietzsche did not conclude simply that there is no certainty of proper reference or linguistic truth. He argued further that, although language can never bridge the gap between itself and reality, it nevertheless attempts to do so by means of various rhetorical devices. “Truth” is nothing more than the success of this illusion.

Nietzsche almost certainly had the *Cratylus* in mind when he wrote this essay.<sup>23</sup> He also had in mind Plato’s attack on poetry and rhetoric. The reference to language as a “second metaphor” is a *riposte* to Plato’s critique of *mimesis* as “a copy of a copy.” The word “metaphor” (German *Metapher*) means transferring to a thing

a name that belongs to something else.<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche appropriated this term to designate the rhetorical overreaching of the gap between language and reality. The argument that language is always already metaphorical contributed to his broader project of the self-overcoming of philosophy. However, Nietzsche's revaluation of rhetoric did not simply reverse Plato but extended the critique of *mimesis* to philosophy itself.

Another echo of this position in Nietzsche's philosophy is his radical contention that "God is dead."<sup>25</sup> This coincides with the contention that the ultimate referent of discourse is inaccessible through language and, therefore, permanently absent. The further conclusion already drawn in "On Truth and Lying" is that belief in (access to) the referent is an illusion created by language itself. Nietzsche's arguments recall the *Cratylus*' punning equation between sign (*sema*) and tomb (*sema*), which also suggests that signification is a kind of absence or death. These views capture something fundamental about the nature of signs, something also signaled in Umberto Eco's definition of semiotics as a "theory of the lie."<sup>26</sup> Although the sign guarantees the presence of its referent, the absence of that referent is the very condition necessitating recourse to the sign as a substitute. Consequently, there is always the possibility that the sign is wrong or deceptive.

Nietzsche's description of language as a "metaphor of a metaphor" coincides with the *Cratylus* also in shifting the locus of imitation within the realm of language. Genette distinguishes between an initial, naïve mimologism that asserts a direct connection between language and reality, and the "secondary mimologism" engaged in by Socrates, in which words are connected first to other words, and then (presumably) to reality.<sup>27</sup> Genette defines this as the attempt to correct, through artifice, the failure of natural languages, i.e. the absence of a direct connection between language and reality.

As Genette notes, a parallel concept appeared in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern structural linguistics and semiology.<sup>28</sup> Saussure is known as one of the principal advocates of the arbitrary nature of the sign, which would seem to preclude any Cratylean tendencies. However, Jean Starobinski has shown that Saussure in his private notebooks expended much time trying to demonstrate that certain ancient Latin poems were "anagrams" or echoes of proper names contained therein, the sounds of which were dispersed and hidden throughout the poems to be rediscovered by analysis, if not by the ear.<sup>29</sup> This reminds one of the etymologies in the *Cratylus*, or even of Tantric methods of exegesis of names of the deity.

Even in the context of his public lectures on linguistics, Saussure qualified the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign by allowing for a “relative motivation” based on “associative relations” (paradigmatic relations) among different signs.<sup>30</sup> Although, in his discussion of this issue, the associative relations that relatively motivate the system of language are confined largely to the level of grammar and morphology, he also allowed that words may be associated “simply from the similarity of the sound-images.... Thus there is at times a double similarity of meaning and form, at times similarity only of form or of meaning. A word can always evoke everything that can be associated with it in one way or another.”<sup>31</sup> Saussure also provided examples of words falsely believed, through the force of phonetic resemblance, to be related etymologically and semantically.<sup>32</sup> Through linguistic sleight-of-hand, sound may substitute for sense, or form for content.

Saussure emphasized that relative motivation is a response to the fundamental arbitrariness of linguistic signs:

Everything that relates to language as a system must, I am convinced, be approached from this viewpoint, which has scarcely received the attention of linguists: the limiting of arbitrariness. This is the best possible basis for approaching the study of language as a system. In fact, the whole system of language is based on the irrational principle of the arbitrariness of the sign, which would lead to the worst sort of complication if applied without restriction. But the mind contrives to introduce a principle of order and regularity into certain parts of the mass of signs, and this is the role of relative motivation.<sup>33</sup>

Cases of relative motivation are apparent exceptions that prove the rule of linguistic arbitrariness by acknowledging it as a precondition and problem which they attempt to overcome. To say that there is no absolute motivation of linguistic signs means that the connection between language, as “signifier,” and reality, as “signified,” is fundamentally arbitrary and that, consequently, there can be only a relative motivation among different words or signifiers on the basis of associative relations. Relative motivation is a substitute and remedy for the absence of an absolute motivation or natural connection between language and reality.

The important distinction between relative and absolute motivation is easily overlooked, as may be illustrated by an example from the tradition of Śaiva Āgama, which is closely related to Tantra. Richard Davis quotes an example of a fictitious

etymology of the ritual gestures called *mudrā*: “It gives delight (*mudā*) to the gods and drives away (*dravayati*) the demons. Because of its power to delight and to drive away, it is called a... *mudrā*”<sup>34</sup> Davis accepts this statement at face value and, immediately following, argues with respect to mantras: “The speech act is the signifier (*vācaka*), the divine being is the signified (*vācya*); the mantra may be thought of as the sign in which the two are intimately, and not arbitrarily, united.” Davis’ statements are entirely accurate as a description of the emic view of the Āgamic or Tantric tradition.<sup>35</sup> However, his use of the terminology of “signifier,” “signified,” and especially “arbitrary” misrepresents, perhaps unintentionally, Saussure’s concept of the arbitrariness of the sign. The arbitrariness of the sign is the fundamental condition of language, not an alternative theory of language that may be replaced at whim by a particular linguistic tradition. Poetry and fictitious etymologies are designed to substitute for the absence of an absolute motivation or natural connection between language and reality. Poetry is not reality but rhetoric, not the revelation of a natural connection between signifier and signified, but the exploitation of the appearance of such a connection. Tantric ritual uses various rhetorical devices, including fictitious etymologies, to motivate ritual actions with respect to their purported function. We must be careful to distinguish between the emic and etic inter-pretations of such devices.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the differences among the various accounts of language given by Vālmīki, Plato, Nietzsche, and Saussure, there are some converging themes. Each account grappled with the problem of whether a truly natural, pre-semiotic language exists. Only the first affirmed the existence of such a language, which it identified with poetry. Each of the others retreated, in varying measure, from such an affirmation. Plato seemingly denied a direct connection between words and things, but left open the possibility of an indirect connection through a kind of onomatopoeia or natural significance of certain sounds, and through the phonetic analogies between words. Saussure rejected the possibility of motivation between words and things, apart from a greatly diminished role for onomatopoeia,<sup>37</sup> but introduced “relative motivation” as a limited exception to the arbitrariness of the sign. At the extreme end of the spectrum, Nietzsche excluded any possibility of proper or certain reference precisely in order to affirm the metaphorical and, ultimately, deceptive nature of language. In each of these accounts, poetry (whether or not identified as such) appeared either as the “missing link” between language and reality, or as a



substitute for the absence of such a link, one which was granted a certain effectiveness even if only as an illusion.

Such accounts force us to perform our own inversion or revaluation (*Umwertung*) of the classical Western theory of *mimesis*. The claim that poetry or art imitates nature may no longer be tenable.<sup>38</sup> However, imitation is indisputably a characteristic of poetry and, more broadly, of language itself. The most obvious forms of imitation include alliteration and rhyme, in which words most immediately resemble not things, but other words.<sup>39</sup> To describe such devices, I will borrow Saussure's term "relative motivation."<sup>40</sup>

Roman Jakobson's definition of poetry or, to be more precise, a "poetic function" of language not limited to poetry, increased the focus on such associative (a.k.a. "paradigmatic," "metaphorical") relations within structural linguistics: "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination."<sup>41</sup> He demonstrated that poetry uses both phonetic and semantic relations on the "axis of selection" to build equivalences among different segments of the sequence of language or "axis of combination." (These terms are more fully glossed below.) Equivalences on the phonetic level somehow intrude on the semantic level:

No doubt, verse is primarily a recurrent "figure of sound." Primarily, always, but never uniquely. Any attempts to confine such poetic conventions as meter, alliteration, or rhyme to the sound level are speculative reasonings without any empirical justification. The projection of the equational principle into the sequence has a much deeper and wider significance. [Paul] Valéry's view of poetry as "hesitation between the sound and the sense" is much more realistic and scientific than any bias of phonetic isolationism. Briefly, equivalence in sound, projected into the sequence as its constitutive principle, inevitably involves semantic equivalence...,<sup>42</sup>

Jakobson noted the confounding of sound and sense in poetry that stems from their apparent fungibility or functional equivalence. Although his comments were intended to rehabilitate rhyme and other figures of sound by raising them to the dignity of the semantic level, a different and more disturbing evaluation of these figures may be suggested: even when there is no semantic content, linguistic form may act as a substitute and create an echo of meaning.



This was more nearly suggested by another Russian Formalist, Viktor Shklovsky, who criticized the attempt to distinguish phonetic, “rhythmic,” “musical,” or “tautological parallelisms” from semantic or “psychological parallelisms” on a “form versus content” axis: “*form creates for itself its own content*. For that reason, whenever the corresponding twin of a word is absent, its place is taken by an arbitrary or derivative word. For example: helter-skelter, topsy-turvy, pell-mell, and so on.”<sup>43</sup> As Shklovsky’s examples of linguistic reduplication indicate, a twin of meaning can be created out of nothing or nonsense: an equivalence between sounds is (mis)taken as an equivalence between sound and sense. Once again, as with the coupling of *śoka* and *śloka*, the relation is consummated on the level of linguistic form, but gives birth, on the level of content, to a changeling or *doppelgänger* of meaning.

The creative extension of phonic echoes into the semantic void is by no means confined to the limited class of reduplicated nonsense words described by Shklovsky. It also occurs in cases of etymological derivation of new words from existing ones. A similar device occurs in many cases of onomatopoeia or “sound symbolism,” which actually consists of a scale of related but distinct forms ranging from truly onomatopoeic or “imitative” sound symbolism to the “conventional” sound symbolism of groups of words, such as “splash,” “splatter,” and “splutter,” that contain similar sounds and carry similar semantic value.<sup>44</sup> The most common onomatopoeias are the words for animal cries and, by metonymical extension, for the animals who utter them. The ancient Sanskrit etymological treatise *Nirukta* already stated: “The word *kāka* (crow) is an onomatopoeic word. This onomatopoeia is mostly found in the names of birds.”<sup>45</sup> There is, indeed, some resemblance in rhythm between terms such as *kāka* and “cock-a-doodle-doo,” and the animal sounds they denote. However, true onomatopoeia may be only for the birds. In many cases, it is unclear whether we are dealing with a true imitation of the “real-world” sound. Does the word “splash” really sound like a splash? Or do we only think it does because the resemblance between a splash and a splatter parallels that between the words “splash” and “splatter”? Debates over such issues are interminable, but unnecessary to establish one point: in many claimed cases of onomatopoeia, the connection asserted between language and nature is instead an imitation that is internal to the system of language, a form of relative motivation. Therefore, the extension of cases such as bird cries to a theory of a natural basis of language, which Max Müller ridiculed as the “bow-wow theory,”<sup>46</sup> fails

precisely as the attempt, in the story of Vālmīki, to rhythmically trace poetry to a natural foundation in the bird kingdom. This reinforces the critique advanced earlier of Frits Staal's similar attempt to produce a natural history of mantras by tracing them to the babble of babes and birds. Once again, we see that it is not a question of nature but of tropes of "nature."

Jakobson's definition of the poetic function indicates another fundamental sleight-of-hand performed by poetry. The two axes of selection and combination referred to in this definition he elsewhere termed the "metaphorical" and "metonymical" axes of language.<sup>47</sup> These may be illustrated by the simple rhyme scheme "xA<sup>1</sup> yA<sup>2</sup>." The axis of selection is that network of associative relations, largely pre-existing in the structure of language (*langue*), in which there is some equivalence between "A<sup>1</sup>" and "A<sup>2</sup>," whether in terms of semantic or phonetic resemblance: e.g., "home" and "castle," or "house" and "mouse." The axis of combination is the syntactic or sequential structure manifest in actual utterances (*parole*), which in poetry exploit pre-existing associations by projecting them into significant positions in the sequence, such as the end of a line of verse: e.g., "A man's home is his castle," or "Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse." The poetic function projects relations that constitute part of the *code* of language into the *text* of language, converting the latent relative motivation of language described by Saussure into something active and dynamic, an unfolding performance of textual equivalences. The key question is *why*: what is the purpose of the projection of equivalences into the sequence of language?

This question receives a clearer answer in Michael Silverstein's theory of the pragmatic function of language, and especially of "indexical icons."<sup>48</sup> This concept is, among other things, a gloss of Jakobson's definition of the "poetic function" in terms of the semiotic pragmaticism of Charles Sanders Peirce.<sup>49</sup> The pieces of Jakobson's definition are preserved: "icon" refers to relations of equivalence on the axis of selection, and "index" refers to the directional sequence on the axis of combination. At the same time, this switch of terminology signals an important shift toward pragmatics: "icon" also encompasses resemblances between a text and its context, and "index" encompasses the manner in which this text points to its context. The concept "indexical icon" captures the pragmatic function of poetry.

To understand what an "indexical icon" might be, we must learn a little of Peircean semiotics. The standard typology of signs inaugurated by Peirce and increasingly accepted by semioticians

worldwide includes both the “icon,” a type of sign related to its referent by resemblance or similarity, and the “index,” a type of sign related to its referent existentially by co-occurrence or contiguity.<sup>50</sup> Examples of the icon are a mirror-reflection, a portrait, a map or diagram, and a metaphor; of the index, smoke for fire, a red light as a stop sign, and a metonym. Both icons and indexes are contrasted with “symbols,” or conventional and arbitrary signs. This contrast is not absolute: many, perhaps all signs are some combination of these ideal types. The examples of icons and indexes just given include both natural and conventional kinds: smoke is a natural index of fire, whereas a red light is a conventional index of a traffic stop.<sup>51</sup> (Both of these indexes are causal, although in different ways and to different degrees.) Cultural signs are always at least in part conventional, although Thomas Sebeok has correctly rejected Eco’s further conclusion that there are, properly speaking, no iconic signs.<sup>52</sup>

The Peircean typology already implies the rhetorical function of signs, at least of those signs that are not wholly arbitrary and conventional, but based upon similarity and contiguity. The first reason for this is that these signs deviate from the apparent semiotic “norm” of arbitrariness, according to which absolutely anything at all may be employed as a sign at the option of the individual or culture so determining.<sup>53</sup> If there exist some special categories of signs based upon similarity and contiguity, then these evidence a tendency, a kind of cognitive predisposition, that constrains an otherwise unfettered choice. Further, as indicated by Jakobson’s terms for these two types of signs, metaphors and metonyms, these coincide to some extent with the cardinal tropes of classical rhetoric. Jakobson’s extension of these terms, which originally designated relations on the semantic level, to include figures of sound caused them to converge with the Peircean categories of icon and index, which may be based on any type of similarity and contiguity respectively.

Silverstein’s emphasis on the pragmatic function of signs represents a deliberate refocusing of semiotics away from the fruitless quest for a purified language or “truth” in favor of an explanation of the function of signs in culture. This is an explicit development of Peircean pragmatism. It also confirms that the broadening of logic into semiotic, the occurrence if not the manner of which was arguably forecasted by John Locke,<sup>54</sup> is at the same time a return to rhetoric, the discipline that traditionally attended to all of the pragmatic functions of communication, and especially language, under the rubrics of “persuasion” and “probable reasoning.” Surely it is more than a coincidence that the

development of semiotics proceeded by the rediscovery, at an even more general level, of those relations that had previously held a central position in rhetoric as *mimesis*, and as the cardinal tropes of metaphor and metonymy, now broadened to include rhyme and other figures of sound?

Silverstein's concept of the "indexical icon" further indicates the rhetorical function of these signs, but especially of icons.<sup>55</sup> From the perspective of pragmatics, the most basic or important sign is the index, of which there are many subtypes. Reference is indexical, as it points to the coexistence of a referent. Imperatives are also indexical, as they point, with varying degrees of vigor and effectiveness, to a prospective goal. Therefore, language is indexical by participating with the world in a network of presuppositions regarding prior signs, and entailments regarding subsequent signs. This does not contradict Saussure's argument about the arbitrary nature of the sign: the basic type of index, such as an imperative verb, is indeed arbitrary and conventional. But the "indexical icon" describes a particular type of index, a sign that is indexical by virtue of being an icon, or a sign the indexicality of which is relatively motivated by a form of iconism. Saussure left some room for this possibility, which was further developed by Jakobson and Silverstein as part of a theory of the pragmatic function of language.

To return to our minimalist example of poetic structure, "xA<sup>1</sup>yA<sup>2</sup>" etc.: as the rhythmic pattern of the lines becomes obvious, it is noticed by the listener, who matches prior rhyming segments with subsequent ones in a network of presuppositions and entailments. With increasing density of rhythm, this network becomes, in some sense, increasingly constraining: it leads to enhanced aesthetic expectation on the part of the listener, as well as, potentially, a greater challenge to the poet to keep pace with the multiplication of conventions of composition. The directional force of the poem is augmented through repetition. In other words, the indexical relation among resembling segments is relatively motivated through their resemblance or iconic relation.

So far I have provided only a gloss of Jakobson's concept of the poetic function in terms of Peircean categories. Silverstein has developed this into a true pragmatism, a theory not only of the text, but of the relation between text and context, their "co(n)textuality."<sup>56</sup> The purpose of a refined description of poetic form is to account for the pragmatic function of language in culture. The "indexical icon" describes not only relations among signifiers, but also the relation between signifier and signified. Especially in effective ritual, words may point to the world beyond themselves.

This brings us to the next chapter, which explores the convergence between poetry and ritual.

# **CHAPTER FIVE**

## **The Science of Illusion, Part Two**

### **The Rhetoric of Ritual**

#### **Repetition and Exhaustion**

SILVERSTEIN CONTENTS THAT THE DENSEST METRICALIZATION OF DISCOURSE, THE greatest accumulation of indexical icons, occurs in ritual.<sup>1</sup> This would mean that ritual is an extreme form or maximal degree of poetry. Similar claims have been made by other linguists and anthropologists. Stanley Tambiah argues for the “persuasive” power of metaphors and metonyms in magic,<sup>2</sup> and attributes part of the “performative” function of ritual to its use of “indexical icons.”<sup>3</sup> Sebeok maintained that magic uses semiotic devices in producing illusion.<sup>4</sup> These devices presumably include icons and indexes, which he elsewhere claimed are characteristic of magic.<sup>5</sup> Jakobson identified repetitive incantations with iconic or onomatopoetic words as related manifestations of the poetic function of language.<sup>6</sup> The prevalence of such signs in the rituals of different cultures is partly explained by their status as relatively motivated and, therefore, not entirely a product of arbitrary convention. However, this still does not explain their prevalence in ritual, as opposed to other cultural genres. We need to produce an account of the rhetoric of ritual, i.e. the contribution of such poetic forms, and especially of indexical icons, to ritual’s pragmatic function.

The simplest illustration of the pragmatic function of indexical icons in ritual is the classic case of sympathetic magic as described by E.B.Tylor and 76 James Frazer.<sup>7</sup> The latter explained that magic operates according to the Law of Similarity, that like produces like, and the Law of Contact or Contagion, that objects once in contact continue to operate on each other from a distance. A familiar example is the voodoo doll which, in addition to resembling its victim in appearance and point of injury (=Law of Similarity), might also incorporate some substance of the victim, such as nails, hair, or clothing (=Law of Contagion). Frazer’s two

Frazer's Laws	ritual action	sign relation	goal
Law of Similarity	a) voodoo doll's foot injured	indexical ----->	a) victim's foot injured
	b) water poured on ground	icon	b) rain falls
Law of Contact/ Contagion	a) hair of victim burned	indexical ----->	a) victim burns
	b) weapon anointed	index	b) wound heals

laws, which depend on similarity and contiguity, have been glossed by Jakobson as metaphor and metonymy,<sup>8</sup> and by Sebeok as icon and index.<sup>9</sup> A more precise gloss is afforded by Silverstein's concept of the indexical icon. The magical operation is itself an index of its prospective goal. Any law is an index, as it affirms the co-occurrence of two conditions. This applies equally, despite other obvious differences, to the cases of both a natural law (if smoke, then fire) and a magical law (if voodoo doll injured, then victim injured). In the cases of magical and other cultural laws, as opposed to natural laws, the underlying index is arbitrary. However, this arbitrary indexical relation may be reinforced by one or more additional, at least apparently natural relations of similarity or contiguity, which serve to motivate the underlying index and obscure its arbitrariness.<sup>10</sup> When this additional relation is a form of similarity, then we have an indexical icon. When it is a form of contiguity, then we have what might be called, somewhat awkwardly, an "indexical index."<sup>11</sup>

These relations may be observed more readily in the following table:

Apart from the fact that the ritual operations in these cases are typically physical discourse rather than verbal, we recognize in them a variation on the theme of a natural language. It is no longer only a question of proper reference, of a discourse that is directly connected to and therefore adequately expresses or reflects a preexisting reality, but of turning that connection around so that reality may be leveraged prospectively from within ritual. This is one manifestation of the bidirectionality of the index as a reciprocal relation of presupposition and entailment, "as clouds are signs of rain to come, and rain of clouds past."<sup>12</sup> The regular co-occurrence of such phenomena reinforces the appearance of a causal relation. In similar fashion, Pavlov's canine subjects, after experiencing the consistent conjunction of the ringing of the bell and the bringing of the food, began to drool at the sound of the bell even before the arrival of the food.<sup>13</sup> Although

in the case of ritual we are often talking about “salvation” rather than “salivation,”<sup>14</sup> the semiotic concept of the index as a relation of co-occurrence also captures the virtual causality of ritual as an index of its prospective goal. And in the case of ritual, as with various “natural” languages, poetic devices are often employed to motivate the indexical relation between discourse and reality.

The classic examples of sympathetic magic involved only the construction of an indexical relation between the ritual operations and their external goal. There was no consideration of the indexical relations constructed on the level of discourse alone, such as we find in poetry. Indeed, neither Tylor nor Frazer devoted much attention to the language of spells, which is the clearest manifestation of the poetic function in ritual. An analysis of the structure of spells reveals the mechanism described in the last chapter: indexical icons constructed on the level of discourse point beyond discourse to a real-world referent. The relative motivation of ritual compensates for the absence of absolute motivation between ritual and its prospective goal. A simple example is the following children’s rhyme which, like many others, resembles spells in both poetic form and pragmatic function:<sup>15</sup>

Rain, rain, go away,  
Come again some other day!

The imperative command that the rain should depart is the basic indexical relation between the rhyme as a whole and the real world result “entailed.” This result is relatively motivated by icons embedded in the text of the spell, such icons consisting in this case of one antithesis on the semantic level (GO—COME) and several instances of rhyme or paronomasia (awAY—dAY; rAIN—rAIN—agAIN; cOME—sOME; and rAIIn, rAIIn—AwAY). The words of the rhyme “lead up to” each other and, in so doing, virtually “lead up to” the result expressed.

