

THE HISTORY OF MAGIC

Including a clear and precise exposition of its procedure, its rites and its mysteries

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CHAPTER VI

MATHEMATICAL MAGIC OF PYTHAGORAS

HE who initiated Numa, and of whose proficiency in Magic something has been said already, was a personage known as Tarchon, himself the disciple of a Chaldean named Tages. Science had then its apostles who went to and fro in the world, making priests and kings therein. Not infrequently persecution itself was overruled to fulfil the designs of Providence, and so it came about toward the seventy-second Olympiad, or four generations after the reign of Numa. Pythagoras of Samos sought a refuge in Italy from the tyranny of Polycrates. The great promoter of the philosophy of numbers had visited all the sanctuaries of the world and had even been in Judæa, where he suffered circumcision¹ as the price of his admission into the mysteries of the Kabalah, communicated to him, though not without a certain reserve, by the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel. Subsequently, but again not without difficulty, he obtained Egyptian initiation, being recommended by the King Amasis. The capacities of his own genius supplemented the imperfect revelations of the hierophants, so that he became himself a master and one who expounded the mysteries.

Pythagoras defined God as a living and absolute

¹ I do not know how this fable originated and the question is not worth the pains which would be necessary to elucidate it. It is narrated by Eliphas Lévi as matter of historical fact; but there is no question that M. Edouard Schuré, who owes so much to the occultist who preceded him, would have been glad to include it in his romantic biography of Pythagoras, if it had not been too mythical even for his purpose. He is content as it is to suggest that the sage of Samos had studied Jewish monotheism during a stay of twelve years at Babylon.

1028
LEVI, E.
1913

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truth clothed in light; he defined the Word as number manifested by form; and he derived all things from the *Tetractys*—that is to say, the tetrad. He said also that God is supreme music, the nature of which is harmony. Religion was, according to him, the highest expression of justice; medicine was the most perfect practice of science; the beautiful was harmony; force, reason; felicity, perfection; while truth in application consisted in distrusting the weakness and perversity of men.

When he made his dwelling at Crotona, the magistrates of that city, seeing that he exercised so great an influence over minds and hearts, were at first in some anxiety concerning him; but ultimately they sought his advice. Pythagoras counselled them to cultivate the muses and maintain the most perfect accord among themselves, because feuds between masters fomented rebellion among servants. Thereafter he imparted to them his grand religious, political and social precept: There is no evil which is not to be preferred before anarchy—an axiom of universal application and almost infinite depth, though one which even our own age is not as yet sufficiently enlightened to understand.

Outside the traditions of his life, the remains of Pythagoras are his *Golden Verses* and his *Symbols*, of which the former have passed into commonplaces of popular morality, so great has been their success through the ages. They have been rendered as follows:¹—

“First worship the immortal gods, as they are established and ordained by the Law. Reverence the oath and next the heroes, full of goodness and light . . . Honour likewise thy parents, and those most nearly

¹ The authorship of the *Golden Verses* is of course a debated point; and it is an old suggestion that their real writer was Lysis, the preceptor of Epaminondas and an exponent of Pythagorean philosophy about 388 B.C., his master being referred to the beginning of the sixth century B.C. I should add that Eliphas Lévi has presented the Verses in a metrical form of his own, which reflects the originals at a very far distance. I have not followed this rendering but have had recourse to that of Mr. G. R. S. Mead.