Following is a modification of the earlier diagram of sympathetic magic in order to take such devices into account:

This diagram parallels the analogy from the last chapter, “emotion:poetry:: śoka:śloka.” In each case, the connection between discourse and reality is reinforced by connections constructed on the level of discourse, such as rhyme. These connections are recursive, being confined entirely to discourse, but project beyond themselves to establish a virtual connection to reality. Each diagram constitutes a poetic argument for this



language ----->	reality
text of ritual . . . etc. -----> "xA <sup>1</sup> yA <sup>2</sup> . . . . nA <sup>n</sup> ." ----->	context/ goal of ritual

connection by mimicking the sequential and indexical structure of a logical argument, but using phonetic rather than semantic associations to motivate this structure. Such examples demonstrate that Aristotle's analogy between the syllogism of dialectic and the enthymeme of rhetoric must be extended to incorporate the structure of poetry itself. Rhetoric is not only a form of probable reasoning that substitutes when the certainty of the syllogism is unavailable: it is also a form of illusion that produces confidence or persuasion out of nothing.<sup>16</sup>

In his studies of Trobriand Islands ritual, Bronislaw Malinowski provided some of the most detailed analyses of a corpus of spells in their cultural context. He described the contribution of the "coefficient of weirdness" of spells,<sup>17</sup> the "meaninglessness" of magical words,<sup>18</sup> to the belief in their efficacy. While spells may be meaningless in some sense, they are not entirely random in form, but contain numerous poetic devices including reduplication,<sup>19</sup> homonyms,<sup>20</sup> metaphor and other tropes,<sup>21</sup> and rhythmic or chanting pronunciation.<sup>22</sup> On another occasion Malinowski summarized three features of magic.<sup>23</sup> The first was onomatopoeia or sound symbolism. The second was descriptions or commands of the goal of the spell, including the enumeration of imperatives and, for example, all of the parts of an intended victim's body. The third element was reference to ancestors and culture heroes, which connected with his notion of a "charter myth" underwriting cultural practices. We recognize in this catalogue many of the same devices employed in Tantric mantras. Malinowski contended that all of these devices depend on the principles of sympathetic magic, especially similarity, identified by Frazer.<sup>24</sup>

Malinowski identified the "creative metaphor of magic," the idea that the assertion of a goal is able to produce that goal, as the basis of such devices:

At the very basis of verbal magic there lies what I have elsewhere called “the creative metaphor of magic.” By this I mean that the repetitive statement of certain words is believed to produce the reality stated. I think that if we stripped all magical speech to its essentials, we would find simply this fact: a man believed to have mystical powers faces a clear blue sky and repeats: “It rains; dark clouds forgather; torrents burst forth and drench the parched soil.” Or else he would be facing a black sky and repeat: “The sun breaks through the clouds; the sun shines.” Or in illness he repeats, like Monsieur Coué: “Every day and in every way it is getting better and better.” The essence of verbal magic, then, consists in a statement which is untrue, which stands in direct opposition to the context of reality. But the belief in magic inspires man with the conviction that his untrue statement must become true.<sup>25</sup>

Malinowski anticipated a semiotic pragmatics of ritual. Many of the features of spells to which he pointed are indeed forms of similarity or, as we term it, of the “icon.” Ritual in this way “evoke [s] the desired object or event,”<sup>26</sup> “forecasts its result, or...imitates its end.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, ritual functions as an indexical icon of its intended result. Malinowski recognized that ritual is often a form of illusionism: in response to situations that present danger, doubt, or uncertainty, magic may produce a counterfactual conviction of confidence and certainty.<sup>28</sup> He produced a detailed analysis of the linguistic form of spells, together with a functionalist account of their workings that, while hampered by a crude psychology, nevertheless represented an improvement on blanket dismissals of the “meaninglessness” of ritual. The formal characteristics of spells that he described point us toward a concept of the rhetorical function of ritual in which both text and context play coordinated roles. The problem is that Malinowski failed to match adequately the two halves of his account, the form and function of spells. Thus, when he said that a spell “evokes” or “forecasts” its result, he was taking into account only the semantic or denotational level of language, which declares the desired goal. He failed to appreciate how the accumulation of poetic devices in the texture of a spell, a phenomenon he himself documented, may contribute to the spell’s function as an indexical icon.

Unfortunately, this criticism applies to one of the last serious treatments of these issues by an anthropologist. As previously noted, Stanley Tambiah has described the contribution of tropes

such as analogy, metaphor, and metonymy to the “persuasive” and “performative” power of language. He has also provided a working definition of ritual that elaborates on its formal characteristics and their contribution to its pragmatic function:

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). Ritual action in its constitutive features is performative in these three senses: in the Austinian sense of performative, wherein saying something is also doing something; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively; and in the sense of indexical values—I derive this concept from Peirce—being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance.<sup>29</sup>

Although most of this definition is sound, an analysis of its application reveals certain biases and errors. Tambiah invokes the concept of “indexical icons”<sup>30</sup> without developing this adequately, or noting that both this concept and his own arguments for the persuasive function of different types of analogies in ritual conflict with Austin’s notion of “performatives” as solely conventional signs. (This crucial omission in Austin’s theory is discussed below.) Perhaps most significantly, in his desire to attribute meaning to ritual, Tambiah neglects and even dismisses the contribution of figures of sound or non-semantic icons such as rhyme to the pragmatic function of ritual. He argues against Malinowski:

Trobriand magical language is intelligible language, not mumbo-jumbo shot through with mystical ideas resistant to rational examination. It is not qualitatively “different” from ordinary language, but is a heightened use of it. The same laws of association that apply to ordinary language apply to magical language.<sup>31</sup>

Certainly much ritual language is meaningful, and ordinary language also often exhibits poetic structures. However, the effect of Tambiah’s statements is to limit the poetic function of ritual to only the semantic level of the cardinal tropes:

The metaphor is a mode of reflection and enables abstract thought on the basis of analogical predication. In terms of Jakobson's formulation, the metaphoric use of language exploits the procedures of selection and substitution by which words or ideas replace one another in terms of semantic similarity.<sup>32</sup>

On the contrary: the poetic function exploits any similarity at all, including phonetic similarity, and Jakobson rejected the "bias of phonetic isolationism" that would sharply distinguish the semantic and the phonetic to the denigration of the latter. Tambiah is not merely misinterpreting the poetic function. He is restricting analysis to what we already agree is meaningful. The more "irrational" and less easily explainable cases of magical nonsense words and rhymes are simply taken off the table.

Despite this, Tambiah's reinterpretation of Trobriand spells produces some very useful principles. The spell for "anchoring the garden" enumerates each of the parts of the garden in order (the soil, the magical prism, the yam pole, etc.) and states that each "shall be anchored."<sup>33</sup> Tambiah identifies in such spells a pattern common in many cultures:<sup>34</sup>

Metonymy as traditionally understood and expanded by Jakobson sheds light on the structure of Trobriand spells. Frequently the various parts or constituent units of the recipient of the magic, whether it be a canoe or a human being, are enumerated and the magical transfer made to each of them. Thus, we get a realistic picture of the whole built up from the parts, and this metonymic technique has several implications for lending realism to the rite, for transmitting a message through redundancy, for storing vital technological knowledge in an oral culture, and for the construction of the spell itself as a lengthy verbal form [T]he spells I have cited portray a metonymic use of language—that is, linguistic operations in terms of combination and context, based on contiguity principles. All the parts of a canoe, or a human head or a yam house, comprise a configuration or a set by virtue of contiguous associations which when systematically varied with action words creates a long utterance. Metonymy so used lends a "realistic" colouring to the description.<sup>35</sup>

Tambiah's characterization of this pattern as a mode of "realism" is facilitated by his emphasis on the semantic figures or tropes at the expense of the figures of sound such as rhyme. He limits this

pattern to the enumeration of the parts of a concrete object or the members of a set of related physical “processes.”<sup>36</sup> However, in many spells the set enumerated consists of members linked by associative relations that are not, or not only, semantic. For example, many Tantric mantras enumerate all of the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. Tambiah’s semanticist bias has obscured the nature and scope of this cross-cultural pattern, which may be based on any type of association whatsoever. The broader pattern I am terming “exhaustion” is the enumeration of the members of any posited paradigm class, whether concrete or abstract, physically joined or separate, existent or non-existent, semantic or phonetic. If the poetic function is the projection of members of the same paradigm class into the sequence of language, “exhaustion” is a special manifestation of this: the projection of an entire paradigm class, or at least a substantial portion thereof, so as to constitute a trope of plenitude. Exhaustion merges into the much larger class of spells that employ repetitive or rhythmic sound, and is only the most extreme form of the more general phenomenon of ritual repetition.

Sebeok’s structural analysis of Cheremis charms shows how semantic and phonetic resemblances may accumulate to augment the indexical force of a spell. His translation of one spell is:

As the apple-tree blossoms forth, just so let this wound heal!  
(All blossoms must be mentioned.) When water can blossom  
forth [i.e. never], only then overcome me!<sup>37</sup>

The basic form of the spell is an index, an “if...then” relation of implication, which Sebeok denotes through logical notation as “ $\supset$ .” The third sentence adds a negative implication, logically equivalent to: “when hell freezes over...” The instruction in the second sentence to mention all blossoms means that the spell should be repeated once for every type of flowering tree. This is an example of semantic exhaustion. Such indexes reinforce the entire spell as an indexical sign of its goal, namely, the healing of the wound.

Sebeok notes that the phonetic level or “texture” of the spell, no less than its semantic level, is structured by forms of repetition, mainly alliteration:

An extremely interesting fact about the data is this: that striking symmetries are found to characterize each message no less than the code itself. The alliterative pattern [of the original Cheremis formula] may be diagrammed as follows:

k-p-š

p-k-š

p-k-k

k—p—k...

The interpreter of these multiform equations and antinomies —of grammatical categories and morphemes (roots as well as suffixes), of phonemic bundles, their components (the distinctive features) and elementary sequences (the syllables) —perceives them, in the output, as semantic relationships.... The multiplication of mutually reinforcing symmetries serves to communicate, indeed, to impress the structure of incantations in general; *but their incarnation in the texture forges this message into a functional tool—an instrument with which the healer is capable of ordaining the future.*<sup>38</sup>

This analysis further develops Jakobson's contention that phonetic equivalences may be perceived as semantic equivalences, by suggesting that the accumulation of both types of equivalences reinforces the pragmatic function of the spell as an index of its prospective goal. In other words, exhaustion describes not only the enumeration of a single paradigm class, but also the enumeration of several classes, simultaneously or sequentially, on different levels of language. Another example is the following rain-making mantra, which provides an opportunity to revisit some of the stylistic features of mantras introduced in [chapter one](#):

Oṃ ghuru ghuru (roar), ghuḍu ghuḍu (defend), masa masa (crush), ghaṭa ghaṭa (strive), ghoṭaya ghoṭaya (strike), O lord of the nagas (mythical serpents) who causes the snakes to tremble, He-he Ru-ru Ka, those nagas who have gone to the seven lower realms, kar aya karṣaya (drag them forth), varṣaya varṣaya (rain), garjaya garjaya (thunder), phuḥ phuḥ phuḥ phuḥ phuḥ phuḥ phuḥ hūṃ huṃ hūṃ phaṭ svaha.<sup>39</sup>

The multiple sets of doubled imperatives, a common feature of Tantric mantras, are a form of semantic exhaustion. The repetition of synonymous or semantically related imperatives, which as Malinowski noted is found in the spells of many cultures, adds iconic motivation to the basic indexical thrust of the imperative

verb. The mantra adds to this several forms of phonetic repetition and exhaustion, including the alliteration of the voiced aspirated guttural “gh,” the reduplication of the syllables of the divine name *Heruka*, the rhyme of *karṣaya* (drag them forth) with *varṣaya* (rain), and the repetition of the non-semantic *bījas* such as *phuḥ* and *hūṃ*. Several of the imperatives, such as *ghuru ghuru*, are also onomatopoeias. This demonstrates again a point made in the last chapter, namely, that ritual coopts or mimics such forms as a means of “naturalizing” its language. Although Tambiah termed related devices “realism,” they are actually illusionism, the illusion of reality.

The spells found in the *Greek Magical Papyri* and related texts show similar patterns of repetition and exhaustion. One spell exhausts the directions north, south, east, west, etc.;<sup>40</sup> while another commands obedience using logical binaries in a style we sometimes refer to as “legalese”:

I adjure you...that you listen to the things of my mouth and accomplish the things of my hand, concerning everything about which I shall invoke you, whether what is good or what is [evil], whether binding or loosing, whether killing or making alive, whether gathering or scattering, whether establishing or overthrowing, whether favor or disgrace, (or) watching well, whether what is hidden or what is visible.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to such examples of semantic exhaustion, there are numerous examples of phonetic exhaustion, including palindromes that enumerate the seven vowels of the Greek alphabet (a, e, ē, i, o, u, ō), mysterious words, or the names of deities both forward and backward, e.g., “ablanathanalba.” Other shapes exhaust the letters by moving the first to the last in succession, thus traversing from “alpha” to “omega,” the beginning and end of all. Still others are triangles that exhaust the letters by whittling them down to nothing. Several of these devices establish and reinforce a clear direction for the spell. As in the basic meaning of “index,” they literally point toward a particular goal, which in some cases they iconically represent and virtually enact, as in the following spell for “cutting the uvula”:<sup>42</sup>

cutting the uvula

utting the uvula

tting the uvula

ting the uvula  
 ing the uvula  
 ng the uvula  
 g the uvula  
 the uvula  
 he uvula  
 e uvula  
 uvula  
 vula  
 ula  
 la  
 a

In theory, the uvula is cut off at the same time the word for uvula is; the disease disappears along with its name. Another device that accomplishes the same thing is the “counting-out” spell, illustrated by the following Anglo-Saxon example for removing a boil or tumor:

Nine were Noththe’s sisters;  
 then the nine came to be VIII  
 and the VIII to VII  
 and the VII to VI  
 and the VI to V  
 and the V to IV  
 and the IV to III  
 and the III to II  
 and the II to I  
 and the I to nothing.

This will free you from kernel and scrofula and worm and  
 misery of  
 every kind. Sing *Benedicite* nine times.<sup>43</sup>

It is obvious how such devices contribute, as supplemental and explicit indexes, to the pragmatic force of the spell as an index of its prospective goal. The key Tantric example of this phenomenon was the pattern of “enveloping” the mantra with different syllables or even the entire alphabet in forward and reverse order at the



beginning and the end, respectively. The sequence of seven vowels employed in many Greek spells, “a, e, ē, i, o, u, ō,” also roughly follows the path of speech from throat to lips, suggesting an analogous attempt to mimic the act of speech and to harness it for pragmatic purposes.<sup>44</sup> The paucity of data on the meta-pragmatic theories informing the construction of the spells in the *Greek Magical Papyri* makes the task of interpretation difficult and speculative. This is precisely the situation in which comparative data from other traditions may prove illuminating (or misleading).

Such spells are especially clear examples of what semioticians call “diagrams” or “diagrammatic icons,”<sup>45</sup> a term I have already used in a non-technical sense to describe the way in which Tantric mantras construct maps of different processes of creation. Unlike direct forms of resemblance, such as rhyme, the diagram or diagrammatic icon relies on an indirect resemblance between different sets based on their similar number or arrangement of parts or members. When there are no shared qualities among different sets or domains, the diagram is the only way of producing a resemblance among them. Diagrams are a continuation of poetry by other means, and the clearest example of its potentially deceptive power. They can be used to construct a likeness between unlike things, including language and reality, or nature and culture. Of course, not all diagrams are false: a map may be very useful as a guide to the terrain.

Most forms of poetry are already diagrammatic, in a broader sense. The metricalization of discourse produces relationships that we recognize as a “text,” through a process of “entextualization.”<sup>46</sup> Especially in ritual, this text co-emerges with and indexes its “co(n)text,” through a process of “co(n)textualization.” This leads to an important distinction between what we might call “sequential” and “contextual” indexical iconicity.<sup>47</sup> Perceptive readers may have noted already a difference between the examples of sympathetic magic with which I began this chapter, and the examples of magical language analyzed subsequently. In many cases of sympathetic magic, there is a direct resemblance between the ritual operation and the event in its context that is indexed: e.g., between water being poured on the ground and rain falling from the sky. This is an example of contextual indexical iconicity. (Without the iconicity, it would be like the imperative verb “rain!”) However, in the case of many spells incorporating rhyme or alliteration, the iconic relation is among units of discourse (“rain, rain, go away”), which produces a sequential indexicality among these units that we then recognize as a “text.” This text as a whole bears in turn (through

substitution or transference) an indexical relation to the event in context. However, it does not resemble this event directly (except to the extent that “no rain” resembles no rain). The Tantric pattern of enveloping the mantra, like the examples of counting-out spells just given, may be taken to represent still another type of sequential indexical iconicity, one in which the resemblance is not a direct iconicity among the units of the text, but a diagrammatic (in this example, palindromic) iconicity between the text and its (posited) context.

These formal distinctions have some important implications. To the extent that we have sequential indexical iconicity, namely, a “text,” we should expect higher emic awareness of the indexical relationships in question. This is implied by Jakobson’s statement: “The set (*Einstellung*) toward the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language.”<sup>48</sup> What he meant by “set” was indexicality.<sup>49</sup> In many forms of poetry (or music), this indexicality is indeed directed mainly back toward the text of the poem itself: the point is to dwell on the palpability of linguistic (or musical) form. However, in ritual, the sequential indexicality of the text is also directed simultaneously toward its context, through some form of referential linkage: e.g., the *sadhya* of the mantra. In such cases, as I have suggested, the awareness of the textuality of the ritual is partially repressed in the perceived “naturalness” of the indexical relation between this text and its context. The visibility of language gives way to a transparency through which the world is in view. Such is the nature of artifice.

The contribution of such devices to the pragmatic function of language in ritual and related genres is ignored in an influential theory on which Tambiah relies, namely, J.L. Austin’s concept of the “performative utterance,” which was further developed by John Searle in his concept of a “speech act.”<sup>50</sup> Austin argued that many utterances are not simple descriptive statements or truth-claims about some state of affairs in the world, but are rather “performative” in the sense that they accomplish something in the act of being uttered. His prime examples were the statement “I do (take this man or woman)” uttered in the course of a marriage ceremony, the christening of a ship, and the declaration “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother” as found in a will.<sup>51</sup> Austin’s first and most fundamental condition for a performative was that “There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances...,”<sup>52</sup> In keeping with this view, he spoke of

“conventional or ritual acts”<sup>53</sup> in a single breath, as perfect synonyms.

The thesis that convention alone is what makes an utterance or other ritual act performative appears, at first glance, to explain the cases raised by Austin. However, if we look historically and cross-culturally, it becomes clear that various forms of repetition and other poetic devices frequently contribute to the pragmatic functions of ritual language, including its performativity and persuasiveness. Austin did not account for these devices, nor even for a device as simple and ubiquitous as the reinforcement of a statement through repetition. He bracketed the text of ritual and declared the whole to be performative, without inquiring into the contribution the internal poetic structure or relation among the parts of this text makes to its performativity. This seems especially strange when we consider that the unfolding of such poetic structures is precisely what is normally called a “performance.” The substitution of a concept of performance as frozen and static rather than fluid and dynamic enabled his depiction of ritual acts as conventional. The form of ritual could then safely be ignored.

Austin’s omission is highlighted by a consideration of one of the examples he relied upon. The phrase “I do (take this man or woman)” taken from the marriage ceremony omits all of the poetry of the oath from the complete version found in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. Even before the marriage can be performed, the minister must repeat in public, on three separate Sundays, the question whether anyone has knowledge why the couple should not be joined. During the ceremony, in addition to declaring “I will,” the bride also vows: “I take thee to my wedded Husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part.” Such repeated parallelisms or binomial formulas contribute to the binding force of many vows, oaths, and declarations. At an earlier phase of the law, these formulas were often more clearly poetic, being based on rhyme or alliteration. Ancestors of the marriage vow may be found in the magical incantations of the Anglo-Saxon charms, one of which includes the phrase “Find those cattle, and fetch those cattle/ And have those cattle and hold those cattle ...” (find *ðæt feoh* and fere *ðæt feoh/* and hafa *ðæt feoh* and heald *ðæt feoh...*)<sup>54</sup> The folklorist Jacob Grimm catalogued a large number of such forms in early law, including variants of “to have and to hold.”<sup>55</sup>

In comparison with these earlier formulas, there is not very much alliteration in the marriage declaration. However, there are numerous semantic equivalences based on synonymy, antonymy,

and the exhaustive enumeration of all possible worldly conditions such as “for better for worse, for richer for poorer” All of these devices contribute to the binding character of the marriage vow as an index of commitment.

This should put to rest the view that the effectiveness of ritual is solely a function of the belief of a ritual community, and that the form of ritual contributes nothing to its function. According to this view, the discourse of ritual is a purely conventional (i.e. formally arbitrary) sign. On the contrary, it appears that, in many cases, various poetic devices accumulate to relatively motivate or augment the force of ritual as an indexical icon of its prospective goal.

The preceding analysis reveals several problems with Austin’s theory. The first is that he failed to account for the contribution of poetic form to the performative function of ritual. The second is that his concept of performative or pragmatic function was too narrow. Austin’s definition of a “performative” was a statement that accomplished something automatically in the mere act of utterance. When the goal of a ritual is to declare a legal status, such as the condition of being wedded, this fiction does not come into direct conflict with reality. However, in the case of a magical ritual seeking a real-world result, the function of the ritual is to create a persuasive illusion, and the status of the ritual as a performative is only virtual. This distinction is not absolute: Austinian performatives are usually defeasible in a manner parallel to that in which magical rituals may prove ineffective. A marriage vow, a contract, and a courtroom oath are all effective and legally binding when properly made, but can be violated (although not generally falsified or retrospectively invalidated) by subsequent non-performance of the duties they entail. Moreover, both magical rituals and Austinian performatives may use rhetorical devices to promote confidence or certainty in their function. In Austin’s defense, it might be objected that he was not trying to describe magical rituals. Yet his theory has been applied to many rituals, including Hindu mantras, that use poetic devices for magical purposes. The present analysis at least shows the limits of his theory. Even in some of the very examples he employed, Austin ignored the contribution of style to performance. His reading of ritual texts, coupled with the progressive exclusion of obvious poetic devices from the text of modern rituals, resulted in a restricted rhetoric.<sup>56</sup>

### The Logic of Lists, the Coercion of Canon

The devices of repetition and exhaustion also contribute to the structure and pragmatic function of many lists and canons. As I use these terms, “list” refers to any extended enumeration of items, and “canon” refers to a special type of list, a reduction to a limited set that simultaneously aims at completeness or totality, to describe which I have previously borrowed Jonathan Z. Smith’s helpful definition.<sup>57</sup> The extended, repetitive form of many lists affords an especially vivid example of the projection of equivalences into the sequence of language that is characteristic of poetry.<sup>58</sup> The accumulation of equivalences coincides with the totalizing function of many lists, the exhaustive enumeration of an entire paradigm class, that underlies not only the certainty of canon but also its binding and coercive power in progressive, dynamic performance.

I have argued that Hindu Tantra regards the Sanskrit language or alphabet itself as a canon. This understanding of language informs not only mantras, but also the related genre of *Sahasranāmas* discussed in [chapter three](#). *Sahasranāmas* are highly repetitive, including numerous synonyms and near-synonyms but also, very frequently, names linked by alliteration.<sup>59</sup> In the *LSN*, many sequences of names begin with the same word.<sup>60</sup> Other sequences, however, are linked by alliteration alone, e.g., nos. 777–79: “She who is worshipped by heros (vira), She who is the cosmogenetrix (*virāj*), She who is without (vi-) stain (*-rajas*).” In other *Sahasranāmas*, all of the names begin with the initial letter of the name of the goddess.<sup>61</sup> Each of the names in a *Sahasranāma* is quite meaningful, and this meaning is the subject of exegesis and commentary. But what strikes the ear (or eye, if one happens to be reading a text) is the profusion of alliteration, far beyond what one would find in our most common examples of poetry. A modern Indian interpreter of the *LSN* proves remarkably tone-deaf to these poetic features, and unappreciative of their philosophical basis:

In the *Sahasranāma* the poet...has no room...for the elaboration of his subject, not even for logical connection between one statement and another. Topics have to be huddled together, like the words in a *samāsa* [compound word], without any connecting links. When the poet is not required to show any logical connection he easily succumbs to the temptation of not conceiving any. The besetting drawback of many a *Sahasranāma* is that all logical thinking

is sacrificed to the tin gods of alliteration and assonance. Hence we often have more sound than sense. Alliteration has, no doubt, a special value in such a mnemonic literary form as the *Sahasranāma*, but when it is secured at the expense of logical sequence it gives an uncomfortable jolt to the mind of the reader who is not content to be a mere parrot. ...[I]f logical connection has no leg to stand on even when coherent material is at hand, it vanishes into the thin air amidst these insubstantial word-juggleries.<sup>62</sup>

This author disparages the *Sahasranāma* as an illogical assemblage of discordant items. His critique resembles Jonathan Z. Smith's emphasis on the arbitrariness and discontinuity of many lists, especially the alphabetic lists found in dictionaries and encyclopedias.<sup>63</sup> This coincides with Smith's critique elsewhere of the "mere surface associations" holding together the "encyclopaedic" mode of scholarly comparison, which consists of a disjointed list of fragmentary observations and resemblances posited out of context.<sup>64</sup> He does distinguish such lists from "catalogs," which exhibit greater order, as well as from "canons," which differ from catalogs by being closed or complete.<sup>65</sup> Presumably, Smith would identify the *LSN* as a canon. However, this highlights an omission in his theory. Despite his acknowledgment that catalogs and canons employ mnemonic devices, presumably including alliteration, he emphasizes the "arbitrary reduction" at the heart of canon, and largely ignores the contribution of poetic devices to the logic and coercive, pragmatic force of lists and canons. Poetic devices often, as in *Sahasranāmas*, serve not merely to make such lists more memorable. They also use repetition and exhaustion to motivate the sequential indexicality of the list and augment its pragmatic function. Smith has rightly emphasized the adaptive ingenuity of canonical exegesis, which is not a mere static reiteration of archetypes,<sup>66</sup> but he may have underestimated the contribution of poetry in structuring this virtuoso performance.

A further example of this is the dietary codes in the Sanskrit medical tradition of *Ayurveda* as described by Francis Zimmermann. He calls these repetitive and exhaustive lists "logico-poetic," and argues that "[t]he epistemologist must... become a student of poetics."<sup>67</sup> It is not a question of correlating these texts with some body of external "facts": the authors themselves were not engaged in empirical experimentation as we understand it. Rather, the poetic devices in question contribute to the texts' authority by producing an internal coherence. Although,

as both Smith and the Indian scholar of *Sahasranāmas* note, such lists may have a mnemonic purpose, Zimmermann correctly argues that they also serve other purposes: “It is sometimes said that the versification of scientific texts has a utilitarian purpose: it makes it easier to learn them by heart. This explanation, however, is too simplistic. It is not so much a matter of aiding the memory as of the promotion, prescription, and scansion of knowledge.”<sup>68</sup> *Sahasranāmas* similarly serve a range of functions, including magical ones.<sup>69</sup> Other arguments against restricting the poetic form of ritual to a merely mnemonic rather than a more broadly pragmatic function are provided later in this chapter.<sup>70</sup>

Another group of theorists working on a closely related genre, the “system of classification” or “taxonomy,” has developed a different but equally restrictive account of the rhetorical force of ritual. Brian K. Smith describes the Vedic ritual system as an attempt to “classify the universe” taxonomically in every department of nature and culture: plants, animals, humans, etc.<sup>71</sup> The relation (*bandhu*) among the different departments is their (often hierarchical) organization into similar numbers of members. He argues that the ultimate rationale of the entire system is social: every order is referred to the social order of caste (or *varṇa*), which is primary. The accumulation of all such divisions contributes to the greater reinforcement of the caste system by naturalizing its arbitrary social divisions.

Smith’s account agrees with the present study’s conclusion that ritual accumulates resemblances to reinforce its pragmatic function. However, his exclusive focus on taxonomies, which are a form of diagrammatic icon, ignores other forms of resemblance that coordinate with these. As we have seen, in Vedic ritual a *bandhu* might be evidenced by any resemblance whatsoever between things, including a phonetic resemblance between the words for those things. The Tantras develop such devices further. By ignoring such stylistic devices, Smith produces a restricted rhetoric that supports his contention of the social origin and reference of the taxonomies of Vedic ritual.

Smith’s oversight is influenced by Émile Durkheim’s and Marcel Mauss’ book on *Primitive Classification*, which argued that such taxonomies mirror the divisions of the social order.<sup>72</sup> Although this is indeed often the case, critics have rightly pointed out that there is in many cases no evidence or even counter-evidence for the rigid thesis of a one-to-one correspondence between divisions of society and divisions of nature.<sup>73</sup> This has not prevented others from restating Durkheim’s thesis. Francis Cornford invoked him in arguing, without evidence, that Anaximander’s four elements



corresponded to a totemic division of the social order, to which Empedocles' additional elements of love (*philia*) and strife (*neikos*) merely added the forces of social cohesion and division.<sup>74</sup> Much later, and with no more evidence, Pierre Bourdieu has argued that *philia* and *neikos* are clearly social.<sup>75</sup> Undoubtedly, such taxonomies are more than mere intellectual abstractions. They operate on a practical as well as an ideal level. However, the referent of such devices cannot be reduced to the social order, nor can their function be reduced to the support of that order. Taxonomies often serve the intellectual function of explaining how all things are related: how the Many come from the One, or from the Few.

Durkheim showed, against Immanuel Kant, that the basic categories of thought certainly do not reflect "pure reason."<sup>76</sup> Nor do they reflect nature purely. These categories are not prior to, but posterior to and derived from empirical existence in the social order. As [chapter six](#) further elaborates, my disagreement with Durkheim and his followers is not over whether ritual signs are ultimately arbitrary, but over how ritual motivates these signs precisely in response to their arbitrariness. A semiotic perspective recognizes the gap between the level of signs or discourse and that of material reality, whether cosmic, physiological, or social; and theorizes the quasi-independent semiotic dimension of culture on the basis of a detailed analysis of the contribution of the form of discourse to its function. Otherwise, it becomes impossible to provide an account of the rhetorical force and pragmatic (including social) function of ritual.

Bruce Lincoln identifies as the "central question...whether taxonomic systems are more concerned with nature than with culture: That is, are they primarily epistemological or sociopolitical in their orientation and instrumentality?"<sup>77</sup> He argues, rather ingeniously, that the absence of any reference to the social order in a system of taxonomies can facilitate the further reinforcement of that order by obscuring the very human motivations that underlie the taxonomic system and clothing that system with the appearance of naturalness or facticity.<sup>78</sup> This seems quite plausible to me. However, I suggest that the choice between nature and culture, and Kant and Durkheim,<sup>79</sup> that Lincoln poses is potentially misleading. Of course, taxonomic systems are never purely natural, and always to some extent cultural. They also serve sociopolitical purposes. However, apart from the *what* and the *why* of such systems, the question of *how* is still important: how taxonomies, and other ritual forms, produce the rhetorical force that contributes to both their logical



Set:	first member	second member	third member
animal	a	b	c
vegetable	a	b	c
mineral	a	b	c
social	a	b	c

persuasiveness and their coercive power. This is the question of “relative motivation.” In this connection, Lincoln makes the important observation that the “multiplication of taxonomic modules” contributes to the implicative and persuasive power of the system,<sup>80</sup> or what he calls the “tyranny of taxonomies.” The exhaustive function of such taxonomies converges with that of more obvious forms of poetry, as illustrated in the following table: The division of each set into three members is implied by the division of all other sets into three. Juxtaposed, the sets function precisely as rhyming words at the end of poetic lines, or as successive lines in a logical argument. The accumulation of such sets places increasing constraint to so divide all potential sets.<sup>81</sup> The principle of exhaustion articulated earlier in this chapter structures not only each set individually as exhaustive of its own domain of nature or culture, but also the macro-set or set of all sets, which attempts to exhaust the entire cosmos or, as Brian K.Smith puts it, to “classify the universe.” This extension of the principle captures not only taxonomies, but also the coordination in ritual of different semiotic modes, or sensory and performative registers beyond the verbal: e.g., symbols, song, and dance, to borrow a line from Maurice Bloch.<sup>82</sup> Taxonomies have their own logic (paralogic, analogic) that contributes, apart from any particular social morphology, to constrain or determine their structure.

In many taxonomies, the divisions of nature and culture are indexed to a set of basic cosmic elements, which has the appearance of transcribing reality. However, the arbitrariness of even this most primal division is proved already by the fact that different cultures disagree as to the number of elements. Aristotle and much of the Western tradition posited four elements: earth, water, fire, and air. The Chinese tradition reduced the cosmos

both to the two principles of yin and yang and to five elements: metal, wood, fire, water, and earth. In the Indian tradition, there were both three basic qualities (*guṇa*) and five elements (*bhūta*): space, wind, fire, water, and earth. Although these choices of elements were obviously based in part on the empirical observation of nature, they also reflected the inescapable influence of culture. Each set of elements claimed for itself an absolute motivation. However, the division of all other departments of nature and culture to correspond to the magic number of three, four, five, etc. could add only a relative motivation, especially as there could never be any necessary correlation between these elements and the other qualities, such as those of sound and color, with which they were associated.

An analysis of color taxonomies underlines this point. From an early date, Hinduism and particularly the Sāṃkhya school of philosophy posited the existence of three elemental qualities (*guṇa*) called *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* and identified with the colors white, red, and black, respectively. The entire cosmos supposedly consisted of combinations, in differing proportions, of these three qualities. One of the earliest texts expounding this idea is *CU* 6.2–4, which predated the classical theory and identified the three colors with water, fire, and food.<sup>83</sup> As we shall see, this division has parallels in other cultures that may suggest a partial explanation for the choice of colors:

In the beginning, son, this world was simply what is existent—one only, without a second.... And it thought to itself: “Let me become many. Let me propagate myself...[It became heat (or fire: *tejas*), water, and food.] So, that deity established the distinctions of name and appearance (or “color”: *nīpa*) by entering these three deities here with this living self, and made each of them threefold... “The red appearance of a fire is, in fact, the appearance of heat, the white, that of water, and the black, that of food....” [And so with other macrocosmic and microcosmic constituents.] It was, indeed, this that they knew, those extremely wealthy and immensely learned householders of old, when they said: “Now no one will be able to spring something upon us that we have not heard or thought of or understood before.” For they derived that knowledge from these three—when they noticed anything that was reddish, they knew: “That is the appearance of heat”; when they noticed anything that was whitish, they knew: “That is the appearance of water”; when they noticed anything that was blackish, they knew: “That is

the appearance of food”; and when they noticed anything that was somehow indistinct, they knew: “That is a combination [or compound: *samāsa*] of these same three deities.”

This passage presents the three elements as a fact of nature, rather than a product of culture. Later texts correlated the three qualities and/or colors with different domains of nature and culture. The colors red, black, and white represented respectively the gods Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Śiva and, in *AU* 1.7, the letters “a,” “u,” and “m” of the *praṇava*. If each domain, such as color or sound, individually represents a more or less arbitrary division of its spectrum, then their coordination is even more arbitrary. How could there be any natural relation between color and, for example, moral qualities? Yet the three *guṇas* represented the moral qualities of goodness, activity, and torpor. Similarly, the four elements of early Greek science corresponded to four humors that were both moral qualities and physical substances of particular color: from blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile we have the terms for the emotional states sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic, respectively. The important point is that such associations were neither natural nor merely arbitrary, but were precisely attempts to motivate or naturalize arbitrary cultural categories.

The rhetorical function of taxonomies continues to be overlooked in some current debates over the existence of linguistic universals. Proponents of their existence occasionally fall into the trap of mistaking culture for nature, repeating in more subtle form the mistake made by earlier questers after a natural language. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay discovered similar patterns in the color taxonomies of many cultures.<sup>84</sup> Different cultures may distinguish varying numbers of basic colors, as represented by the existence of non-complex terms for these colors such as “red,” “green,” etc. However, if we examine any particular language with a given number of such color terms, the semantic foci of these terms tend to correspond to particular wavelengths of light. When there are only three such terms, they will always center on focal black (or dark), focal white (or light), and focal red. The addition of such terms occurs in a more or less regular manner: e.g., the fourth term added will be either yellow or green, and the fifth, green or yellow. Although Berlin’s and Kay’s basic empirical finding has held up under scrutiny, its interpretation remains open. Some have seen in it a refutation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, which holds that the categories of our

language determine our conceptualization and interpretation of experience, rather than the other way around.<sup>85</sup> Yet the cultural function of color taxonomies, particularly in ritual, suggests that even in this apparent case of linguistic universals, language can never be taken as a direct transcription of nature or perceptual reality.

Writing prior to and independently of Berlin and Kay, Victor Turner compiled a list of examples from different cultures, including *CU 6*, where the three colors black, white, and red appeared in ritual. He argued that these examples have a physiological basis:

Among the earliest symbols produced by man are the three colours representing products of the human body whose emission, spilling, or production is associated with a heightening of emotion—in other words, culture, the super-organic, has an intimate connection with the organic in its early stages, with the awareness of powerful physical experiences. These heightened bodily experiences are felt to be informed with a power in excess of that averagely possessed by the individual; its source may be located in the cosmos or in society; analogues of physical experience may then be found wherever the same colours occur in nature; or else experience of social relations in heightened emotional circumstances may be *classified* under a colour rubric. The colours represent heightened physical experience transcending the experiencer's normal condition—they are therefore conceived as “deities” (Hindu) or mystical powers, as the sacred over against the profane. The physical experiences associated with the three colours are also experiences of social relationships: thus white=semen is linked to mating between man and woman .... Not only do the three colours stand for basic human experiences of the body (associated with the gratification of libido, hunger, aggressive, and excretory drives and with fear, anxiety, and submissiveness), they also provide a kind of primordial classification of reality. This view is in contrast to Durkheim's notion that the social relations of mankind are not based on the logical relations of things but have served as the prototypes of the latter. Nor has society, Durkheim argues, been merely the model on which the classifying thought has been wrought: the framework of society has been the very framework of the system of things.... Against this I would postulate that the human organism and its crucial

experiences are the *fons et origo* of all classifications. The point I am trying to make here is that the three colours white-red-black for the simpler societies are not merely differences in the visual perception of parts of the spectrum: they are the abridgements or condensations of whole realms of psychobiological experience involving the reason and all the senses and concerned with primary group relationships. It is only by subsequent abstraction from these configurations that the other modes of social classification employed by mankind arose.<sup>86</sup>

In Turner's interpretation, the category of "nature" took on a decidedly different meaning from that which it possessed in the Hindu theory of the three qualities. The three colors do not describe basic qualities of the external world, but are invested with significance through their association with emotionally charged bodily experiences. Despite Turner's effort to distinguish it, his explanation closely resembles Durkheim's argument that ritual signs are merely the receptacles of "effervescence,"<sup>87</sup> but with the crucial difference that the source of this sentiment is the individual organism and its physical experiences, rather than the social group. Turner continued the flawed project of trying to link symbolic colors directly to a material basis. However, the association of bodily substances with particular color foci already constitutes an act of abstraction from experience. It is unclear which, if any, actual bodily substance was designated by the Hippocratic humor "black bile."<sup>88</sup> Turner contended that each of the colors was independently significant as a metonym for a particular organic experience, instead of receiving its value through its position in a system of relations in which all three colors are taken together. He substituted a diachronic account, in which symbolic meaning is traced to the experiential history of an individual (and from thence to a collective), for a properly synchronic account. Turner was guilty not only of factual inaccuracy—there are numerous cultures where his three color scheme does not hold—but also of failing to grasp the basic principles of structuralism as applied to color taxonomies.

Marshall Sahlins applies a similar criticism to naturalistic interpretations of Berlin's and Kay's thesis. He argues that the universality of color taxonomies seems to violate the Saussurean principle of arbitrariness only because the meaning of such taxonomies has already been reduced to the act of pointing at nature, rather than being regarded as the product of a cultural system of relational values. This reduction erroneously

reproduces, on the level of semiotic analysis, the view from within the culture studied, in which the selection of colors appears to be motivated.<sup>89</sup> Sahlins' description of color taxonomies coincides with Jonathan Z. Smith's concept of canon as an arbitrary reduction to a particular set, which then becomes the basis for an exegesis of all experience:

[B]asic color terms amount to the abstraction of perceptible features according to an arbitrary criterion of significance—which is then capable of achieving for society such miracles unknown to arithmetic as the conjoining of two apples, three cherries, and a pint of blood. Color in culture is indeed just this process of relating, not of recognizing. It cannot be, as Mauss says in a brilliant discussion of sympathetic magic, that the conceptual coupling of objects by similarities or differences in color is *sequitur* to the act of perception. For, “far from there being any association between the two objects due to their colour, we are dealing, on the contrary, with a formal convention, almost a law, whereby, out of a whole series of possible characteristics, colour is chosen to establish a relationship between two things.” “Basic” color terms testify to a selective ordering of experience: that kind of intervention in natural-perceptual fact whose presence is the certain indication of a cultural project....<sup>90</sup>

The preceding analysis of color taxonomies shows how the arbitrary selection of canon may be clothed with the appearance of naturalness. The Hindu tradition at the time of the Upaniṣads recognized many more colors than black, white, and red. Yet these three were selected as primary categories organizing and underlying not only color, but also all other domains of nature and culture. Such a selection often appears to have been motivated initially by a biological factor, the ease of visual differentiation of particular wavelengths of light. However, the subsequent attempt to diagram everything by means of this selection is perfectly arbitrary. The fact that numerical or quantitative equivalences must be constructed between different domains shows already that there is no qualitative or natural equivalence between them, no more than between language and reality, or nature and culture. Whatever quantum of biological motivation underlies the choice of colors, is exploited and supplemented by the relative motivation produced by repetitive and exhaustive diagrams. Significantly, the triad of black, white, and red identified by Turner comprises not just any random set of colors, but three that among them, as

Berlin's and Kay's data suggest, exhaustively divide the spectrum (i.e. subtend totally the extensional spectrum of hue and saturation or brightness). This makes these three an especially suitable choice for a taxonomy or canon of color. Similarly, the four humors of Hippocratic medicine added to these three colors a fourth, yellow (bile), which in a Berlin and Kay four color taxonomy would exhaust the spectrum. Undoubtedly there are many color taxonomies that do not conform to this pattern. However, it appears that the "naturalness" of the colors selected is often motivated by the principle of exhaustion. In short, we are not talking about "facts" here, whether cosmic, physiological, or social, even and especially when the discourse of taxonomies claims to be doing so.<sup>91</sup> Efforts to render taxonomies univocal by reducing them to a single referent mimic earlier quests for a natural language.

### **The Economy of Signs: Arbitrariness and the Production of Certainty**

As both this chapter and the earlier analysis of Tantric mantras have demonstrated, ritual is often an extreme case of the poetic function. Ritual accumulates icons of different types. What is the purpose of such an accumulation? A partial answer in terms advanced at the beginning of this chapter is that the accumulation of icons within the text of ritual relatively motivates or reinforces ritual as an index of a prospective goal in its context. Somehow these icons "add up" to entail increasingly (if only virtually) a real-world result.

The last chapter raised the idea of a natural language, one that is directly connected with reality, in order to show that this is only a dream, a response to the unbridgeable gap between language and reality. This gap underlies the arbitrary nature of the sign, the lack of an absolute motivation of words. Poetry attempts to compensate for this lack by substituting a relative motivation on the level of discourse. Through this device, poetry virtually bridges or crosses over the gap between language and reality, and produces the appearance or illusion of a natural language.

The arbitrariness of the sign is not merely the problem of how to establish a value for individual signs in a comprehensive code. It is also a lack or loss that afflicts all signs as substitutes for their referents, doubles which may also be duplicitous, which are required only in the "absence," in some sense, of those referents, and which therefore assert or guarantee the presence of something absent. Arbitrariness is the sum of all of those

conditions that promote the dis-appearance or “absence” of the referent. Accordingly, motivation is a matter of degree, a measured response to the problem of arbitrariness, that may vary with the pragmatic context.

The truth of this observation is confirmed in the case of ritual, which often responds to some situation of pragmatic crisis, such as illness or drought. In “magical” rituals that seek to effect a real-world goal, such as healing or rain, it is the present non-existence of that goal that constitutes the “arbitrariness” of the ritual as an indexical sign of that goal. The rain-stopping rhyme quoted earlier is presumably recited when rain is falling from the sky. Ritual “works” or “performs” by working *against* something, which in many cases is the obvious absence of that which the ritual seeks to produce. Of course, the inverse of this is those cases where ritual has the function of “warding off” disease, rain, etc. In these cases, ritual works against the presence in context of other countervailing indexes (such as the presence of many sick people or gathering storm clouds) entailing that which is to be warded off.

Some scholars have argued that rituals are not performed from a blind belief in their efficacy, but are often timed for success: for example, the rain-making ritual is performed at the end of the season of drought.<sup>92</sup> However, this seems to me to ignore the counterfactual nature of many of these rituals and forcibly impose a modern realism on the magical practitioner. Of course, any attempt to time the performance of the ritual to coincide with the natural sequence of events may also be regarded as an attempt to produce the illusion of control by using a natural index of these events, such as the time of year (or gathering storm clouds), to reinforce the artificial, cultural index of ritual. This is just like Pavlov’s coordination of the ringing of the bell with the bringing of the food. Once the connection between the two indexes has been established, they may be separated, and the artificial index may be employed counterfactually with symbolic effect and real behavioral consequences. In similar fashion, an imperative verb that is used with varying degrees of coercive effect in human encounters may subsequently be directed at divine or supernatural beings who will never respond. Ritual uses of such indexes are often, if we can use so blunt a term, “parasitic” upon their normal uses. For most purposes, it may matter little whether we call such ritual uses “symbolic” or “superstitious.” However, it seems to me that a full appreciation of the rhetorical function of ritual requires the acknowledgment that ritual may be pragmatically effective in a range of related ways: by influencing



human behavior, by symbolizing cultural values, and in some cases, by creating persuasive illusions of control. To excise the latter dimension of the rhetorical function of ritual is to replace the perspective of a semiotic pragmaticism outlined above with a restricted concept of "symbolism."

One of the principal functions of the sign is to produce confidence or certainty in the existence of its referent. But situations of doubt or uncertainty undermine this confidence. The marriage vow provided a clue to how poetry may operate in these cases to produce a purely formal certainty out of nothing, as it were. Like any contract, the marriage vow seeks to be binding, and to maximize the probability of performance by the contracting parties. A contract is an insurance policy, which reassures and guards against unknown dangers. In other words, a contract is a kind of mechanism or machine for the production of greater certainty. That is why, in a sales contract, there are usually so few provisions regarding the buyer's performance, apart from some instructions prescribing the manner of transfer of funds. The reason for this is that we all know what money is. Money is an example of a completely fungible good; the only issue is the quantity. But in the case of goods being sold, we must know exactly what these are, and numerous provisions regarding their nature, extent, and quality are customary in a sales contract. When the sales contract enumerates the goods sold "lock, stock, and barrel," it is attempting to ensure that the entirety of the goods, without remainder, will be transferred. And toward that end, as in the marriage vow, it may employ formulas that are repetitive and exhaustive, as a trope of completeness and conclusiveness.

We must conclude that there exists an economy of signs in which the mechanisms of substitution, exchange, and accumulation outlined above play coordinated roles. The sign substitutes for the absence of its referent. One type of sign-relation may substitute for another, as sound for sense, or relative motivation for the lack of absolute motivation. In ritual there frequently occurs a coordination of different levels of language, and of language and other, nonverbal semiotic modes, that can be explained only as an accumulation of relative motivation to augment pragmatic function. Even the cases of sympathetic magic (such as the voodoo doll) that do not involve an *accumulation* of motivation within the text of ritual represent an *addition* of motivation to the contextual indexicality of the ritual. Without some model of an economy of signs, I submit that it becomes impossible to account for the proliferation of indexical icons in ritual.

The chief goods or values in this economy of signs are *certainty* and *control*. In events of pragmatic crisis in which direct control over the world is lacking, human beings often try to influence the world virtually through the medium of speech, and to produce a kind of poetic certainty that substitutes for more tangible goods. Through such devices, ritual attempts to bridge the gap between language, which we can control, and the world, which we too often cannot.

This model of the economy of signs, although building from an awareness of the difference between discourse and reality similar to Jonathan Z. Smith's, reaches a very different conclusion regarding the function of ritual. Smith contends that ritual is an "assertion of difference"<sup>93</sup> between discourse and reality that not only is "incapable of overcoming [this] disjunction"<sup>94</sup> but even seeks to preserve and reflect upon it:

*[R]itual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things...It is not that "magical" rituals compel the world through representation and manipulation; rather they express a realistic assessment of the fact that the world cannot be compelled.*<sup>95</sup>

While agreeing that ritual is, in some sense, a response to a situation of incongruity or disjunction between discourse and reality,<sup>96</sup> I would contend that ritual often attempts precisely to erase or cross over this disjunction, to bridge the gap between the way things are and the way we would like them to be. Of course, this attempt will seldom succeed: the bridge is only virtual, not actual. Yet without recognizing ritual as an *actual attempt* to bridge the gap, it seems impossible to account for the economy of signs outlined above, in which the relative motivation of discourse substitutes for the absence of absolute motivation. To call this sleight-of-hand "realism" (as was also done by Tambiah) is to commit a fundamental mistake. Ritual implies the (submerged) recognition of the reality of difference in the same way that the dream implies the subject's (unconscious) recognition of his real motive: through the reactions of repression and rhetorical compensation. As Archimedes showed, we can measure the volume

of anything (even something invisible) by the amount of water it displaces.

Smith's account of ritual, as further described in the next chapter, remains within a poststructuralism in which binary opposition, *the digital function of signification*, is the only way of distinguishing among the values of different signs. Under such a semiotic, it is impossible to account for the contribution that the accumulation of motivation, especially that based on resemblance or repetition, makes to the value (and function) of signs. Such an accumulation constitutes part of what we might call *the analog function of signification*. Poststructuralist theories of ritual typically ignore this analog function, thereby precluding any adequate account of the force of signs in ritual.

Some theories that have attended to the function of repetition and poetic devices in ritual have encouraged a restricted concept of this function. Tambiah, in a passage quoted above, suggests that such devices serve "for transmitting a message through redundancy, for storing vital technological knowledge in an oral culture, and for the construction of the spell itself as a lengthy verbal form."<sup>97</sup> Tambiah relates the mnemonic function of "storing" with the functions of communicating or "transmitting" and composing or "constructing" the message of spells. His formulation shows clearly the intersection of several lines of interpretation of ritual. One is the application of communication theory to explain repetition or "redundancy" in ritual as facilitating the transfer of information or the content of a message.<sup>98</sup> Such an application has also been endorsed by, among others, Edmund Leach<sup>99</sup> and Jonathan Z. Smith.<sup>100</sup> The idea is that if the same message is transmitted multiple times and through different channels, it is more likely to overcome the vagaries of distortion and be received by an audience. A second line of interpretation has been developed from Milman Parry's and Albert Lord's studies on the techniques of oral composition of epic poetry.<sup>101</sup> According to this view, repetition and poetic devices not only aid recall in an oral culture, but also contribute to the performance of poetry as an oral genre. This theory has been applied to spells by Barbara Kerewsky Halpern and John Miles Foley, as well as by the cognitive psychologist David Rubin, who stresses the mnemonic function of such devices as alliteration in oral genres including children's counting-out rhymes.<sup>102</sup> All of these theorists recognize the desirability of a scientific account of the contribution of ritual's form to what may broadly be called its communicative function.<sup>103</sup> Like the author of this study, they appreciate the need to go beyond the circularity of the thesis that

the “belief” in a ritual explains its currency, and to show why certain cultural forms seem better adapted, as conducive to belief (or memorability, etc.), in a dynamic process of selection among individuals and across cultures and times.

While agreeing in part with each of these interpretations, it seems to me that each fails to describe certain aspects of the rhetorical function of repetition and other poetic devices in ritual. The function of these devices is regarded as subsidiary to and supportive of the semantic “content” of spells, contributing to either the retention and recall, the composition, or the transmission of a “message.” The mnemonic interpretation may explain some of the rhymes and parallelisms in various oral genres. But it does not explain the extreme repetition found in many spells, nor the position of repetition in the metrical structure of certain ritual discourses. Frequently, this reinforces precisely the goal of the ritual. And this goal is what is least likely to be forgotten, not least because it is prospective, so it is not a question of “remembering” it, but of reinforcing it. In the case of the voodoo doll, it is not a question of repetition promoting “memory” of the resembling event, namely, the prospective harm of the enemy. Rather, this harm is always in view, and the force that weighs against the idea of harm is not mere “forgetting,” but the actual, observable presence of the absence of harm to the enemy (or, in the case of a rain-making spell, a drought), which is a countervailing sign that places the efficacy of the magical operation in doubt, hence the need to reinforce that operation through multiple repetitions.

A mnemonic interpretation can be more adequate if it is not limited to a narrow understanding of memory as mere “recall.” Historically, the mnemonic and rhetorical functions were connected. The ancient art of memory was part of the broader discipline of rhetoric. Aristotle’s short treatise on memory, *De memoria et reminiscencia*, identified the various analogical associations that support memory as similarity, contrariety, and contiguity.<sup>104</sup> These associations converge with the cardinal tropes of classical rhetoric. Jonathan Z. Smith has traced Tylor’s and Frazer’s discussions of the laws of association of ideas in magic to this Aristotelian tradition.<sup>105</sup> A more immediate source was David Hume, whose theory of the associating principles of thought recognized the convergence of the mnemonic and the rhetorical functions of these principles, particularly in ritual.<sup>106</sup> Frances Yates has shown the association of the art of memory with magic in the Renaissance.<sup>107</sup> The art of memory cannot be confined to the simple function of recall. The principles that reinforce the

association of ideas, including similarity and contiguity, may promote, alternatively, the retention and recall of an idea, or its rhetorical reinforcement for pragmatic purposes.

On some of these points, we may find the interpretation of ritual repetition based on communication theory more satisfactory. In ritual, repetition and other poetic devices often seem to enhance the transmission rather than the mere retrieval of the "message" of the ritual. However, the interpretation based on communication theory will need to be modified. Communication theory assumes that information is distinguished by difference: a message is constituted by its singularity and uniqueness. Consequently, once repetition of the message multiple times in different channels serves to convey this unique message whole and entire past the barriers of interference and distortion, there can be no further need for repetition. This reflects a bias toward semantic "content." However, the reinforcement of ritual through magic words and non-verbal devices shows that it is a question not only of semantics, but also of pragmatics. The binary or digital model of "information" needs to give way to an analog model in order to account for the phenomenon of relative motivation. Motivation is not simply on or off, but a question of degree; and the distortion being resisted is not simple distortion, but conditions that tend to promote the appearance of arbitrariness of the message. Therefore, in cases in which the goal of the ritual is counterfactual, a greater degree of repetition may be required. The shift toward a concept of motivation as a matter of degree, a sliding scale of indexical values, coincides with a shift of focus from the semantic content of a message to its pragmatic function.

In retrospect, we perceive a vast oversight in modern theories of ritual and rhetoric. Hardly any of these theories even attempts to provide an account of the force of discourse, much less of the contribution of poetic form to that force. The semanticist bias and the poststructuralist emphasis on the digital function of signification have combined to produce a restricted rhetoric. The final chapter outlines a genealogy of ritual and rhetoric that indicates some further causes of their repression.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Toward a Genealogy of Ritual and Rhetoric

### Iconophiles and Iconophobes

When language sobers down, when metaphors become less bold and more explicit, there is less danger of speaking of the sun as a horse, because a poet had called him the heavenly racer.... Yet under a different form Language retains her silent charm; and if it no longer creates gods and heroes, it creates many a name that receives a similar worship. He who would examine the influence which words, mere words, have exercised on the minds of men, might write a history of the world that would teach us more than any which we yet possess.

—Friedrich Max Müller, “Modern Mythology.”<sup>1</sup>

THE PRECEDING TWO CHAPTERS PRESENTED AN ACCOUNT OF THE RHETORIC OF RITUAL that purports to be valid in all places, for all time: a kind of *metarhetoric*.<sup>2</sup> This concluding chapter interrogates the pretensions of such an account through a genealogical analysis of the categories of ritual and rhetoric, and their intersection, in Western thought. This analysis reveals that ritual and rhetoric share a mixed parentage and ambivalent legacy. Our views and especially pejorative evaluations of these categories are derived in part from the Platonic attack on imitation (*mimesis*), and in part from religious polemics against idolatry. Both of these critiques have been invoked above, the latter more obliquely, through the application of their terminology to ritual and especially Tantric mantras. In making this admission, I am not taking back what has already been written. The paternity of ritual is not one the history of religions can so easily disown. As this study has shown, ritual is often a form of imitation and even, in some cases, a form of idolatry. In my view, the Platonic attack on imitation and religious polemics against idolatry were important

moments in the Western critical tradition that remain resources for an ongoing critique of the rhetoric of ritual.<sup>3</sup>

The present chapter responds to the recognition that the history of religions necessarily involves both structural and historical, or synchronic and diachronic dimensions. The requirement of negotiating between these two dimensions can be perceived as a crisis or an opportunity, can lead to paralysis or catalysis. Or it can lead to denial: this book might have ended with the last chapter (some of you may soon wish it had), stopping where many anthropological theories of ritual leave off. However, such an account would have been crucially incomplete. The recovery of the rhetoric of ritual performed in earlier chapters begs the question *how and why this rhetoric was repressed*. This is the question to which the present chapter attempts to provide a preliminary answer.

In the course of this study it has been observed numerous times that existing theories ignore the rhetoric of ritual or, even if they do attend to it, mischaracterize it, generally by neglecting its most troublesome aspects. This facilitates the misrecognition of such rhetoric as something more benign, such as a natural language or a harmless form of poetry. The repression of rhetoric can take a variety of forms. Within the Western tradition, the term “rhetoric” has ambivalent connotations. Rhetoric has been regarded as an effective form of communication valued for its usefulness and even as a necessary component of an education fitting one for participation in civic life. Rhetoric has been regarded as a potentially dangerous and deceptive form of persuasion that can lead to the triumph of style over substance. More dismissive opinions ridicule rhetoric as mere *hocus pocus*: a transparent attempt to deceive, the very obviousness of which undermines its efficacy. Finally we have the view of rhetoric most characteristic of the modern age: an almost total neglect that coincides with a massive restriction of the concept, and perhaps even the practice, of rhetoric. This places us at the end point of a particular historical trajectory characterized by the decline (in some sense) of rhetoric.

The narrative of decline I am proposing is the flip side of those evolutionist accounts that relegated ritual to the status of, in the words of Tylor, a “survival” from an earlier, “primitive” stage of culture. This explanation of the rhetoric of magic omitted or glossed over some crucial questions: is it the weight of tradition itself or the poetry of these rituals that leads to their survival? Is the diachronic or synchronic dimension of discourse to blame?<sup>4</sup>

And what causes such forms to die out? (Assuming for the moment that they do.)

The comparative disciplines of the nineteenth century, including Tylor's *Anthropology* and Max Müller's *Comparative Mythology*, the predecessor of the history of religions, may have struggled, and failed, to reconcile structure and history. At least they struggled. Many students of culture now assume that there is little difference between the past and the present, or between "us" and "them." There but for the grace of capitalism go we. Television and one generation of time lapse can indeed work wonders. Having abandoned the cultural chauvinism of earlier evolutionist theories, many act as if the word "modern" had no meaning. But that fails to explain the disappearance of the most obvious forms of rhetoric, namely, those associated with ritual. This absence defines a gap between modernity and its past. The repression of rhetoric, and of ritual, even appears to be characteristic of modernity.

Nietzsche advanced a new genre of "genealogy" in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where he argued that the distinction of moral value between "good" and "evil" was an inversion of an earlier distinction between "good" and "bad."<sup>5</sup> In the present era, the Nietzschean genealogy coordinates with the poststructuralist axiom that the value of language and other signs depends on differences that are often hierarchical. Thus, Michel Foucault has reconstructed histories of madness, criminality, and other pathologies opposed to normalcy.<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida has exposed the valuations of the spoken over the written word, and of philosophy over rhetoric, a move earlier addressed by Nietzsche.<sup>7</sup> Talal Asad has described the formation of the categories of religion and ritual in similar terms.<sup>8</sup> Such genealogies have taught us a great deal. However, they sometimes empty the categories they address of content and definition, leaving us unable to make any principled distinction between philosophy and rhetoric, not to mention between good and evil.

A more consistent application of genealogical method deconstructs not merely the outsides, but the insides of categories such as rhetoric. A complete theory of rhetoric must attend to rhetoric itself, and not only to the rhetorical move, the polemic or antirrhetic,<sup>9</sup> by which philosophy opposes itself to rhetoric. The analysis of rhetoric pursued above has called into question the purity and integrity of philosophy. However, this analysis has not cleared rhetoric of the charges against it, but has proved some of those charges beyond a reasonable doubt. Rhetoric often does operate as a form of what Plato called "imitation" (*mimesis*) and



Nietzsche called “metaphor” (*Metapher*). Far from being the mere opposite of philosophy, rhetoric is an *ape of reason*, a duplicitous double that possesses a magical power to persuade and threatens to introduce a dangerous heteronomy within the univocal language of logic. There may be hyperbole in this statement, but no irony. Genealogy is a mode of recovery and remembrance. However, the return of the repressed does not mean that the aim is simply to “bring back rhetoric” (or ritual, or myth) in some naïve sense. The aim instead is to explore further the nodes of discomfort and cognitive slips that signal the trauma inflicted by the violence of *both* rhetoric *and* its repression.

With these caveats, we proceed to uncover the common ancestry of rhetoric and ritual. Apart from Nietzsche’s speculations that myth, poetry, and music began in the cult of Dionysus,<sup>10</sup> some modern scholarship has suggested that the concept of *mimesis* originated in ritual dance.<sup>11</sup> Gorgias the rhetorician incorporated alliteration and rhyme into his style and explicitly connected rhetoric with magic, a connection that Plato, among others, subsequently acknowledged and condemned.<sup>12</sup> In book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato referred to the “magician or sleight-of-hand man and imitator” and the “spell that these adornments [rhythm, meter, and harmony] naturally exercise,” and stated that “scene painting in its exploitation of this weakness of our nature [to be deceived by optical illusions] falls nothing short of witchcraft, and so do jugglery and many other such contrivances.”<sup>13</sup> The connection between ritual, especially magic, and imitation emerges in these passages.<sup>14</sup>

Closer to our own time, Hume criticized resemblance for its role in the “mummeries” of Catholic ritual.<sup>15</sup> Hume argued that resemblance, together with contiguity and cause and effect, were the “associating principles of thought.”<sup>16</sup> These principles were universal, and influenced correct as well as erroneous thought: contiguity and resemblance could “inliven”<sup>17</sup> or increase the “firmness, or solidity, or force, or vivacity” of ideas,<sup>18</sup> and thereby “augment the conviction of any opinion, and the vivacity of any conception.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the “mummery” of ritual was not a mere mistake, but a mistake conditioned and determined by the rhetorical force of resemblance. Hume’s critique of causation, which is better known than his observations on ritual, took this line of inquiry to its logical conclusion, resulting in a profound skepticism regarding philosophy or pure reason.

Jonathan Z. Smith has noted the influence of the philosophical tradition of “Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Hartley, and Mill” on Tylor’s and Frazer’s concepts of the laws of association of ideas.<sup>20</sup>

Reprising, wittingly or unwittingly, Hume's critique of the rhetorical function of these laws in ritual, Tylor stated:

The principal key to the understanding of Occult Science is to consider it as based on the Association of Ideas, a faculty which lies at the very foundation of human reason, but in no small degree of unreason also. Man, as yet in a low intellectual condition, having come to associate in thought those things which he found by experience to be connected in fact, proceeded erroneously to invert this action, and to conclude that association in thought must involve similar connection in reality. By a vast mass of evidence from savage, barbaric, and civilized life, magic arts which have resulted from thus mistaking an ideal for a real connexion, may be clearly traced from the lower culture which they are of, to the higher culture which they are in.<sup>21</sup>

Frazer similarly condemned his two laws of magic as "misapplications...of the association of ideas"<sup>22</sup> which applied correctly and with the evolution of thought yield science. These authors experienced some difficulty in explaining how magic could ever have been regarded as effective. Tylor suggested various reasons, from the professional interest and cunning of the magician, who is "at once dupe and cheat,"<sup>23</sup> to the human tendency to regard coincidences as significant. Frazer's explanations were similar. Neither seems to have been prepared to recognize fully the rhetorical or persuasive force of the analogies they correctly uncovered at the basis of many magical operations. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, both partially confounded the structural dimension of the rhetoric of ritual, namely the force of poetry, with its historical dimension, the force of tradition.

The denigration of such cultural forms as magic within the context of an evolutionism that regards these as explainable only as a kind of intellectual mistake on the part of a "primitive" culture or phase of society proved unsatisfactory from both an intellectual and an ethical standpoint, leading to attempts to account for the meaning and function of ritual in its social context. Recently, demonstrations of analogical thinking in modern culture, and even its science and scholarship, have further undermined the evolutionism of Tylor and Frazer. Jonathan Z. Smith exposes the irony that Tylor's and especially Frazer's own writings were tainted by analogical or magical thinking. Frazer's discourse on taboo was itself structured by "the rhetoric of association,"<sup>24</sup> and both thinkers practiced what Smith calls the

“encyclopaedic” mode of comparison, in which “contextless lists [are] held together by mere surface associations...,”<sup>25</sup> Smith generalizes from such cases to argue that, inasmuch as it depends upon analogical principles, the modern scholarly activity of comparison resembles magic,<sup>26</sup> and even that analogy is universal in human thought.<sup>27</sup> The announcement of the death of “primitive thought” has turned out to be largely another case of “the king is dead, long live the king.”

In important ways not fully acknowledged and reconciled within his own discourse, Smith is not refuting but continuing and extending Tylor’s and Frazer’s critiques of analogical thinking. Although Smith declares that Frazer’s manner of analogizing renders his conclusions untrustworthy,<sup>28</sup> and even that the entirety of the argument in *The Golden Bough* is fallacious,<sup>29</sup> it would seem that some portion of Frazer’s account of sympathetic magic survives, for Smith, like his predecessors, maintains an ambivalent attitude toward analogy as the source both of all thought, and of mistaken thought, whether this is labeled “primitive,” “magical,” or “encyclopaedic.” Nor is Smith’s approach free from the taint of evolutionism, as he seeks to relegate the “encyclopaedic” mode of comparison to a past outmoded by current norms of scholarship.

Each of these accounts, from Hume to Smith, reflects an interesting ambivalence toward resemblance or analogy as the source both of all thought, and of mistaken thought. More directly than in Plato’s attack on imitation, rhetoric appears as a “double” of philosophy, one that may also be duplicitous. These theories, reinforced by the analysis of the rhetoric of mantras and ritual provided in this book, suggest that any genealogical account of Plato’s attack on imitation that would trace this solely to competition between philosophers and poets as different social groups rivaling each other in the “truth business,” would be overly simplistic. Such an account would ignore the substance of Plato’s critique, namely, that as an imitation, or even a “copy of a copy,” poetry and the other arts are somehow removed from reality or truth.

Sometimes the very terms employed for rhetoric and ritual by both their proponents and their critics are evidence for the connection between rhetoric and ritual as genres based on imitation. As Jakobson and Edward Sapir have pointed out, reduplication is frequently used to indicate repetitive phenomena.<sup>30</sup> In a form of sound symbolism, the word may recursively instantiate the phenomenon it denotes. Some reduplicated forms signify inarticulate speech (stammer, murmur,

chatter, babble, Sanskrit *gadgada*-) or those who speak in such a way (Greek *barbaroi*). Others are specifically reserved for magic or magical language: e.g., hocus pocus, mumbo jumbo. Such reduplicated forms are, as we have seen, also extremely common in magical formulas. The same principle of phonic repetition appears to underlie many cases of both the belief in the efficacy of magic spells, and the negative valuation of spells as deceptive and ineffective. The very same reduplicated term for magic can be pejoratively rephrased as a condemnation of magic, as seems to have occurred with “hocus pocus” and certainly occurred with *mantra-tantra* (or *tantra-mantra*) in modern Bengal.<sup>31</sup>

A number of examples of reduplicated or repetitive “nonsense” words in spells consist of words of which the meaning has been lost, or even of words in which the loss of semantic content has been somehow compensated through the augmentation of poetic form. “Hocus pocus” was derived by some from the phrase “hoc est (enim) corpus (meum)” in the Catholic mass.<sup>32</sup> “Abracadabra” may have come from the name of the deity “Abraxas” or “Abrasax.” Another example is the Buddhist mantra quoted in [chapter one](#), “ine mine dapphe daḍapphe,” which supposedly came from the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths. Whether any of these etymologies is historically correct is beside the point; it is enough that they were asserted to be. Shklovsky’s contentions concerning the manner in which phonic forms take the place of missing semantic content are borne out here. It seems that some of the concerns over the possibility that rhetoric may substitute for “truth” have been justified. The demonstration, based upon an analysis of ritual forms, that form may in some cases substitute for content, at least from the standpoint of pragmatic force, tends to uphold Plato’s attack on imitation. Ritual increasingly merges with poetry as the dangerous, duplicitous “other” of philosophy.

How do we characterize the transition from the belief in such forms, to their condemnation? Part of the explanation may lie in a heightened awareness of the principle underlying the efficacy of these forms, as is suggested in the use of the repetitive terms “mumbo jumbo” and “hocus pocus” for magic and ritual. Perhaps, once the mechanism becomes transparent, part of its effectiveness disappears: the spell is broken. The difference may reside, then, in a greater self-con-sciousness about the function of such forms, as accomplished by Plato and periodically thereafter. This greater self-consciousness may even have contributed something to the construction of modernity, insofar as that consisted of the consignment of such forms to a “primitive” past as was done by Tylor and Frazer.

Once rhetoric has been banished, however, it becomes very easy to forget its dangerous potency. Several recent developments have operated to restrict our awareness of rhetoric. As noted above, many forms of (post)structuralism agree that signs are invested with value through a process of arbitrary distinctions. The form of signs contributes nothing to their force, which comes immediately from society. The deficiencies of this account become most apparent when we confront the obvious rhetoric of ritual. Jonathan Z. Smith labors under the limitations of such a semiotic. So did Durkheim, whose notion of the Sacred as merely that which is opposed by society to the Profane appears to coincide with structuralism. For this reason, Smith contends that Durkheim “comes close to developing an adequate linguistic model that would have decisively advanced his work.”<sup>33</sup> However, Richard Parmentier has rightly pointed out that, unlike Saussure, Durkheim recognized no independent role for signs, and effectively excised the semiotic level of analysis:

[H]aving isolated symbols, Durkheim in the end refuses to grant them independent theoretical status. Symbols are merely the instruments by which the externalized sentiments of individuals and the internalized authority of society are interconnected. The arbitrariness of symbols is not a proto-Saussurean step toward an independent science of “signs in society” but rather a rejection of symbols independent of social morphology.... As a result, Durkheim is fundamentally uninterested in the perceptible morphology of material signs, such as the *churinga* stones that serve as foci of historical consciousness for Australian aborigines, or in the shape of ritual acts or mythological narratives. As long as collective sentiment locates itself on some expressive form, that form will serve as the focus of religious feeling; the forms themselves are neither expressive of religious ideas nor constitutive of religious sensibilities.<sup>34</sup>

Durkheim’s error was a result not of simple neglect, but of a deliberate and vociferous denial of the contribution of the form of signs to their social function. He insisted on the arbitrary and conventional nature of the *churinga* or totems that are the collective representations of the Australian tribes, and specifically excluded the possibility that they might be mimetic or representative:

Now in themselves, the *churinga* are objects of wood and stone like all others; they are distinguished from profane things of the same sort by only one particularity: this is that the totemic mark is drawn or engraved upon them. But if we are seeking to understand how it comes that these totemic representations are so sacred, it is not without interest to see what they consist in. Among the Indians of North America, they are painted, engraved or carved images which attempt to reproduce as faithfully as possible the external aspect of the totemic animal.... But it is not the same in Australia, and it is in the Australian societies that we must seek the origin of these representations. Although the Australian may show himself sufficiently capable of imitating the forms of things in arudimentary way, sacred representations generally seem to show no ambitions in this line: they consist essentially in geometrical designs drawn upon the *churinga*.... They are either straight or curved lines, painted in different ways, and the whole having only a conventional meaning. The connection between the figure and the thing represented is so remote and indirect that it cannot be seen, except when it is pointed out. The meaning of the figures thus obtained is so arbitrary that a single design may have two different meanings for the men of two different totems.... When a *nurtunja* is made, it is given a meaning which it keeps during the whole ceremony, but which, in the last resort, is fixed by convention. These facts prove that if the Australian is so strongly inclined to represent his totem, it is not in order to have a portrait of it before his eyes which would constantly renew the sensation of it; it is merely because he feels the need of representing the idea which he forms of it by means of material and external signs, no matter what these signs may be.<sup>35</sup>

To appreciate these comments, we must recall that Durkheim's project was to retrieve the "elementary forms" of religion, those found in the most "primitive" society, that of the Australian aborigines. Their *churinga* would reveal the true character of all religious signs. Therefore, if he could show that these *churinga* were non-representative, then he could prove that the form of all religious signs was strictly irrelevant. Any mimetic representation or apparent non-arbitrariness in religious signs would be a deviation from this standard, a degradation from the pure primitive, and could be ignored. Durkheim became a sort of modern iconoclast! His argument paralleled, if it did not betray

the influence of, earlier Protestant arguments that “original” Christianity was devoid of idolatrous elements subsequent introduced by Catholicism.

Durkheim’s contention that religious signs are arbitrary was a necessary part of his argument that the force of these signs comes not from themselves, not even in part, but rather from society alone. This force is a product of the sentiment of “collective effervescence” experienced by the social group on occasions of ritual gatherings.<sup>36</sup> This sentiment is contagiously transmitted to, “spontaneously attach[ed]” to, “added to” or “superimposed upon” the religious symbol.<sup>37</sup> Durkheim’s insistence on the instinctive, fluid, and contagious nature of “primitive” sentiment was consistent throughout his writings,<sup>38</sup> and on other occasions caused him to underestimate the role of analogy in structuring rituals of punishment.<sup>39</sup> In this case, it led him to dismiss the contribution of resemblance or, indeed, any other formal feature to the pragmatic function of ritual signs.

As we have seen, Jonathan Z. Smith goes even further, explicitly attributing the recognition of “difference” to those anthropological others formerly accused of being “primitive.” This would mean that *they*, *unlike us*, best exemplify (and are aware of) the true principles of semiotic anticipated in Durkheim’s study of the “elementary forms” and finally articulated by structuralism. It is *they* who are the true poststructuralists and postmoderns; it is *we* who have reified the distinction between (modern) philosophy and (premodern) myth and, in so doing, denied or effaced the reality and value of difference.

Smith identifies the Reformation polemic against the emptiness of idolatry and ritual, including the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, at the root of later negative appraisals of ritual.<sup>40</sup> Assertions of the real presence of the divinity in the Eucharist gave way to an insistence that this was a mere sign or symbol. A stark and uncrossable line was drawn between ritual signs and their divine referent. We saw earlier that Hume’s criticism of the role of resemblance in the “mummery” of Catholic ritual may have influenced Tylor’s and Frazer’s later interpretations of magic. Smith’s interpretation of Durkheim’s concept of the “arbitrariness” of ritual explicitly compares this concept with Reformation attacks on the “emptiness” of idolatry, and expresses some sympathy for the latter:

I shall want more to argue forcefully against...attempts to “restore” ritual than to quarrel with the older formulations of its emptiness. Though I reject the evaluation, I find a shrewd



recognition of a characteristic of ritual in the Reformation formulations.... What is required is a rectification of the old theory of the emptiness of ritual, not its outright rejection....<sup>41</sup>

Smith's own interpretation of this "emptiness," like Durkheim's, results in a kind of *iconoclasm by neglect* that underestimates the deceptive power of verbal and other images. This position echoes, in its own way, the dethroning of rhetoric and its progressive elimination from authorized discourse, a process observable in post-Reformation culture. A recovery of more of what might be valid in both the Platonic attack on *mimesis* and the Reformation war on idolatry brings us not only backward, but also forward, beyond poststructuralism.

Continuing the genealogy of the history of religions, we find other modes of iconoclasm and even iconophilia that might serve as models to imitate or condemn. The preceding analysis of Tantric mantras as diagrams of creation recalls Mircea Eliade's theory that the behavior of *homo religiosus* models itself on cosmogonic archetypes. He argued that ritual agents imitate the actions of divine predecessors: "[T]he rite always consists in the repetition of an archetypal action performed *in illo tempore* [at the beginning of time].... By its repetition, the act coincides with the archetype, and time is abolished.... The main function of myth is to determine the exemplar models of all ritual, and of all significant human acts."<sup>42</sup> Without a developed semiotic incorporating the study of religious discourse,<sup>43</sup> it was impossible for Eliade to recognize such imitative behavior as only one form of *mimesis*, one manifestation of the rhetoric of religion. His statement that ritual effects a convergence between type and token is only a restatement of the emic view of ritual as an indexical icon.

The forms of imitation Eliade described might be called "inter-ritual repetition," the apparently conservative and routinized copying of prior ritual instances, ultimately referring to some cosmogonic act. By contrast, with some exceptions, this study has focused on "intra-ritual repetition," the use of repetition (including poetry) within the discourse of ritual itself, as a means of motivating that discourse. (This distinction parallels the one made earlier between contextual and sequential iconicity.) However, this may ultimately be a distinction without a difference. Both forms of repetition converge in ritual, which may establish and imitate its own models within the discrete text of a single ritual instance. The important point is that numerous studies, including Eliade's, by considering only inter-ritual repetition, have failed to attend to the



poetic structure of ritual discourse. This failure has facilitated the false conclusion that ritual repetition is fundamentally conservative rather than constructive, a static reiteration of tokens of a pre-given type. For example, one of the earliest and most influential treatments of the issue, Tylor's theory of "survivals," presented ritual in these terms, without recognizing that the large class of examples of sympathetic magic he described could not be accounted for in this way. In such cases, ritual does not or not only imitate a prior type, but also a prospective goal in its immediate context.<sup>44</sup> Between memory and desire, it is but a small step. This demonstrates that the real problem of ritual is not explaining its "survival," but rather how it came to life in the first place, if we can use this phrase for a phenomenon that may be coeval with human culture. The rationale for the existence of ritual is not the merely negative one of continuity, possibly in debased form, of a "primitive" custom, but rather the positive, creative, and constructive function it serves within culture. More recent emphases on the "transmission" of ritual risk perpetrating the same error. Although the transmission of ritual, or its memorability, is an important dimension of the pragmatic function of ritual, it must, as I earlier argued, be considered in relation to other dimensions of that function.

Eliade would not have acknowledged this rhetorical interpretation of religion. His quest was for meaning in a modern world in which the connection with the Sacred seemed to have been permanently severed. The subtext of his extended reiteration of the various hierophanies of *homo religiosus* was the hope that, through the accumulation of such symbolically re-presented experiences, one could vicariously re-encounter the Sacred. In philosophical terms, this was implicitly a method of proof, if not of the existence of the Sacred, then at least of its phenomenological indispensability to the archaic ontology. We know better. The piling-up of similarities does not amount to a proof of the self-identity of Being. The way back is closed to us. Instead, we are compelled to acknowledge that we wander endlessly through a discursive labyrinth of our own construction. In any case, the agreement of all peoples on the existence of the Sacred could never constitute a proof. On the contrary: whenever it appears that there is universal agreement, we should be most suspicious of the claim presented. Majorities are right only in the polling booth and the marketplace. What Eliade managed, unwittingly, to discover was part of a science of illusion, the manner in which the gesture to origins can appear convincing. This is a direct refutation of the method of phenomenology, which brackets the question of truth

and so ignores evidence of the techniques of construction of verisimilitude. Whereas Eliade contended that *homo religiosus* repeated the archetypes because they were believed to be true, we recognize that this repetition itself contributed to the conviction in the truth and efficacy of religious discourse. The archaic ontology is not only philosophy but poetry, an attempt to rhyme Being with itself. Our “return” to Eliade is therefore also a reversal of perspective, one that does not refer man to the Sacred but the Sacred to man, its true author.

This interpretation of Eliade’s theory largely agrees with Jonathan Z. Smith, who points to Eliade’s static and ahistorical depiction of the Sacred, and to his demotion of humanity to the role of a passive spectator to whom the Sacred appears as an involuntary visitation.<sup>45</sup> Against the Eliadean view of mythic thought as fundamentally conservative, Smith shows that it is often instead a creative and constructive response to change. Eliade’s *homo religiosus* stands enthralled by the archetypes and is condemned to repeat these endlessly. In contrast, a rhetorical theory of ritual repetition recognizes, together with Smith, that the Sacred is under the control and manipulation of human agents, whose “personal experience” of the Sacred is also an act of construction mediated by sociocultural systems.

Although Smith’s basic criticism is accurate, he occasionally goes too far and obscures the potential continuing value of some of Eliade’s observations. For example, Smith’s objection that the myth of Io, in which Eliade saw an archetype for ritual conduct, is not primordial but a late instance of Maori syncretism in the context of colonialism,<sup>46</sup> seems not only non-dispositive, but actually quite beside the point. For Smith, the meaning of the Io cult is apparently established by the reconstruction of the historical conditions of its production. But this does not explain the human need for reference to an authoritative “origin.” Smith is fundamentally confuting two separate issues: one, the historical “truth” of the myth; and two, its religious function. The question is not whether a myth or ritual is itself “timeless,” because the answer will always be “No,” and therefore fails to tell us anything new. A myth is not itself original, but it is a *tale* of origins. The important question is why the claim of eternality, the gesture toward temporal transcendence, is so often made: what function is served by this claim? Smith has argued persuasively for a shift of focus in the study of religions away from congruity, equivalence, and continuity to incongruity, difference, and discontinuity.<sup>47</sup> Although this is a necessary and productive move, it must be accompanied by a more nuanced account of the role of rhetorical

constructions of identity and continuity as responses to the fact of difference.

Although Eliade must be reckoned a rare iconophile, another ancestor of the history of religions was a virulent iconophobe. Max Müller pursued linguistic pathologies similar to those diagnosed in this study. He argued that many myths arise when words for natural phenomena are used metaphorically as names for divine beings, and their original reference is then forgotten or obscured.<sup>48</sup> Myths could also be produced by false etymologies, when a mere resemblance between the words for things was taken as evidence for a real connection between the things themselves. Müller, who was a linguist first and modeled his Comparative Mythology on Comparative Philology, recognized that these processes are not limited to myth, but are quite general in language. He called the phenomenon where a single word means several quite different things “radical metaphor” to signal its affinity with, as well as difference from, ordinary or “poetical metaphor.”<sup>49</sup> Such cases inspired a broadened definition of myth:

[W]hen I speak of a mythological period, I do not use *mythological* in the restricted sense in which it is generally used. In the sense in which I use *mythological*, it is applicable to every sphere of thought and every class of words, though, from reasons to be explained hereafter, religious ideas are most liable to mythological expression. Whenever any word, that was at first used metaphorically, is used without a clear conception of the steps that led from its original to its metaphorical meaning, there is danger of mythology; whenever those steps are forgotten and artificial steps put in their places, we have mythology, or, if I may say so, we have diseased language, whether that language refers to religious or secular interests.<sup>50</sup>

As these same linguistic processes continue to influence thought, Müller devoted a lecture to “Modern Mythology.”<sup>51</sup> His definition of this phrase broadened the phenomenon even further:

What I mean by Modern Mythology is a subject so vast and so important, that ...all I can do is to indicate its character, and the wide limits within which its working may be discerned. After the definition which on several occasions I have given of Mythology, I need only repeat here that I include under that name every case in which language assumes an independent power, and reacts on the mind,

instead of being, as it was intended to be, the mere realisation and outward embodiment of the mind.<sup>52</sup>

Müller was both admiring and critical of the linguistic feats of myth and related genres. He applauded poetry, but deplored the abuses of language occasioned by homonymy and “polyonymy,” which are, respectively, when one name stands for several different things, and when one thing has several different names.<sup>53</sup> Müller echoed many of the complaints of those moderns who would produce a universal language that, among other things, eliminates linguistic pathologies and ambiguities. He quoted with approval John Wilkins and his seventeenth century project of a “real character” or universal written language.<sup>54</sup> Such projects, although they concentrate on the denotational value of language forms, are inspired by a dream of a natural language similar to that dream which seduced the Tantras and other “mythic” systems. One difference of these modern projects is their greater awareness of the illusion-producing capacities of language, although Benjamin Lee Whorf, as discussed below, invoked the Hindu theory of “illusion” (*māyā*) as precedent for his own linguistic skepticism.

Another figure Müller cited as precedent for his critique of mythological language was John Locke, who devoted an entire section of his *Essay* to language, including its abuses. Among other passages of this book quoted by Müller is one remembered for its prediction that a future discipline of “semeiotike” is a necessary branch of knowledge:

[T]he third branch may be called *semeiotike*, or *the doctrine of signs*; the most usual whereof being words, it is aptly enough termed also *logike*, logic: the business whereof is to consider the nature of signs, the mind makes use of for the understanding of things, or conveying its knowledge to others. For, since the things the mind contemplates are none of them, besides itself, present to the understanding, it is necessary that something else, as a sign or representation of the thing it considers, should be present to it: and these are *ideas*. And because the scene of ideas that makes one man’s thoughts cannot be laid up anywhere but in the memory, a no very sure repository: therefore to communicate our own thoughts, as well as record them for our own use, signs of our ideas are also necessary: those which men have found most convenient, and therefore generally make use of, are *articulate sounds*. The consideration, then of *ideas* and *words*

as the great instruments of knowledge, makes no despicable part of their contemplation who would take a view of human knowledge in the whole extent of it. And perhaps if they were distinctly weighed, and duly considered, they would afford us another sort of logic and critic, than what we have been hitherto acquainted with.<sup>55</sup>

Apart from the influence of Lévi-Straussian structuralism, there has been very little recognition of the importance of semiotics within the study of religion. Yet, as we have seen, the very conditions Locke describes—the inevitable gaps between things and ideas, ideas and words, and one person and another—define the problem of ritual. We are compelled to acknowledge the manner in which words substitute for things, and fictively bridge the gap between language and reality. This process was already famously captured in Müller’s conclusion: “The mischief begins when language forgets itself, and when we mistake the Word for the Thing, the Quality for the Substance, the *Nomen* for the *Numen*.”<sup>56</sup> Many of Müller’s specific examples may now prove unconvincing, and his theory that myth is a “disease of language” is today generally ignored. However, the phenomenon of linguistic illusion to which he directed our attention seems real enough.

Müller shows the transformation of the critique of idolatry into a critique of verbal idolatry, a development that began already with Francis Bacon, who fulminated against different errors he called “idols,” and especially the “Idols of the Marketplace.”<sup>57</sup> These were instances where words governed reason rather than being governed by it; where words were active agents in the production of meaning rather than empty vessels passively transmitting the substance of meaning. Locke developed this criticism of language much further. He argued that words are abused when we “take them for things,” namely, when we believe that they necessarily reflect reality.<sup>58</sup> He gave as an example Aristotle’s categories of logic. Jeremy Bentham contended similarly that, in Aristotle’s time, people were led by the patterns of grammar to believe that a name or noun substantive implied the existence of the thing it named.<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche as well maintained that the categories of logic merely reflect the categories of Greek grammar and, like Müller, singled out the word “atom” as an example of how when we hear a noun substantive, we may falsely assume that there is a unitary and indivisible thing to which it refers.<sup>60</sup> The criticisms of verbal fictions voiced by Locke, Bentham, and Nietzsche echoed Reformation complaints against idolatry. Müller also echoed this complaint, as further revealed in the following passage where he

criticized the “mythological personification” of abstract terms, a habit he said continued into modern times:

[W]hen the mind, led away by the outward semblance of the word *vinus*, conceived what was intended merely as a collective predicate, as a personal subjective essence, then the mischief was done; an adjective had become a substantive, a predicate had been turned into a subject; and as there could not be any real and natural basis on which this spurious being could rest, it was placed, almost involuntarily, on the same pedestal on which the statues of the so-called divine powers had been erected; it was spoken of as a supernatural or a divine being. *Virtus*, manliness, instead of being possessed by man, was herself spoken of as possessing, as ruling, as inciting man. She became a power, a divine power, and she soon received temples, altars, and sacrifices, like other more ancient gods. Many of those more ancient gods owed their origin to exactly the same intellectual confusion.<sup>61</sup>

Inspiring these polemics was not only the conviction in the deceptive nature of many linguistic and other practices, but also the hope that, by purifying discourse, one might end the abuses of language that make possible religious debates and consequent strife. This hope explicitly inspired some earlier philosophical critiques of language, such as Locke’s, which merely described the project of a universal language,<sup>62</sup> as well as Wilkins’ attempt to effect this project.<sup>63</sup> Müller still reflected such motivations long after the wars of religion had apparently ended.<sup>64</sup>

Of course, exposing these historical influences does not resolve the problem. On the contrary, these critiques of language and ritual appear more forceful in light of our study of Tantric mantras. If we cannot turn back the clock, then perhaps we can choose a different future. One possible future that builds from a recognition of linguistic illusion was suggested by Benjamin Lee Whorf, the famous co-author of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity who was, paradoxically, attracted by the dream of a natural language.<sup>65</sup> Whorf maintained that the patterns of a language, instead of directly reflecting nature or physical reality, determine, at least partially, the manner in which reality is apprehended.<sup>66</sup> The grammatical patterns of a language may become reified, creating linguistic illusions that distort our perception of reality: “This organization [of language] is imposed from outside the narrow circle of the personal consciousness,

making of that consciousness a mere puppet whose linguistic maneuverings are held in unsensed and unbreakable bonds of pattern.”<sup>67</sup>

Whorf's skepticism regarding the ability of language to apprehend truth followed his earlier quest for hidden meanings embodied in language. He had projected the self-confessedly “visionary” prospect of

a science restoring a possible original common language of the human race or... perfecting an ideal natural tongue constructed of the original psychological significance of sounds, perhaps a future common speech into which all our varied languages may be assimilated, or, putting it differently, to whose terms they may all be reduced.<sup>68</sup>

Much later, Whorf spoke of modern science as having reached the frontier of the mythical tower of Babel, and lamented the breakdown of all communication among disciplines, showing that his quest remained, at some level, a natural or universal language.<sup>69</sup>

Whorf's resolution of this apparent contradiction between relativism and universalism, and his solution to the problem of linguistic illusions, was to compare languages. By analyzing the patterns of different languages, we can counteract the distorting influences of the patterns of our particular language on our interpretation of reality.<sup>70</sup> As a model for his future science, Whorf chose Indian “Mantra Yoga.”<sup>71</sup> He identified the unconscious patterns of language that distort individual perception with *māyā* or illusion.<sup>72</sup> Mantra Yoga is the science that, through analysis, attains to awareness of these patterns and, in so doing, escapes from, and even attains the ability to control, the forces they produce.<sup>73</sup>

Like the Tantric science of mantras (*mantrasāstra*), Whorf's projected science oddly resembled rhetoric. This is shown by its claimed pedagogical, propagandizing, and other pragmatic functions;<sup>74</sup> in its identification of the patterns of language with those of music, poetry, and style;<sup>75</sup> and in its going beyond Aristotle's categories of logic:

The Indo-European languages and many others give great prominence to a type of sentence having two parts, each part built around a class of word—substantives and verbs—which those languages treat differently in grammar.... The Greeks, especially Aristotle, built up this contrast and made it a law of



reason. Since then, the contrast has been stated in logic in many different ways: subject and predicate, actor and action, things and relations between things, objects and their attributes, quantities and operations. And, pursuant again to grammar, the notion became ingrained that one of these classes of entities can exist in its own right but that the verb class cannot exist without an entity of the other class, the “thing” class, as a peg to hang on. “Embodiment is necessary,” the watchword of this ideology, is seldom STRONGLY questioned. Yet the whole trend of modern physics, with its emphasis on “the field,” is an implicit questioning of the ideology.<sup>76</sup>

Whorf’s new science echoed earlier philosophical transformations of the religious prohibition against idolatry into a critique of verbal idolatry. Yet he prescribed a deeper engagement with the rhetorical patterns of language, and projected a different result from this engagement: the conversion and expansion of the philosophy of language into something more closely resembling a science of rhetoric.

There remain considerable inconsistencies and oversights in Whorf’s account. For one thing, he does not appear to have recognized that his new science became, for all intents and purposes, a theory of rhetoric. Moreover, despite all the evidence he himself had provided of the impossibility of a natural language, he continued to voice aspirations to such a language.<sup>77</sup> This contradiction is understandable, perhaps even excusable. Whorf’s dilemma was that, on the one hand, he took the diversity of languages seriously, and on the other hand, he lamented the barrier to understanding and communication posed by this diversity. His response to the fact of relativism, and the need for universalism, was an attempt to combine the two in a new science of linguistic relativity, one that could not, it now appears, entirely escape the gravity of the dream of a natural language.

As Whorf suggested, the problem of translation actually consists of different but analytically related problems: the translation between different languages, and the translation between any given language and reality. He sought to solve one problem by means of the other: a comparison of the patterns in different languages may allow us to recalibrate our language toward the real. My goal is more modest. The illusion-producing patterns Whorf identified in language are forms of metaphor (*translatio*), which are already attempts to translate between the “word” and the “world.” The gap between these domains may be



unbridgeable, yet by comparing different attempts to bridge it, we may produce a theory of metaphor or translation, a theory of the "word" rather than the "world." The condition of the impossibility of translation, the solipsism of individual cultures and individual minds, becomes the precondition of a new human science. By collating and cataloging the various dreams of a natural language, we may in the end arrive at a science of illusion.

When we study human beings, the last thing that we are likely to learn is the truth. A better appreciation of this fact would contribute to a resolution of the current stalemate in the human sciences, between those who are still looking for "truth," and those who may have stopped looking for anything. A deeper recognition of the role of deception in human affairs extends the paradoxical promise of a human science that grounds itself as a science of illusion, and by eschewing "truth," achieves the possibility of knowledge. This may be the price of science.

There are at least two ways of taking another culture seriously: by regarding what they say and do as meaningful "for them" (and therefore possibly meaningless for us), or by giving them equal weight in a general science of culture. The latter approach seems preferable to me. However, it does require that we all abandon our illusions. If all cultures are equally true, then by the same token, they are equally false. Of course, this includes us in the "modern" West. All of our received categories, including religion, ritual, and poetry, must be placed at risk. It has become increasingly popular to deny the existence of stable referents for such terms as "religion" and "ritual." Whereas an overly rigid interpretation of these categories prevents change, adaptation, and growth, a surrender of all language to an extreme fluidity of interpretation leads us again to the babble of solipsism and, by denying any purchase on reality to even the most basic categories of our thought, at the same time places them beyond the criticism and revision enabled by a "reality check."

The dangers of comparison have been reckoned incorrectly. Comparison among different cultures may risk introducing an erroneous and misleading analogy, but it remains the only means of counteracting the distorting influence of our received categories. The "cautious" insistence on transparency in the terms of translation, which is impossible to satisfy and so forecloses dialogue, is potentially more dangerous than the "reckless" invocation of broad categories (which are, in any case, already at play) in our attempt to speak to and about the "other." Faced with the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of universalism, we can

only go forward. We may be damned if we do, but we shall certainly be damned if we don't.

# Notes

## Introduction

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Reason in Philosophy,” *Twilight of the Idols*, section 5, in *The Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J.Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 38.
- 2 The definition of this term is difficult. The Tantras are, first and foremost, a class of texts that refer to themselves as such. This is true of both Hindu and other types of Tantras, although this study is confined to the Hindu type. One problem of definition is that, unlike the Vedas, the class of Tantras is not closed. Moreover, the Tantras are closely related to other texts called by other names, including the Āgamas and some Puraṇas. Despite these difficulties, it is possible to define a core of Tantric belief and practice. Some useful attempts to do so are found in Agehananda Bharati, *Tantric Traditions*, revised ed. (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1993), 13–31; Sanjukta Gupta, Dirk Jan Hoens, and Teun Goudriaan, *Hindu Tantrism* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1979), 5–9; David Gordon White, ed., *Tantra in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7ff. My own analysis below demonstrates the consistency of a number of Tantras not only with each other, but also with earlier developments in the Hindu tradition, especially as concerns mantras. In this study, I will use *Tantra* as a general designation for the tradition; *Tantras* for the class of texts; and the adjective *Tantric* as a convenience. I will also treat Tantra largely as a unitary system, rather than raising differences in doctrine or chronology that are extraneous for the purposes at hand.
- 3 *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), s.v. “mantra.”
- 4 On these and related terms, see Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. James Fentress (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 267–78. As described in [chapter five](#), Plato’s *Cratylus* advanced the concept of a language based on nature (*physis*) rather than convention (*nomos*).

- 5 Arthur Avalon, *The Garland of Letters: Studies in the Mantra Sastra* (Madras: Ganesh and Co., 1998), 70–81.
- 6 Ibid., 90–91.
- 7 I have added the phrase “of a book” for clarification, following Olivelle’s note on this passage, which explains that the “leaves” in question are most likely those of a palm leaf manuscript. Cf. *MU* 1: “The syllable ‘oṃ’ is this entire world” (my trans.).
- 8 Trans. Oertel.
- 9 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 43.
- 10 *KDhT* 6.23–24. As explained in [chapter two](#) below, the alphabet that begins and ends with these letters is a special Tantric version known as the “fifty letters” (*pañcāśat lipi*).
- 11 See [chapter four](#) for an explanation of this term.
- 12 Patrick Olivelle, ed. and trans., *The Early Upaniṣads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 24–27; Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 30ff.
- 13 See [chapter five](#) for an expanded discussion of the following points, complete with citations.
- 14 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. 7–8, 88–93.
- 15 See the discussion of this thesis in Gérard Genette, “Poetic Language, Poetics of Language,” in *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 75–102 at 78.
- 16 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 52ff. Cf. Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 106–07.
- 17 See [chapter four](#), particularly the discussion of Saussure’s concept of “relative motivation.”
- 18 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 65.
- 19 I occasionally use the term “magic” in place of “ritual” to denote a particular subset of effective ritual in which a physical result is sought, or where discourse is believed to influence reality. Understood in this way, magic is an extreme case that most clearly reveals the counterfactual and rhetorical function of ritual, which is why I have chosen to use the term. The applicability of this term to Tantric mantras is fully justified in chapters one through three; and its frequently negative connotations are discussed, and partially endorsed, in [chapters four](#) through six.
- 20 See the citations to Silverstein’s work in [chapter four](#).

## Chapter One

- 1 Jan Gonda, "The Indian Mantra," in *Selected Studies* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1975– 91), 4:248–301 at 251; Bharati, 103–04.
- 2 Frits Staal, *Ritual and Mantras: Rules without Meaning* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996), 227, points out the resemblance of Tantric *bījas* to Vedic *stobhas*.
- 3 *TS*, p.21.
- 4 Gonda, "Indian Mantra," 253–54; Staal, 191.
- 5 See citations and discussion in [chapter two](#).
- 6 In the Hindu ritual tradition, the rites that are optional or desired (*kāmya*, from *kāma*, "desire") are contrasted with those that are obligatory (*nitya*) or occasional (*naimittika*) (i.e. occasioned by particular circumstances). See [chapter two](#) on the special connection between the optional rites and the rites for making mantras effective.
- 7 André Padoux, "Contributions a l'étude du mantrasastra 3: Le *Japa*," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient* 76 (1987): 117–64 at 129.
- 8 For an extended treatment of the *!aṣkarmāṇi*, see Teun Goudriaan, *Māyā Divine and Human* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 109, notes Buddhist prescriptions of different numbers of repetitions of the mantra for subjugating different levels of beings.
- 10 The practices of selecting mantras (*mantroddhāra*) and purifying or testing them (*mantraśodhana*) involve using various diagrams (*cakra*, literally "wheels") to test the favorability of the mantra with respect to its user, the time of use, or some other variable. See Padoux, "Contributions a l'étude du mantrasastra 1: La selection des *mantra* (*mantroddhara*)" *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient* 65 (1978): 65–85.
- 11 *TS*, p. 78.
- 12 *TS*, p.79; *KT* 15.9.
- 13 *MMU* 24.97; Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, reprint ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), s.v. "mantra."
- 14 I have drawn from both the Rai and Sri Satguru eds. for the reconstruction of the mantras, and supplemented the translations of these editions, which leave the mantras largely untranslated in keeping with the ritual prescription that they must be repeated without alteration in order to be effective.
- 15 The term *Sahasranāma* literally means "one thousand names." I use it as a general term for all such lists, including *Śatanāmas* (one hundred names), etc.
- 16 The *LSN* occurs in two forms: one in which the names are simply listed one after the other, and the other a series of names (*nāmāvali*) in which each name is given as a mantra of the form "oṃ-(name in dative case)-namaḥ." *SB*, pp.72, 583, argues that the *LSN* is a mantra, and should therefore be preceded and followed by the pronunciation of oṃ. The significance of appending oṃ in this way is addressed in [chapter two](#).

- 17 Stephan Beyer gives the basic mantra and variations in *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 208–09. Cf. *Sādhanaṃālā* 93, quoted in Goudriaan, *Māyā*, 363.
- 18 Alex Wayman, “The Significance of Mantras, From the Veda down to Buddhist Tantric Practice,” in *Buddhist Insight*, ed. George Elder (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), 413–30 at 427–28.
- 19 See the examples of “cheli mili” and “kṣaṇa, kṣiṇi, kṣuṣu” below. With some of these magic words, there may be an “associative relation” (see [chapter four](#)) with actual words in the language that influences their phonetic form. However, they are still primarily magical, onomatopoeic, or evocative, rather than denotative.
- 20 Franz Bernhard, “Zur Entstehung einer Dhāraṇī,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 117 (1967): 148–68.
- 21 HT 1.2.32. Goudriaan, *Maya*, 79, notes the resemblance in form and function between this mantra and the one given by Bernhard.
- 22 *Mahabharata*, quoted in Arthur Avalon, ed., *Principles of Tantra* (Madras: Ganesh and Co., 1952), 72–73 and 72 n.5. Avalon attributed particular meanings to these vocables, perhaps following the commentary.
- 23 MMU 16.123–24.
- 24 MMU 6.87.
- 25 *Agni Purāṇa* 134, quoted in Goudriaan, *Māyā*, 107–08.
- 26 DT 2.
- 27 MMU 10.90–91.
- 28 MMU 10.100–02.
- 29 Trans.Gupta.
- 30 HT 1.2.20.
- 31 MMU 9.34–35.
- 32 See [chapter two](#) for a discussion of this mantra.
- 33 MMU 10.51–53.
- 34 LSN nos. 204–06.
- 35 Cf. Richard A.Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), s.v. “auxesis.”
- 36 *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prājñāpāramitā*, quoted in Wayman, 420; cf. SDT, p. 20, which refers to this as the mantra of Gautama Buddha.
- 37 TS, p.66.
- 38 MMU 12.30–32.
- 39 See Michael Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 198, quoting Thomas Sebeok’s definition that the historiola is “an introductory reference of some sort to a past deed by a beneficent power, to whom the rest of the charm is anchored.”
- 40 MMU 14.116ff.
- 41 MMU 13.54ff.
- 42 See [chapter five](#).
- 43 Another Hindu example of exhaustion is the pattern Saussure noted in some Vedic hymns of declining the name of the deity through all

- of its cases. Jean Starobinski, *Words upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, trans. Olivia Emmet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 22–24.
- 44 Wayman, 429.
- 45 *MMU* 1.178–79.
- 46 *MMU* 1.164.
- 47 *MMU* 14.38–42.
- 48 Trans.Gonda, “Indian Mantra,” 267.
- 49 *MMU* 19.73–75.
- 50 See *GawT* 30.57ff.; *SY* 23.136–41; *NiT* 12.20–28; *BNiT* 6.171 ff.; *TRT* 1.72.
- 51 Carl Gustav Diehl, *Instrument and Purpose: Studies on Rites and Rituals in South India* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1956), 290. I have not used the actual Tamil mantra, but given a Sanskritized illustration of its round-robin form.
- 52 *MMU* 1.191. This produces a shape similar to some spells of the *Greek Magical Papyri*. See [chapter five](#).
- 53 Bharati, 130–31, notes Gopinath Kaviraj’s claim that “long, bīja-repeating mantras” require less repetition. Cf. Goudriaan, *Māyā*, 77: the “most lively element [of a dhāraṇī] is the use of a chain of imperatives, each usually repeated once, which should adduce strength to the spell.”
- 54 Similarly, Johannes Bronkhorst, “Etymology and Magic: Yāska’s *Nirukta*, Plato’s *Cratylus*, and the Riddle of Semantic Etymologies,” *Numen* 48 (2001): 147–203, raises the connections among fictitious etymologies (which he calls “semantic”), the idea of a natural language, and magic, providing examples from Hinduism and other traditions, including Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus*. Like the author of the present study, Bronkhorst is of the opinion that the widespread use of such etymologies demands a “universal” explanation.
- 55 There is no study of Tantric mantras comparable to Jan Gonda, *Stylistic Repetition in the Veda* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche, 1959).
- 56 *N* 1.15–16; *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.2.
- 57 Wayman, 429 n.51, quotes the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*: “This is precisely the meaning of (mantras), that they are meaningless” (āyam eva caiṣ am artho yad uta nirarthata) (my trans.). See also Harvey Alper, ed., *Mantra* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 13; Gonda, “Indian Mantra,” 299–300.
- 58 Bharati, 114, quotes Bṛhaspati, founder of an ancient Indian school of materialism: “the authors of the three Vedas are nothing but impostors, rogues and skrimshanks, when they pass their unintelligible gibberish, their ‘jarbhārī’ and ‘turphari’ for words of wisdom.” These nonsense words appear in *RV* 10.106.
- 59 Cf. *ibid.*: “Most modern Hindus shares this ancient disdain [of materialists such as Bṛhaspati for mantra]; the same holds for Theravada Buddhists where they live in close contact with *mantra*-using Hindu groups like in Ceylon, and to a lesser extent in Burma.

In colloquial Sinhalese, *mantra* means something like ‘hocus-pocus.’” The extent to which this reflects the influence of Western views on ritual is uncertain.

- 60 See [chapter two](#) below for citations.
- 61 Avalon, *Garland of Letters*, 260.
- 62 J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). For the application of these theories to mantras, see the essays by Harvey Alper, Ellison Banks Findly, and Wade Wheelock in Alper, *Mantra*; François Chenet, “De l’efficace psychagogique des *mantras* et des *yantras*” in André Padoux, ed., *Mantras et diagrammes rituels dans l’Hindouisme* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1986), 65–78. Stanley Tambiah is another example, although his discussion of mantra in “The Magical Power of Words” precedes his adoption of Austin’s theory in “Form and Meaning of Magical Acts” and “A Performative Approach to Ritual.” See his *Culture, Thought, and Social Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) and the discussion thereof in [chapter five](#) below. See also Staal, 237–42, for a different criticism of the thesis that mantras are “speech acts.”
- 63 Teun Goudriaan and Sanjukta Gupta, *Hindu Tantric and Śākta Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981), 29, contains one paragraph of stylistic analysis. In the context of a discussion of rites of *nyasa* or “laying down” the syllables of a mantra on the body of a ritual practitioner, Padoux has suggested the desirability of a semiotic analysis of the coordination in Tantra of ritual gestures (*nyāsa*, *mudrā*) with ritual language (*mantra*). “Contributions à l’étude du mantrasastra 2: Le *Nyasa*, l’imposition rituelle des *mantra*” *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême Orient* 67 (1980): 59–102 at 62 n.1. A semiotic analysis of the coordination of the gestural and verbal elements of Tantric ritual would indeed be interesting. However, the present study is confined to the analysis of mantras (which is sufficiently complex), and only incidentally with the non-verbal components of Tantric ritual. Lastly, Douglas Renfrew Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom: The Texts and Traditions of Śrīvidyā Śākta Tantrism in South India* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 82–86, ventures a brief semiotic interpretation of mantra in Śrīvidyā Śākta Tantrism. He argues that mantras are considered within the tradition to be not merely conventional “symbols,” but “indexes”: they indicate, and help to bring about, the real presence of the divinity. Although this basic contention is correct, mantras, as we shall see, constitute indexes of their goals, including the coming-into-being of divinities, by virtue of iconically representing their production or creation. Hence, mantras are a form of what Michael Silverstein has called “indexical icons.” See chapters [four](#) and [five](#) for an explanation of this concept.
- 64 “Bharati, 128–31.



- 65 The past participle “enveloped” (*saṃpuṭita*) is also very common. Padoux translates these terms as “encased, encasing” (*emboîté, emboîtement*). See “Un terme technique du *mantrasastra*: *vidarbha*” *Journal Asiatique* 265 (1977): 345–49 at 346; idem, *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, trans. Jacques Gontier (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 268. Gudrun Bühnemann, “On Purascaraṇa: Kulaṛṇavatantra, Chapter 15,” in Teun Goudriaan, ed., *Ritual and Speculation in Early Tantrism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 61–106 at 74, translates them as “enclosed, enclosing.”
- 66 Bharati, 102–03. Cf. 130, 138, suggesting that repetition in isomorphemic mantras produces “emotional intensification.”
- 67 *MMU*, Sri Satguru ed., xi: “The vibrations set in motion when the mantras are chanted, tickle our nerves and arouse them for suitable action in consonance with the achievement desired.... When the Vedic Mantras are chanted in chorus with due consideration for the proper accents, the thrill that the listeners experience cannot be explained away as something imaginary. It is real and efficacious.” Following, and partially contradicting, this psychophysiological interpretation, the text then proceeds to proclaim the real-world effectiveness of mantras.
- 68 Staal, *Ritual and Mantras*, 253–93.
- 69 I have simplified Staal’s position somewhat for purposes of exposition. He actually identifies several stages in the development of mantras toward language. In the first stage, mantras have phonetic and pragmatic value, but no syntax or semantics. In the second stage, mantras (and other ritual operations) develop a complicated syntactic structure, but still lack semantic (or propositional) value. What Staal means by the difference between mantras without, and mantras with, syntax may be exemplified for the Tantric tradition by “oṃ” and “oṃ hriṃ sriṃ (rest of mantra) sriṃ hriṃ oṃ” respectively. As we shall see below, this distinction is misleading: the palindromes in Tantric mantras repeat, on a larger scale, a pattern already present on the level of the single syllable oṃ, which diagrams the directionality of language and the cosmic process and is from Vedic times appended at the beginning and end of mantras.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 85–89, 180–81.
- 71 Staal’s argument, addressed in [chapter three](#) below, that certain mantras such as oṃ have a “natural” significance as representations of the beginnings of language in children comes closer to the truth, but still misses the point.
- 72 *Ibid.*, 223–36.
- 73 Richard Payne, “The Shingon *Ajikan*: Diagrammatic Analysis of Ritual Syntax,” *Religion* 29 (1999): 215–29.
- 74 I am not aware of such terms, and Staal does not point them out.
- 75 Staal, 237.

- 76 As Staal notes, the standard translation of this term is “established.”

## Chapter Two

- 1 Important exceptions include Padoux, “Contributions 1, 2, and 3”; Gupta, Hoens, and Goudriaan, 90–117; Gudrun Bühnemann, “Selecting and Perfecting Mantras in Hindu Tantrism,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 54 (1991): 292–306; idem, “On Purascaraṇa”; idem, “The Six Rites of Magic,” in White, *Tantra in Practice*, 447–62.
- 2 The status of the rites for making mantras effective as a pragmatics, a theory of what makes language “work,” is reinforced by their special connection with the optional (*kāmya*) rites, or rites performed for a specially desired, often material purpose. *ST* 2.109–110 states that the flaws of mantras are “in the case of optional rites” (*kāmyakarmasu*). *PA* explains: “In the case of optional rites’: by this (phrase he expresses) that in the case of chanting done for the purpose of liberation, because of the absence of these flaws, the ten rites for perfecting (mantras) also need not be performed. This is an example, by which (it is understood) that the instructions for (the rites of) purifying, etc., which are about to be declared, (if) for the purpose of liberation, need not be performed.” *P*, p.128, rejects the reading “in the case of optional rites” (*kāmyakarmasu*) and reads instead “in the case of all rites” (*sarvakarmasu*). *NiT* 12.2, 5 says: “The optional rites should be performed with perfected (*siddha*) mantras, and not otherwise....” Referring specifically to the method of enveloping in the chanting of the *Durgāsaptaśati*, *MMA* 2.2, p. 313, says: “In optional rites, chanting should use (the method of) enveloping; in involuntary rites, chanting should be without enveloping.” *Śabdakalpadruma*, s.v. “saṃpuṭa,” attributes this line to *TS*.
- 3 For a translation and description of a number of these Tantric categories and rites, see Bühnemann, “Selecting and Perfecting Mantras”; idem, “On Purascaraṇa”; Robert A.Yelle, “Explaining Mantras: Rhetoric, the Dream of a Natural Language, and the Efficacy of Ritual” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2002), appendix B.
- 4 *TS*, p.68; *ŚA* 12; *MMA* 1.1, p.16. Cf. *KDhT* 8.24; *KubT* 9.498 (“like a body devoid of breath...”).
- 5 *TS*, p.19. Cf. *YT*, p.xxviii.
- 6 See the definition of this term later in this chapter.
- 7 See the discussion later in this chapter.
- 8 See *GauT* 30.77ff.; *KA* 17.255ff.; *TS*, pp.527–28.
- 9 In *NeT* 18.6ff., there are nine perfecting rites (*saṃskāra*). The commentary explains that each of these is a form of enveloping with

- a different *bīja*. In *MMU* 24.98ff., there are ten perfecting rites, only three of which do not involve enveloping the mantra.
- 10 Variant reading.
  - 11 *KT* 15.16; *PA* on *ST* 7.49; *AT*, p.495; *MMA* 1.1, p.15. Cf. *ST* 7.49; *TS*, p.528; *GauT* 30.43–44.
  - 12 See preceding chapter.
  - 13 The texts are careful to define the method of enveloping, and agree that it consists of adding vocables in forward order at the beginning of the mantra, and in reverse order at the end. The mantra is in this way converted into a sort of palindrome. *AT*, p.159, states: “‘enveloped’ means enveloped in forward and reverse order.” *PA* on *ST* 23.139 says that in enveloping “the mantra (i.e. added *bīja*) is read backwards at the end of the name. This is the traditional view.” The *Nauka* comm. on *MMU* 24.107–08 explains the method of enveloping with individual *bījas*: “Enveloping with a single syllable is precisely pronouncing (it) at beginning and end (of the *sādhya*), because of the impossibility of the reversal of one (syllable).” Although enveloping normally requires inversion of the syllables added at the end, a single syllable cannot be inverted.
  - 14 *KT* 15.57–58; *GT* 29.19–21. Cf. *Śaktisangama Tantra*, quoted in Upendrakumar Das, *Shastramulak Bharatiya Shaktisadhana*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: P.M.Bagchi and Co., 1984–88), 705. *PurA* 2, p.90, also refers to a “flaw of birth” (*jātadoṣa*) removed by the yogic method and *yoniṃudrā*.
  - 15 *TS*, p.77; *MMA* 1.1, p.16; *MYS* 64, p.99; *AT*, pp.168 and 482; *SA* 9. The *TS* and *AT* claim to be quoting from the *KT*. It is possible that the verses prescribing *saṃpuṣa* belong to a different version of this Tantra. Other texts say that “the beginning of japa is birth, and the end death.” *PurA* 6, p.489; *PA* on *ST* 14.91.
  - 16 *GauT* 30.22ff.; cf. *TS*, p.90ff.; *ST* 2.112–23.
  - 17 Cf. *SMT* 5, which recommends enveloping with *oṃ* as a means of removing the impurity associated with the birth of the mantra from the middle of the alphabet.
  - 18 *KDhT* 12.2–6.
  - 19 In this capacity, Tantric texts also refer to the *praṇava* as a pin (*kīlaka*), which recalls the statements at *CU* 2.23.2 and *JUB* 1.10 quoted in the introduction.
  - 20 *AT*, p.480; *ŚA* 10; cf. *ŚK*, p.11. *BĀU* 4.4.22 earlier applied the term *setu* to the divinity: “He (Brahman) is the dike (*setu*) separating these worlds so they would not mingle with each other.”
  - 21 *VaDh* 25.10, trans. Olivelle. Cf. *ADh* 1.13.6–9; *GDh* 1.51–57; *ViDh* 30.32–33. See also *SB*, pp.72ff.
  - 22 Trans. Doniger and Smith.
  - 23 The letter “ṃ” is the *anusvara*, a generic nasal.
  - 24 *AU* 1.7
  - 25 *CU* 2.23.2–3. Cf. *MS* 2.76.
  - 26 *SB* 11, p.586; *Śabdakalpadruma*, s.v. “oṃkāraḥ.”
  - 27 *MS* 2.81.

- 28 The two impurities of birth and death are connected with the cosmic cycle in *SvT* 7.240ff.
- 29 *GauT* 30.55–56.
- 30 *TT* 1.25.
- 31 *ŚT* 14.91. Cf. *Dakṣiṇamūrtisaṃhitā* 7, quoted in Padoux, “Contributions 3,” 145–46.
- 32 *VB* 155–56.
- 33 As Padoux notes, these associations are reversed in some texts. “Contributions 3,” 145; *Vāc*, 140 n. 149.
- 34 *KT* 3.50–51.
- 35 *BĀU* 1.5.23; *KU* 2.5.
- 36 *RT* 22.91–103. Cf. *PT* 4.21; *VT*, p. 12.
- 37 *CU* 1.5.3.
- 38 *Bindu* means literally “drop,” “point,” or “dot,” which is the written expression of the *anusvāra* (“ṁ”). This is contrasted with *nāda* (roar, reverberation), which refers to the manner in which the aspiration or *visarga* (“h”) echoes the vowel preceding it. In the *haṃsa* mantra, these terms correspond to the Śiva and Śakti *bījas* respectively.
- 39 The meaning of “*naham*” is somewhat unclear. However, it probably means: “Being identical with the transcendent deity, I am not identical with the external, existent creation that comes into being and passes away.”
- 40 *SUT* 58.11–12.
- 41 *ŚT* 2.74–75, 80, 84; *TRT* 1.76.
- 42 *MMU* 24.102.
- 43 *ŚT* 23.71ff., following *PA*. This mantra also includes the *bījas* of the semivowels (*ya, ra, la, va*), which represent the creation of cosmic and bodily substance. See the discussion of the script of the elements later in this chapter.
- 44 *CU* 2.23; *JUB* 1.10.
- 45 *ŚT* 2.1–2.
- 46 Aitareya *Araṇyaka* 2.3.6, quoted in Padoux, *Vāc*, 19 (my trans.).
- 47 Avalon, *Garland of Letters*, 259.
- 48 *KDhT* 17.7–8; cf. 3.19, 14.11.
- 49 Padoux, *Vac*, 112, 173, 276, 286–89.
- 50 *ŚT* 23.115; *JT* 1.8–9; *AT* 15.49.
- 51 *KDhT* 6.23–24, quoted previously.
- 52 Excepting those ending with the aspiration or *visarga* (“h”), which represents Śakti, and a few others, e.g., *phaḥ*.
- 53 *ŚT* 2.94 says that a *kūḥa* mantra is one-syllabled and without parts (*ṃsa*). *VT*, p. 19, says that *kūḥa* means the same thing as *bīja*. Bühnemann, “On Purascaraṇa,” 90, quotes the *Vidyārṇava Tantra* as saying that even though a *kūḥa* mantra has many syllables, it is considered to be monosyllabic.
- 54 This is sometimes called the *mahāmāyā bīja*. Das, 708, quotes a method of enveloping with *iṃ* called the “consciousness of the mantra” (*mantracaitanya*). Further on this *bīja* see *VR* 1.7; Brooks, 96.

- 55 *PH*, pp.96–97; *SpK* 3.13, comm.; *ŚS* 2.7, comm.; cf. Alper, 279. Padoux, *Vāc*, 286, notes that Jayaratha, in his commentary on the *Tantrāloka*, refers to Pāṇini's definition of *pratyāhāra*; and *ibid.*, 225, notes that the *Nandikeśvarakāśikā* is a Tantric interpretation of Pāṇini's *Pratyāhārasūtras*.
- 56 *PH*, p.97; *SpK* 3.13 comm. (*sa ṁpu ṭikara* used in place of *pratyahara*); cf. *SS* 7 comm. (*garbhik ! ta*)
- 57 In socio-linguistics, this is referred to as a “pair-part” structure. The structural clarity of palindromes lends itself to such communicative functions. Many languages, including English, formulate questions by inverting the sequence of words in a sentence.
- 58 See note 38 above for definitions of these terms.
- 59 *VT*, p.12.
- 60 *VT*, p.3.
- 61 *MS* 9.33.
- 62 For classifications of types of mantras such as *bīja*, *piṇḍa*, etc., see *TRT* 35.28ff.; *NeT* 16.7.
- 63 See the quotation below from the *LT*.
- 64 *PT* 19.35.
- 65 *JT* 10.41–42; *KubT* 2.91, 3.212; Padoux, *Vāc*, 266; Brooks, 125. On the sexual significance of the letter “e” and the word *evam* in Buddhist and Hindu Tantra, see Gopinath Kaviraj, “The Mystic Significance of ‘Evaṁ,’” in *The Selected Writings of Mm. Gopinath Kaviraj* (Benares, 1990), 109–13.
- 66 *SĀ* 11.
- 67 *MVT* 3.10–11.
- 68 *ŚT* 2.8. Cf. Padoux, *Vāc*, 230.
- 69 *Gopatha Brahmanā*, cited in Gonda, “Indian Mantra,” 292.
- 70 Cf. *BS* 1.1.3: “sastrayonitvat,” which can mean either that Brahman is the source of the *Sastras*, or that these texts are the source of knowledge of Brahman.
- 71 See [chapter three](#).
- 72 Padoux, *Vāc*, 268: “Jayaratha uses indeed, with respect to the ritual [sexual] union of the yogin, the term *saṁputa*, which not only designates the union but also the interlocking or ‘encasement,’ the total coincidence of Śiva and Śakti.”
- 73 Avalon, *Principles of Tantra*, quoted in Padoux, “Contributions 1,” 65. *CU* 5.8– 9 already associates woman with the sacrificial fire as embracing life from conception to death.
- 74 *KT* 15.59; *ŚĀ* 9; *BhŚT* 14.1. Cf. *GT* 29.23. *MNT* 3.31 has this line but deletes the word *yonimudrā*. Scholars have previously noted the conservative nature of this Tantra, which may be a recent text created under the influence of Brahmoism.
- 75 In *KT* 15.59 and *GT* 29.23, versions of this verse occur immediately following the verse describing the two impurities of birth and death. The connection is most explicit in the latter text: “Whoever does not know... the *yonimudrā*, he will have this impurity, and after chanting no effect will be produced.”

- 76 See note 104 below.
- 77 Arthur Avalon, *The Serpent Power* (Madras: Ganesh and Co., 1997), plate xv, has a photo of a yogi in *yonimudrā* posture (*āsana*).
- 78 See descriptions of the flame (or tip) of the mantra (*mantraśikhā*), which use the term “going and coming” (*yātāyātakrameṇa*): *KA* 17.1ff.; *NiT* 14.28ff.; *BNiT* 7.172ff.; *PurA*, pp.527–28. Passages specifically relating yogic methods with forwards and backwards chanting are cited below.
- 79 *BhŚT* 5.14–16; *KubT* 5.262–63.
- 80 *GauT* 30.21. This line appears also in *TS*, p.77 and *BNiT* 4.50–51. Cf. *MMT* 6.147–48; *MT* 7; *PurR* 3.
- 81 *ŚT* 2.63.
- 82 *ŚT* 1.14.
- 83 *TS*, p.64; *NiT* 11.21; *BNiT* 4.30.
- 84 *PĀ* on *ŚT* 2.111; cf. *TS*, p.534. A more elaborate account occurs at *SĀ* 9.
- 85 *KĀ* 17.7–8.
- 86 *VT*, p.34.
- 87 *MT* 11.29; *KubT* 9.484; *BNiT* 7.165; *KĀ* 17.276; *NiT* 14.10ff. For a description of these rituals, see Yelle, Ph.D. diss., appendix B.
- 88 *MT* 11.19, 30–31; *BNiT* 7.168; *KĀ* 17.210–13, 274–75; *NiT* 14.8–9.
- 89 This template would appear to be reflected, in more elaborate fashion, in the Tantric rites of *nyasa* or laying down of syllables on different parts of the body, frequently in the directions of evolution from the head to the feet, and of involution in reverse. The goal of this rite, which is commonly associated with initiation, is to establish a perfected body for the practitioner.
- 90 *BĀU* 1.4.6.
- 91 *P*, p.128; *KubT* 6.276–77; *YT* 1.8.6; *BNiT* 8.138; cf. *ibid.*, 8.166; *NT* 11.8; *HYP* 3.9.
- 92 *P*, p.128.
- 93 Certain texts, e.g., *ŚT* 23.136–41, prescribe different ways of arranging the mantra for each such rite. Although in this chapter I have concentrated on explaining the significance of the rite of enveloping, it should not be forgotten that there is a wider variety of rites employed for making mantras effective.
- 94 *SĀ* 9. Cf. Avalon, *Garland of Letters*, 261.
- 95 The commentary on *PT* 35.13 links the eight letters beginning with “ya” with skin, etc., in the course of a description of *praśṭapratīṇha*. Cf. *VT*, p.4; *MVT* 8.31–32.
- 96 *LT* 21.10ff., trans. Gupta.
- 97 *Samjñā* means a name, especially a technical term.
- 98 *Pada* here probably means “word.”
- 99 Cf. K emaraja’s commentary on *NeT* 16.7.
- 100 *Lipi* means letters or alphabet, but especially writing. I will translate it as “script,” although of course, as in the examples discussed here, it is recited verbally. Although Padoux, *Vāc*, 149 n.174, was uncertain whether to translate the term *bhuta* in this compound as

- “element” or “demon,” and Bühnemann, “On Purascaraṇa,” 86, left *bhūtalipi* untranslated, the text leaves no doubt that the only correct translation is “script (or alphabet) of the elements.”
- 101 *ŚT* 7.1–5.
- 102 See also *TS*, p.78; *KĀ* 17.253ff.
- 103 Cf. *JT* 10.4: “The alphabet (*māṭṛka*) beginning with *ha* and ending with *sa* is the imperishable Śakti.”
- 104 The script of the elements also suggests a different interpretation of the most notorious sexual rites in Tantra, the so-called “five m’s” or “five m-words” (*pañcamakara*), practices beginning with the letter “m” which are forbidden to ordinary Hindus but enjoined in Tantric ritual as a particularly effective form of worship: the consumption of wine (*madya*), meat (*māṃsa*), fish (*matsya*, *mīna*), and parched grain (*mudrā*), and sexual intercourse (*maithuna*). The first four “m’s” are, as it were, aphrodisiacs leading up to the fifth “m” of sexual intercourse. Now, the script of the elements rearranges the groups of consonants so that each begins with its respective nasal: ṁ, ñ, ṇ, n, and m. This progressive enumeration of five nasals in the context of a movement from male to female is remarkably similar to the idea of five “m’s” ending in sexual intercourse. The five “m’s,” like the script of the elements as employed in enveloping, are sometimes described in terms that suggest an involution of the elements ending in space, which is identified with the fifth “m,” sexual intercourse (*maithuna*). Space, as the element out of which everything else arises, and to which everything returns, has the same significance as the cosmic *yonī*. See *MNT* 7.108–10; *NT* 11.17–22, which also (at v. 8) applies to the five “m’s” the line about keeping these secret like the goddess’ own pudenda.
- 105 *KT* 3.50–51, quoted above.
- 106 *ŚT* 1.20–21, 34–36.

### Chapter Three

- 1 See the introduction for references to literature on this topic.
- 2 *BĀU* 1.4.10. Cf. *BĀU* 1.4.1, 5.5.4: “His hidden name (*upaniṣad*) is *aḥam* (‘I’). A man who knows this strikes down (*han-*) and gets rid of (*hā-*) evil.”
- 3 *CU* 6.8.7–6.16.3. Olivelle’s trans. of this line as “And that’s how you are,” aims for a middle ground between the traditional interpretation, which I have followed, and Joel Brereton’s argument, which Olivelle notes, that this line was originally only a refrain meaning something like “So there you are.” For my purposes, it is more important how this line was understood by later Hindu traditions and especially Tantra.
- 4 Olivelle, 25, notes that the general approach of modern scholars to such etymologies has ranged from scorn to simple neglect. Friedrich Max Müller, for example, said “sound etymology has nothing to do

- with sound.” *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 6th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1871), 2:267, 327.
- 5 Bronkhorst has suggested the term “semantic etymologies,” which expresses that the connections in these devices are not historical or truly etymological, but expressive of meaning. This term, however, fails to capture the role of alliteration or punning in contributing to meaning.
  - 6 Padoux, *Vāc*, 1–29.
  - 7 Cf. *CU* 2.13.2.
  - 8 Cf. *CU* 1.6–1.
  - 9 Olivelle, 27.
  - 10 See [chapter six](#) below.
  - 11 Paul Griffiths, “Denaturalizing Discourse: Ābhidharmikas, Propositionalists, and the Comparative Philosophy of Religion,” in *Myth and Philosophy*, ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 57–91, esp. 64: “denaturalized discourse is almost always (perhaps always) linked with an attempt to clean up the messy ambiguity of ordinary language used in ordinary contexts. Polysemy, multivalence, the stuff of poetry and the language of love: these are not values for a user of denaturalized discourse.”
  - 12 Bharati, 116, earlier suggested the onomatopoetic significance of some *bījas*, such as the explosive *phaḥ*.
  - 13 Staal, *Ritual and Mantras*, 274–5. Gonda, “Indian Mantra,” 285, notes that the *Satapatha Brahmana* identifies *hiṃ* with “breath” and the *Sāman* chant.
  - 14 *ŚT* 1.49–51; *PŚT*, cited in Avalon, *Principles of Tantra*, 745.
  - 15 *PĀ*, comm. on *ŚT* 14.91. Cf. Padoux, *Vāc*, 142, which notes that Kṣemarāja’s comm. on *SvT* refers to the *haṃsa* mantra as “the unstruck sound” (*anahatadhvani*) and as “self-uttered” (*svayamuccaradrūpa*).
  - 16 The linguistic ideology of the Tantras encodes particular social values and strategies, and is a mechanism for control not only of the physical world, but also of the social world as well. The cosmogonic account of *RV* 10.90, as mentioned earlier, associated the priestly *Brahmana* caste with the head or mouth of the primeval man and, therefore, with the power of speech, depicted as the source of all creation. The recitation of the Vedas, the original *mantras*, was allowed only to the twice-born, or male members of the upper castes. The Tantras represent a range of attitudes from more to less conservative with respect to the traditional caste system, and many allow the use of mantras by lower castes and by women. However, the Tantras often prohibit the use of the *praṇava* and other important *bījas* by such social groups, and require the substitution of some other vocable. *TS*, p.20; *SK*, p.11. Without the foregoing exposition of the significance of the *praṇava* as a diagram of speech, we might see in these prohibitions only the imposition of a conventional rule providing an arbitrary mark of social distinction,



such as a uniform or insignia of rank. Although this is part of their significance, there is another, more insidious meaning. Because the *praṇava* mimetically represents speech itself, the effect of these prohibitions is to render lower castes and women virtually voiceless.

The hierarchy that placed *Brahmaṇas* on top, at the head of the primeval man from which creative speech proceeded outwards and downwards, also reversed and, in some sense, denied the priority of birth from the lower mouth of the female womb. The ritual system that grew around such ideas was largely an attempt to replace nature, conceived as feminine, with a predominantly masculine culture that represented itself as a higher form and perfection of nature. Hence the need for the *saṃskaras*, the life-cycle rites which were also literally “perfections,” including the “second birth” that delivered upper caste males into their inheritance of the social hierarchy. This is even a form of self-intercourse, in which the male half of the species reasserts the priority claimed in various cosmogonies (e.g., *BĀU* 1.4.3) beginning with a solitary, sometimes explicitly hermaphroditic *Puruṣa*. Tantric initiation (*dīkṣā*) involves the transmission of *bījas* from the mouth of the guru to the ear of the student, who is thereby “inseminated.” In some sects, initiation may have involved a literal transmission of semen. See David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 138, 312–14.

The Tantras engage in varying degrees of accommodation with the preexisting Vedic system, of which they constitute a tropic variation. Yet even in the Tantras’ most apparent inversion of the Vedic system, in the worship and deification of women, it would be mistaken to see simply a proto-feminism and model for female religious liberation. Despite their depiction as goddesses invested with power and authority, real women were most likely in the rituals often the passive objects of male agents whose worship of them incorporated a large measure of sexual gratification. It certainly sounds liberated to hear Tantric practitioners talk about rejecting caste and consorting with prostitutes, washer-women, and other lower-caste women, who are at once socially inferior, more “natural,” and more available (if also forbidden). However, one wonders if such women, or the young maidens who were the perpetual objects of Tantric worship, experienced a reciprocal liberation. The imbalance in social status suggests otherwise.

- 17 Cf. *KDhT* 6.23–24, quoted in the introduction above.
- 18 Johanna Drucker, *The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 56.
- 19 *SB*, p.587, gives examples of this technique. Cf. D.S.Sharma, in *LSN*, trans. Tapasyananda, 46: “Again, the convention of having exactly one thousand names is more a disadvantage than an advantage. For, it is not always easy to devise a thousand names for the God or Goddess you worship without repeating yourself. And repetition of a name with the same meaning is forbidden by the ‘rules of the

- game.'...And if, by mischance, he repeats a name which has already been used, the commentator who comes in his wake has to rack his brains to give it a different meaning or cut it into two different bits and give some forced interpretation to each of the bits."
- 20 VR. MS 2.76–78 presages this type of exegesis by identifying the *praṇava*, the three *vyāhṛtis*, and the *Gāyatrī* as the essence of the triple Veda.
- 21 D.S.Sharma, in *LSN*, trans. Tapasyananda, 28.
- 22 On the four levels, see Padoux, *Vāc*, 166–222. Cf. no. 678: "Who has the form of speech" (*bhāṣānīpā*); no. 845: "The source of the *Śāstras*" (*śāstrasārā*); no. 846: "The source of mantras" (*mantrasārā*); no. 850: "Who has the form of the letters" (*varṇanīpinī*).
- 23 *SB*, p.507.

## Chapter Four

- 1 On this distinction, see Kenneth L.Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd revised ed. (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1967), 37–41.
- 2 On this distinction, see E.Thomas Lawson, "Towards a Cognitive Science of Religion," *Numen* 47 (2000): 338–49 at 342; E.Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 12–31.
- 3 Plato's *Cratylus* used the concept of imitation (*mimesis*) to describe a language based on nature (*physis*). See discussion below.
- 4 Wendy Doniger identifies this episode as one of a cycle of Sanskrit stories "in which the emotion of separation from someone beloved is a direct source of the poetic medium in which that separation is expressed," and in which the "combination of sexual activity, animal language, death, and sorrow results in poetry." "Echoes of the *Mahābhārata*: Why Is a Parrot the Narrator of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*?" in *Purāṇa Perennis*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1993), 31–57 at 54.
- 5 *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.2.39. Cf. *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.2.17; *Dhvanyāloka* 1.5.
- 6 Gérard Genette, *Mimologics*, trans. Thaïs E.Morgan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Eco, *Perfect Language*.
- 7 See Leanne Hinton, Johanna Nichols, and John J.Ohala, eds., *Sound Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh, "The Spell of Speech Sounds," in *Roman Jakobson: Selected Writings*, ed. Stephen Rudy (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1962–88), 8:181–234.
- 8 Genette, *Mimologics*, 13ff., discusses the possible distortions attending the use of the term "etymologies" to describe these. Cf. Olivelle, 35; Bronkhorst.

- 9 *Cratylus* 400b-c, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 For a discussion of the history and modern echoes of this definition, see Nöth, 84ff.
- 12 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (London, 1726), reprint ed. (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1976), Pt. 3, Ch. 5, pp.75–76. Michael Silverstein used this example in his course “Language in Culture” given at the University of Chicago, Winter 1998.
- 13 See esp. Plato, *Republic*, books 3 and 10, for the critique of imitation (*mimesis*) in poetry and other arts. This attack was directed mainly at poetry, not rhetoric, but the distinction may not be as rigid as it seems. The primary forms of imitation in poetry were rhythm and meter (see *Republic* 601; Aristotle, *Poetics*, [chapter 1](#)), but also imitation of persons, which is a kind of imitation Plato attributed also to rhetoric or sophistry (*Sophist* 267–68). The rhetorician Gorgias employed numerous poetic devices including rhyme and alliteration in his rhetoric, and defined poetry as “speech having metre,” a definition that clearly encompassed his brand of rhetoric. Gorgias, *Helen*, trans. George A.Kennedy, in *Readings from Classical Rhetoric*, ed. Patricia Matsen, Philip Rollinson, and Marion Sousa (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 34–36 at 35. However, Plato characterized rhetoric as poetry without music, rhythm, and meter: namely, divested of its mimetic properties (*Gorgias* 502c); and Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, book 3, noted Gorgias’ importation of poetic devices into oratory, but contended that the language of prose was distinct from that of poetry. However we draw the line between poetry and rhetoric (and I use these terms as near-synonyms), in this study I am concerned precisely with those forms of imitation (*mimesis*) that so concerned Plato.
- 14 Plato, *Cratylus* 423ff. For a discussion, see Hermann Koller, *Die Mimesis in der Antike* (Bern: A.Francke, 1954), 48–57.
- 15 Plato, *Republic*, book 10.
- 16 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1354a, trans. W.Rhys Roberts, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).
- 17 Ibid.,book3.
- 18 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1447a-b.
- 19 For an analysis of a different form of this phenomenon, the restriction of rhetoric to only a few tropes or even just one, metaphor, see Genette, “Rhetoric Restrained,” in *Figures*, 103–26.
- 20 See Robert A.Yelle, “The Rebirth of Myth?: Nietzsche’s Eternal Recurrence and its Romantic Antecedents,” *Numen* 47 (2000): 175–202.
- 21 Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. and trans.

- Sander Gilman, Carole Blair, and David Parent (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 246–57 at 250.
- 22 Ibid., 248–49. Cf. *Birth of Tragedy*, section 6, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968), 55–56: “Language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music, because music... symbolizes a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena. Rather, all phenomena, compared with it, are merely symbols: hence *language*, as the organ and symbol of phenomena, can never by any means disclose the innermost heart of music; language, in its attempt to imitate it, can only be in superficial contact with music; while all the eloquence of lyric poetry cannot bring the deepest significance of the latter one step nearer to us.”
  - 23 “On Truth and Lying” considers language as an arbitrary legislation of linguistic conventions, the position advocated by Hermogenes in the *Cratylus*. Socrates’ first words in that dialogue (384c) point out that the name “Hermogenes” is itself an example of a mismatch between language and reality, as it signifies a rich person, and the man himself is poor. “On Truth and Lying,” 248, uses an almost identical example: “The liar uses the valid terms, the words, to make the unreal appear real; for instance, he says, ‘I am rich,’ when ‘poor’ would be the right term. He misuses established conventions by arbitrary substitutions and even reversals of names.”
  - 24 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1457b.
  - 25 Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 96–118.
  - 26 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 6–7.
  - 27 Genette, *Mimologics*, 26–27.
  - 28 Ibid., 13ff.
  - 29 Starobinski, *Words upon Words*.
  - 30 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 131ff.
  - 31 Ibid., 126.
  - 32 Ibid., 83, 121.
  - 33 Ibid., 133.
  - 34 Richard Davis, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshipping Śiva in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 33.
  - 35 See *SA* 9.
  - 36 The difficulty of doing so is further indicated by Victor Turner’s apology for the fictitious etymologies of Ndembu ritual as an important part of the “inside view” or emic “explanation” of ritual. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 10–11. After thus framing the function of such devices in terms of a purely arbitrary value, he then proceeded to allow that they produce “semantic enrichment.” Ibid., 64; cf. idem, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 309 n.16: “fictitious etymology, like

- homonymy, is a device whereby the semantic wealth of a word or symbol is augmented.” This comes close to the Saussurean concept of relative motivation or associative relation, an etic concept that transcends and encompasses emic theories of language and ritual.
- 37 Saussure, 69.
  - 38 Cf. Eco’s argument against the existence of truly iconic signs, noted below.
  - 39 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1447a-b, briefly described how the modes of *mimesis* differ in the different forms of art: for example, music employs rhythm and harmony. Aristotle did not note that a number of these modes are self-referential, consisting, to an even greater degree than in poetry due to the apparent lack of any semantic component, of the recurrence of patterns of sound. This self-referential quality has been captured, to some extent, in Roman Jakobson’s definition of poetry as “The set (*Einstellung*) toward the MESSAGE as such.” “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 350–77 at 356. See the discussion of this definition in [chapter five](#). Note also that Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), described a science of “logology” or “words about words” based on a similar shift of perspective toward the patterns of discourse and away from their ultimate referent. For Burke, this shift was explicitly pragmatic in at least two senses: it was an attempt to account for the rhetorical or symbolic force of discourse; and it confined the locus of our analysis to the observable realm.
  - 40 Genette, *Mimologies*, 15, uses the term “indirect motivation” to distinguish such devices from Saussure’s concept, which is, technically speaking, a property of linguistic codes, and not of texts, and is also, as previously noted, confined largely to grammar and morphology.
  - 41 Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” 358.
  - 42 *Ibid.*, 367–68.
  - 43 Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991), 24 (emphasis original). The translators have, of course, substituted English examples of reduplicated terms for the original Russian.
  - 44 Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala, 1–6.
  - 45 *N* 3.18, trans. Sarup. That the text proceeds to give fictitious etymologies for several animal names only reinforces the point I am trying to make: the difficulty of distinguishing the two devices. Interestingly, the text also mentions an early linguistic skeptic who denied the existence of onomatopoeias.
  - 46 Müller, *Science of Language*, 1:407ff. Cf. Saussure, 69; Otto Jespersen, *Language: Its Nature, Development, and Origin* (New York: Norton, 1964), 413–16.
  - 47 Roman Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” in *Roman Jakobson: Selected Writings*, ed.

- Stephen Rudy (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1962–88), 2:239–59. Saussure referred to these as the “associative” and “syntagmatic” axes; later structuralists have commonly replaced the former term with “paradigmatic.”
- 48 See the following papers by Michael Silverstein: “The Three Faces of ‘Function’: Preliminaries to a Psychology of Language,” in *Social and Functional Approaches to Language and Thought*, ed. Maya Hickmann (Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1987), 17–38; “Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function,” in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Meta-pragmatics*, ed. John A. Lucy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 33– 58; “The Secret Life of Texts,” in *Natural Histories of Discourse*, ed. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 81–105; “The Improvisational Performance of Culture in Realtime Discursive Practice,” in *Creativity in Performance*, ed. R.Keith Sawyer (Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1998), 265–311.
  - 49 Silverstein, who is Jakobson’s student, is further developing his teacher’s own efforts, especially in the later, American phase of his career, to harmonize Saussurean semiology with Peircean semiotics and produce a unified theory of language.
  - 50 Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, vol. 2, *Elements of Logic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 156–73.
  - 51 Peirce did not use the terms “natural” and “conventional,” but developed an elaborate system of classification of signs beyond the basic tripartite division of icon, index, and symbol. This more elaborate system can be ignored for our present purposes.
  - 52 Thomas Sebeok, *The Sign and Its Masters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 112–13, 115; Eco, *Theory of Semiotics*, 191ff.; idem, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 2001), 338ff.
  - 53 A classical assertion of this is Saussure, 68: “Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system.” Immediately prior to these statements, Saussure predicted a relative lack of concern on the part of the future semiology for “completely natural signs, such as pantomime.” The course of this study proves the inaccuracy (not to mention incoherence) of this statement.
  - 54 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1959), 2:461–62. See Thomas Sebeok, *Semiotics in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 12; idem, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics* (Toronto: University of

- Toronto Press, 1994), 107. See the discussion of Locke in [chapter six](#) below.
- 55 The role of resemblance in producing illusion or deception was noted by Peirce: “Each *Icon* partakes of some more or less overt character of its object. They, one and all, partake of the most overt character of all lies and deceptions...their Overtness. Yet they have more to do with the living character of truth than have either Symbols or Indices. The Icon does not stand unequivocally for this or that existing thing, as the Index does. Its Object may be a pure fiction, as to its existence. Much less is its Object necessarily a thing of a sort habitually met with. But there is one assurance that the Icon does afford in the highest degree. Namely, that which is displayed before the mind’s gaze...the Form of the Icon, which is also its object...must be logically possible.” “Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism,” in *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 249–52 at 252.
- 56 See Silverstein and Urban, 1ff.

## Chapter Five

- 1 Cf. Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” 369: “Folklore offers the most clear-cut and stereotyped forms of poetry, particularly suitable for structural scrutiny.”
- 2 Tambiah, *Culture*, 72, 77ff.; cf. 36, 41.
- 3 Ibid., 128, 156–57.
- 4 Sebeok, *Semiotics in the United States*, 117–18.
- 5 See the following paragraph for references.
- 6 Jakobson and Waugh.
- 7 Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 4th revised ed., (London: John Murray, 1903), 1:115ff.; James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 1 vol. abridged ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 12ff.
- 8 Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language,” 258; Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1956), 81. Cf. Genette, *Figures*, 108. Jakobson’s gloss of Frazer has been noted in Tambiah, *Culture*, 35; idem, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 53; Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 29; Nöth, 189.
- 9 Sebeok, *The Sign and Its Masters*, 113; idem, *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 31–32, 76–77, 131–32. Cf. Nöth, 189; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1984), 23: “When he had finished investigating magic

- Frazer had done no more than to name the conditions under which one thing may symbolise another.”
- 10 Similarly, Leach, *Communication*, 31, argues that magic often consists in mistaking a “metaphor,” or apparent connection based on resemblance, for a “metonym,” or real causal connection.
  - 11 For an extension of this analysis to the very similar class of analogical punishments such as the law of talion (“an eye for an eye”), see Robert A. Yelle, “Rhetorics of Law and Ritual: A Semiotic Comparison of the Law of Talion and Sympathetic Magic,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 (2001): 627–47.
  - 12 Thomas Hobbes, quoted in Nöth, 86.
  - 13 Leach, *Communication*, 29, contends that Frazer “assumed the magician’s mistake is to confuse expressive acts with technical acts, whereas the general consensus of most recent anthropologists is that what the magician usually does is to interpret an index as a signal, after the fashion of Pavlov’s dog.”
  - 14 I owe this pun to Michael Silverstein.
  - 15 Nöth, 189, provides an example of a magical formula that is almost identical: “Fever, fever, stay away./Don’t come in my bed today.”
  - 16 See Maurice Bloch, *Ritual, History, and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology* (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 28, stating that formalization operates to increasingly constrain ritual discourse: “in the extreme situation where we are dealing with traditional discourse repeated from a traditional body of knowledge only one speech act B can follow speech act A. In other words with increased formalisation A predicts to an ever greater extent B.” He specifically denies that ritual constitutes an “argument,” because, as he maintains, formalization excludes semantic content and information.
  - 17 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and their Magic* (New York: American Book Company, 1935), 2:218ff.
  - 18 Ibid., 2:214.
  - 19 Ibid., 2:230.
  - 20 Ibid., 2:70; cf. 2:72.
  - 21 Ibid., 2:222.
  - 22 Ibid., 2:219.
  - 23 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), 54–55.
  - 24 Ibid., 55; idem, *Coral Gardens*, 2:232.
  - 25 Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*, 2:238–39.
  - 26 Ibid., 2:72.
  - 27 Malinowski, *Magic*, 53.
  - 28 Ibid., 13–14.
  - 29 Tambiah, *Culture*, 128. Tambiah cites Austin at 77ff.
  - 30 Ibid., 155ff.
  - 31 Ibid., 35.
  - 32 Ibid., 36.
  - 33 Ibid., 38–39; Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*, 1:130.



- 34 Although Tambiah, *Culture*, 17, suggests that his conclusions are new, the pattern of enumerating all the members of a given set, such as the parts of the body, did not entirely escape the notice of Malinowski. See *Coral Gardens*, 2: 220, 227, 245; *Magic*, 55. Cf. Richard Winstedt, *The Malay Magician* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 8 n.1; Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 110, 115, 190–91; Naomi Janowitz, *The Poetics of Ascent: Theories of Language in a Rabbinic Ascent Text* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 3.
- 35 Tambiah, *Culture*, 36,41; cf. 142–43.
- 36 Ibid., 38.
- 37 Thomas Sebeok, “The Structure and Content of Cheremis Charms,” in *Language in Culture and Society*, ed. Dell Hymes (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 356–71 at 359–60. The attempt by Elli Köngäs-Maranda and Pierre Maranda to apply Lévi-Strauss’ canonic formula to this charm has been criticized by Edmund Leach and defended by Solomon Marcus. See Leach, “Plus Royaliste que le Roi,” *Semiotica* 7 (1973): 77–90 at 84–85; Marcus, “The Logical and Semiotic Status of the Canonic Formula of Myth,” *Semiotica* 116 (1997): 115–88 at 161.1 agree with Leach that the attempt to force every spell, myth, or other datum of folklore into this formula does violence to the data. In this particular charm, the presence of a negative implication conduces to the effort to fit the charm to the canonic formula, which includes inversion or negation. Although many charms include such forms, most do not. Such forms are better explained as one type of indexical icon that may be used together with other types. The canonic formula does not, and presumably was not intended to, describe many other types of indexical icons, nor the accumulation of motivation at different levels of the language of spells.
- 38 Sebeok, “Cheremis Charms,” 363–64 (my emphasis).
- 39 HT 1.2.20, trans. Snellgrove, who notes, at 1:52 n.1, that “The whole of this *mantra* is translatable, although of course at the expense of the sonorous effect, whence their power was derived.” Consequently, he leaves the first group of imperatives in the original Sanskrit, and provides a translation in a footnote. Oddly, both the text and the translation of these imperatives in volume 1 leave out the words *masa masa* found in the Sanskrit text in volume 2. These imperatives are most likely derived from the adverb *masmasa* or *ma śmaśa*, an onomatopoeia meaning “zu Staub zerreiben.” See Otto Böhtlingk and Rudolph Roth, *Sanskrit Wörterbuch*, 7 vols., reprint ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000). I have translated them as “crush” to fit the context. Snellgrove’s omission enhances the “sonorous effect” of the formula by deleting the one imperative that doesn’t phonetically resemble the others, suggesting that the rhetoric of the formula may have worked on the translator himself!
- 40 Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 139.

- 41 Ibid., 244; cf. 211.
- 42 Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 315.
- 43 Felix Grendon, "The Anglo-Saxon Charms," *Journal of American Folklore* 22 (1909): 105–237 at 171, 218. I borrow the term from Henry C. Bolton, *The Counting-Out Rhymes of Children: Their Antiquity, Origin, and Wide Distribution*, reissue ed. (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1969). For a Serbian example, see Barbara Kerewsky Halpern and John Miles Foley, "The Power of the Word: Healing Charms as an Oral Genre," *Journal of American Folklore* 91 (1978): 903–24 at 912, 917 and n.28.
- 44 On a more playful note, the expressive, onomatopoetic power of such sequences is indicated by the Giant's call in "Jack and the Beanstalk": "Fee, Fie, Foe, Fum," which, in a kind of Doppler effect, uses the progression of vowels to diagram the approach of the Giant.
- 45 For definitions of these terms, see Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 2:157–60; Nöth, 123, 126; Paul Bouissac, ed., *Encyclopedia of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), s.v. "icon."
- 46 Silverstein and Urban, 1ff.
- 47 I am indebted to the reviewer for Routledge, who suggested this distinction and terminology.
- 48 Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," 356.
- 49 Michael Silverstein, personal communication.
- 50 For an expanded critique of Austin's theory in the context of legal rituals, see Robert A. Yelle, "Poetic Justice: Rhetoric in Hindu Ordeals and Legal Formulas," *Religion* 32 (2002): 259–72.
- 51 Austin, 5.
- 52 Ibid., 14.
- 53 Ibid., 20.
- 54 Grendon, 180–81.
- 55 Jacob Grimm, *Von der Poesie im Recht*, reprint ed. (Darmstadt: Hermann Gentner Verlag, 1957), esp. 17–18, 20. For further examples of such alliterative parallelisms in the language of early law, see F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, reprint ed. (Sindelfingen: Scientia Aalen, 1960), 1:242, 396, 400; Grendon, 180, 222, 229; Esther Cohen, *The Crossroads of Justice: Law and Culture in Late Medieval France* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 64.
- 56 Cf. Shklovsky, 26, complaining about the deletion of repetitions in Russian folklore by sociologically oriented collectors. The "disappearance" of rhetoric, or at least of its obvious forms, from the text of law and related genres, poses another set of questions. A preliminary genealogy of the repression of rhetoric appears in [chapter six](#).
- 57 A classic discussion of such forms is Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.
- 58 Valentina Izmirlieva, "The Christian Art of Listing: Naming God in Slavia Orthodoxa" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1999), applies

- both Jakobson's and Silverstein's theories to show the manner in which poetic devices, including numerical repetitions, contribute to the function of lists and magic as converging genres.
- 59 LSN, trans. Tapasyananda, iv: "Extensive alliteration in the beginning of words is a common feature of all Sahasranāmas."
- 60 E.g., *maha-* (great-) (nos. 209–10, 212–34); *sarva-* (all-) (nos. 204–06).
- 61 E.g., the list of names of *kundalini* at RT 36, and the one hundred names of Kali at MNT 7.12ff.
- 62 D.S.Sharma, in LSN, trans. Tapasyananda, 44–46.
- 63 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 44–45. This reminds one of Borges' chaotic "Chinese encyclopaedia," which Michel Foucault argued "transgresses the boundaries of all imagination, of all possible thought." *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xvi. While acknowledging that the logic of lists is often difficult to divine, especially when the list is an artifact of an alien culture, I would argue that often in lists a poetic motivation and organization substitutes for principles of ordinary logic. Rhetorical devices are employed precisely in order to defeat the arbitrariness of the list and invest it with both meaning and pragmatic function. Borges' list was actually drafted as a satire of Bishop John Wilkins' seventeenth-century project of a "real character" or universal written language. This project was the most ambitious effort by an Englishman actually to construct a universal language by reducing all possible items of reference to an unambiguous system of writing that would accurately communicate ideas among any parties, no matter what languages they spoke. It depended on the systematic classification of entities, in the arrangement of which principles of mnemotechnic were also employed. This list was anything but haphazard and discontinuous, representing instead the foredoomed impulse toward regularity, continuity, and closure. See Eco, *Perfect Language*, 207–208, 253; John Wilkins, *An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language* (London, 1668), reprint ed. (Menston, England: The Scolar Press Limited, 1968). See also the discussion of Wilkins in [chapter six](#) below.
- 64 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 23.
- 65 Ibid., 45, 48.
- 66 Ibid., 4ff., arguing against Jensen.
- 67 Francis Zimmermann, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 133, 135.
- 68 Ibid., 155.
- 69 SB, pp.63–64.
- 70 A further illustration of these points is the lists of Buddhist *Ābhidhamma* in the Pali Canon as described in Rupert Gethin, "The *Mātikās*: Memorization, Mindfulness, and the List," in *In the Mirror of Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Janet Gyatso (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 149–72. Much early Buddhist philosophy consisted of an exhaustive

enumeration of various cosmological or psychological constituents, frequently in a numerically structured pattern grouped by twos, threes, etc. Such patterns contributed to the memorability and oral performance of lists of thousands of items, as Paul Griffiths, in Reynolds and Tracy, 76ff., also notes. According to Gethin, however, the function of these lists was not merely mnemonic. Their recitation recreated the philosophical coherence of the system, and even led to the experience of the Buddha's teaching (*dhamma*), as described at 155, 166:

Using the lists is not merely an aid to learning the Dhamma by rote, as it were; on the contrary, the lists help one to learn the Dhamma with a view to its inner structure and dynamic. For the lists essentially are not just lists to be listed one after another, but fit together to form a pattern. Thus to learn and know the lists is to learn and know how they fit together, how they interconnect to form the structure and pattern of the Dhamma that is "beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, beautiful in the end."...In other words, it is not a book to be read; it is to be performed.... The lengthy repetitions themselves contribute to the majesty of the performance; the sheer vastness of the full recitation itself is awe inspiring.

Gethin, 161, argues for the creative function of the Ābhidhamma lists, which are called *mātikās* (Sanskrit: *mātṛkā*), literally "matrices, mothers": "*mātikās* contain the building blocks for constructing an exposition or text. But they are magical building blocks; when combined and used in various ways they can create a palace that is much larger in extent than the sum of its parts." In Hindu Tantra, of course, *mātṛkā* is the most common name for the alphabet as the mother of both language and the cosmos. Gethin downplays the relevance of this definition of *mātṛkā* for an understanding of the Buddhist use of the term.

- 71 Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- 72 Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, trans. Rodney Needham (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); cf. Smith, *Classifying the Universe*, 4–5.
- 73 Rodney Needham, Introduction, in Durkheim and Mauss., esp. xv.
- 74 Francis M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 40ff., esp. 61–63.
- 75 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 224 n.48.

- 76 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 27–33.
- 77 Bruce Lincoln, “The Tyranny of Taxonomies,” in *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 131–41 at 140.
- 78 Ibid., 137–41.
- 79 Ibid., 136–37.
- 80 Ibid., 136.
- 81 See the following medieval Scholastic argument against Galileo’s astronomical discoveries, quoted in Reynolds and Tracy, *Myth and Philosophy*, 37–55 at 49:

There are seven windows given to animals in the domicile of the head What are these parts of the microcosmos? Two nostrils, two eyes, two ears and a mouth. So in the heavens as in a macrocosmos, there are two favorable stars, two unpropitious, two lumīnaries, and Mercury undecided and indifferent. From this and from many other similarities in nature, such as the seven metals etc., which it were tedious to enumerate, we gather that the number of planets is necessarily seven.

Cf. Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Fulton Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 50 (book one, aphorism XLV):

The human understanding is of its own nature prone to suppose the existence of more order and regularity in the world than it finds. And though there be many things in nature which are singular and unmatched, yet it devises for them parallels and conjugates and relatives which do not exist.... Hence...the element of fire with its orb is brought in, to make up the square with the other three which the sense perceives.

- 82 Bloch, 19.
- 83 This is the text that Lincoln contends may refer to the social order by omission.
- 84 Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).
- 85 See the discussion of Whorf in [chapter six](#) below.
- 86 Victor Turner, “Colour Classification in Ndembu Ritual: A Problem in Primitive Classification,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966), 47–84 at 80–83.
- 87 See [chapter six](#) below.

- 88 Henry Sigerist, *A History of Medicine*, vol. 2, *Early Greek, Hindu, and Persian Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 319–20. Originally the humors were blood, phlegm, (yellow) bile, and water. Black bile was first found as a cardinal humor in *On the Nature of Man*. Sigerist asked: “What is black bile, that humor which, for over two thousand years, was to play an extremely important part in people’s thinking, and not only in medicine? We know of no such substance today.” Sigerist proceeded to suggest that “black bile” may have described the excretions of those suffering from bleeding gastric ulcers or blackwater fever, a form of malaria. But these suggestions were tentative.
- 89 Marshall Sahlins, “Colors and Cultures,” in *Symbolic Anthropology*, ed. Janet Dolgin, David Kemnitzer, and David Schneider (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 165–80 at 178.
- 90 *Ibid.*, 172.
- 91 A similar criticism applies to Bloch, 6ff., who argues that universals such as those identified by Berlin and Kay are found in “non-ritual practical communication,” whereas concepts conforming to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity are found in ritual. This distinction associates universals with nature as opposed to the culture of ritual. The preceding analysis of color taxonomies, however, calls into question the naturalness of such universals precisely by interrogating their function in ritual.
- 92 Tambiah, *Magic*, 54ff.; Douglas, 67ff., quoting Godfrey Lienhardt.
- 93 Smith, *To Take Place*, 109.
- 94 Smith, *Map Is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 309; cf. 299ff.
- 95 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 63, 65; cf. 100–01.
- 96 This point was already made by Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*, 2:239: “Magic is not a belief in the omnipotence of thought but rather the clear recognition of the limitations of thought, nay, of its impotence.”
- 97 Tambiah, *Culture*, 36.
- 98 *Ibid.*, 137ff. This should be contrasted with Bloch’s contention, previously noted, that the conventional and stereotyped patterns of ritual exclude the variations or differences that alone constitute the content or information of an argument.
- 99 Edmund Leach, “Ritualization in Man,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, series B, no. 772, 251 (1966): 403–08 at 404.
- 100 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 54.
- 101 Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).
- 102 Halpern and Foley; David Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-Out Rhymes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 103 See, in addition, the applications of linguistic and cognitive theories to the analysis of religious ideas and rituals, and especially their function of transmission, in Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of*

*Religious Ideas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); idem, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Lawson and McCauley, *Rethinking Religion*.

104 *De memoria et reminiscencia* 451b.

105 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 20ff.

106 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P.H.Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 107. For Hume's view on the function of such principles in ritual, see [chapter six](#) below.

107 Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

## Chapter Six

- 1 Müller, "Modern Mythology," in *Science of Language*, 2:572–633 at 572–73.
- 2 This contrasts with both Aristotle's *Metaphysic* and Plato's contention, in the *Gorgias*, that there can be no *techne* or systematic knowledge of rhetoric. Concerning the former, whereas the focus of much philosophy has been a quest to capture in theoretical terms the ultimate principles of nature (*physis*), the present study has already suggested a reorientation away from this version of the quest for a natural language and toward a focus on the rhetorical properties of discourse. The relation to Plato's contention is more subtle. A *techne* is supposed to be a form of prescriptive knowledge, somewhat similar to what we mean by the word "technique." I do not claim to have provided this. The preceding account of rhetoric is only descriptive, not prescriptive or predictive, apart from the few obvious techniques that Madison Avenue already employs. More elaborate forms of rhetoric, such as Tantric mantras, often invoke a whole cultural system or even esoteric knowledge, and do not transfer from one culture to another. Yet even in these cases, the semiotic forms out of which different cultures construct their own particular rhetorics are remarkably similar.
- 3 Cf. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), esp. 6, 112–36, 241–50.
- 4 See the discussion below of Tylor in connection with Eliade.
- 5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings*, 439–607.
- 6 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965); idem, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); idem, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

- 7 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); idem, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207–71.
- 8 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
- 9 For the significance of this term, see Peter Goodrich, *Oedipus Lex: Psychoanalysis, History, Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 49ff.
- 10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, in Basic Writings*, 3–144.
- 11 Koller, 37.
- 12 See Jacqueline de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); Gorgias, *Helen*.
- 13 *Republic* 598d, 601b, 602d; cf. 607c, 608a. Trans. Paul Shorey.
- 14 Romilly, 31.
- 15 Hume, 99–100.
- 16 Ibid., 107. The reader would be correct in identifying this as a semiotics *avant la lettre*. Hume, Locke, and the tradition of British empiricism in general have been identified as important predecessors of modern semiotics. Sebeok, *Semiotics in the United States*, 116–17.
- 17 Hume, 107.
- 18 Ibid., 106.
- 19 Ibid., 110.
- 20 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 21; cf. *Map*, 273.
- 21 Tylor, 116.
- 22 Frazer, 13.
- 23 Tylor, 134.
- 24 Smith, *Map*, 252–53.
- 25 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 23.
- 26 Ibid., 19ff.
- 27 Smith, *Map*, 240: "The process of comparison is a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence. Whether revealed in the logical grouping of classes, in poetic similes, in mimesis, or other like activities, comparison, the bringing together of two or more objects for the purpose of noting either similarity or dissimilarity, is the omnipresent substructure of human thought."
- 28 Ibid., 253, quoting Franz Steiner.
- 29 Ibid., 239.
- 30 Jakobson and Waugh, 200; Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921), 76–78.
- 31 For *mantra-tantra*, see discussion in [chapter one](#) above. Thomas Ady, *A Candle in the Dark* (London, 1655), mentioned a magician named Hocus Pocus who was called this because he used the formula "Hocus pocus, tontus talontus, vade celeriter jubeo." John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury, possibly as an attack on



- Catholic ritual, later derived this term from the Latin mass. Such pejorative rephrasings may be a form of what Tambiah, *Culture*, 161ff., terms “ritual involution.”
- 32 See preceding note.
  - 33 Smith, *ToTake Place*, 106.
  - 34 Richard Parmentier, “The Prāgmatic Semiotics of Cultures,” *Semiotica* 116 (1997): 1–114 at 7.
  - 35 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 144, 148–49.
  - 36 Ibid., 405; cf. 246ff.
  - 37 Ibid., 251, 261.
  - 38 Ibid., 83; Durkheim and Mauss, 87.
  - 39 Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1947), 85–86, 89–90. For a discussion, see Yelle, “Rhetorics of Law and Ritual,” 628ff.
  - 40 Smith, *To Take Place*, 99ff.
  - 41 Ibid., 103.
  - 42 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 32, 410.
  - 43 Eliade did consider some charms or incantations as forms of this archetypal repetition, e.g., at *ibid.* 296. However, even in these cases he did not examine the relation between invocations of mythic archetypes, and devices such as rhyme.
  - 44 Eliade occasionally emphasized the pragmatic function of ritual imitation as a form of sympathetic magic. See *The Myth of the Eternal Return: or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 24.
  - 45 Smith, *Map*, 88–103.
  - 46 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 66–89.
  - 47 In addition to the references cited in [chapter five](#) above, see Smith, *Map*, 289–309.
  - 48 Friedrich Max Müller, *Comparative Mythology*, reprint ed. (New York: Arno Press, 1977).
  - 49 Müller, *Science of Language*, 2:393ff.
  - 50 Ibid., 2:392–93.
  - 51 Ibid., 2:572–633.
  - 52 Ibid., 2:572; cf. 2:574: “It has been frequently said that most controversies are about words. This is true; but it implies much more than it seems to imply. Verbal differences are not what they are sometimes supposed to be—merely formal, outward, slight, accidental differences, that might be removed by a simple explanation, or by a reference to ‘Johnson’s Dictionary.’ They are differences arising from the more or less perfect, from the more or less full and correct conception attached to words: it is the mind that is at fault, not the tongue merely.”
  - 53 Ibid., 2:390–91.
  - 54 Ibid., 2:50–51, 622–23.

- 55 Locke, 2:461–62. Müller, *Science of Language*, 2:369–70, quotes all but the first sentence of this paragraph, the one that includes the word “semeiotike.”
- 56 Müller, *Science of Language*, 2:633.
- 57 Bacon, *The New Organon*, book 1, aphorisms LIX–LX, cited in Müller, *Science of Language*, 2:622.
- 58 Locke, 2:132.
- 59 Charles K.Ogden, *Bentham’s Theory of Fictions* (Paterson, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, 1959), esp. xlii–xliii, lxvii–lxviii. Bentham similarly criticized the veneration of the Common Law and the antipathy toward its reform, and queried “Whether it has been a kind of *personification* that has been the cause of this, as if the Law were a living creature....” *A Fragment on Government*, reprint ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 10.
- 60 See the passage from Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, quoted at the beginning of the introduction above; Müller, *Science of Language*, 2:632.
- 61 Müller, *Science of Language*, 2:613–14.
- 62 Locke, 2:130–31, 151, 162–63. Cf. Bacon’s earlier comments, quoted in Anderson’s introduction to *The New Organon*, xv. Eco, *Perfect Language*, 312ff., discusses the importance of such ideas for our understanding of later philosophical movements, including especially the analytical tradition.
- 63 See Müller, *Science of Language*, 2:622–23, quoting Wilkins.
- 64 Ibid., 2:573: “Words without definite meaning are at the bottom of nearly all our philosophical and religious controversies, and even the so-called exact sciences have frequently been led astray by the same Siren voice.”
- 65 Eco, *Perfect Language*, 113.
- 66 Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1956), 214, 221.
- 67 Ibid., 257. Cf. 135, 261–62.
- 68 Ibid., 12. Also quoted in Eco, *Perfect Language*, 113.
- 69 Whorf, 246.
- 70 Ibid., 244; cf. 263.
- 71 Ibid., 249, 263.
- 72 Ibid., 262–63.
- 73 Ibid., 249–50.
- 74 Ibid., 82, 229.
- 75 Ibid., 266: “Language has further significance in other psychological factors on a different level from modern linguistic approach but of importance in music, poetry, literary style, and Eastern mantram.” Cf. 261.
- 76 Ibid., 241. Cf. 207ff., 238: “[T]he mechanistic way of thinking is perhaps just a type of syntax natural to Mr. Everyman’s daily use of the western Indo-European languages, rigidified and intensified by Aristotle and the latter’s medieval and modern followers.”
- 77 Ibid., 249–50.



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