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related to thee. Of all the rest of mankind, make him thy friend who distinguishes himself by his virtue. Always give ear to his mild exhortations, and take example from his virtuous and useful actions. Avoid as much as possible hating thy friend for a slight fault. Understand that power is a near neighbour to necessity. . . . Overcome and vanquish these passions—gluttony, sloth, sensuality, and anger. Do nothing evil, neither in the presence of others nor privately, and above all things respect thyself. In the next place, observe justice in thy actions and in thy words. . . . The goods of fortune are uncertain; as they may be acquired, so may they likewise be lost. Always make this reflection, that it is ordained by destiny that all men shall die. . . . Support with patience thy lot, be it what it may, and never repine at it; but endeavour what thou canst to remedy it. Consider that fate does not send the greatest portion of these misfortunes to good men. . . . Let no man by his words, or by his deeds seduce thee; nor entice thee to say or to do what is not profitable for thyself. Consult and deliberate before thou act, that thou mayst not commit foolish actions. For it is the part of a miserable man to speak and to act without reflection. But do that which will not afflict thee afterwards, nor oblige thee to repentance. Never do anything which thou dost not understand; but learn all that thou oughtest to know, and by that means thou wilt lead a very pleasant life. In no wise neglect the health of thy body; but give it drink and meat in due measure, and also the exercise of which it has need. . . . Accustom thyself to a way of living that is neat and decent without luxury. . . . Do only the things which cannot hurt thee, and deliberate before thou dost them. Never suffer sleep to close thy eyelids, after thy going to bed, till thou hast examined by thy reason all thy actions of the day. Wherein have I done amiss? What have I done? What have I omitted that I ought to have done?"

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Up to this point the Golden Verses seem to be only the instructions of a schoolmaster. They bear however a very different construction. They are the preliminary laws of magical initiation, which constitute the first part of the Great Work, that is to say, the creation of the perfect adept. This is proved by the following verses:

"I swear by him who has transmitted into our souls the Sacred Quaternion, the source of nature, whose cause is eternal. Never begin to set thy hand to any work, till thou hast prayed the gods to accomplish what thou art going to begin. When thou hast made this habit familiar to thee, thou wilt know the constitution of the Immortal Gods and of men. Even how far the different beings extend, and what contains and binds them together . . ., and nothing in this world shall be hid from thee. . . . O Jupiter, our Father! if thou wouldst deliver men from all the evils that oppress them, shew them of what daimon they make use. But take courage; the race of men is divine. . . . When, having divested thyself of thy mortal body, thou arrivest at the most pure Æther, thou shalt be a god, immortal, incorruptible, and death shall have no more dominion over thee."

Pythagoras said otherwise: "As there are three divine concepts and three intelligible realms, so is there a triple word, because hierarchic order is ever manifested by the triad. There are (a) simple speech, (b) hieroglyphical speech and (c) symbolical speech. In other terms, there is the word which expresses, there is the concealing word and, finally, there is the word that signifies: all hieratic intelligence is in the perfect science of these three degrees." After this manner he enshrined doctrine in symbols, but eschewing personifications and images which, in his opinion, begot idolatry sooner or later. He has been even charged with detestation of poets, but it was the makers of bad verses to whom he forbade the art: "Thou who hast no harp, seek not to sing in measures," he says in his symbols. A man so great as

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he could never disregard the exact correspondence between sublime thoughts and beautiful figurative expressions; indeed his own symbols are full of poetry: "Do not scatter the flowers of which crowns are made." In such terms he exhorts his disciples never to diminish glory and never to flout that which it seems good for the world to honour.

Pythagoras was chaste, but far from commanding celibacy to his disciples he married on his own part and had children. A beautiful saying of his wife has remained in memory: she had been asked whether purification was not requisite in a woman after intercourse with a man, and in such case after what lapse of time she might regard herself as sufficiently purified to approach holy things. She replied: "Immediately, if it be with her husband; but if it be with another, never."

The same severity of principles, the same purity of manners, qualified in the school of Pythagoras for initiation into the mysteries of Nature and so was attained that empire over self by which the elementary powers could be governed. Pythagoras possessed the faculty which by us is termed second sight and was known then as divination. Being with his disciples one day on the seashore, a vessel appeared on the horizon. "Master," said one of the companions, "would it mean wealth if they gave me the cargo carried by that ship?" "To you it would be more than useless," Pythagoras answered. "In such case I would keep it for my heirs." "Would you wish to bequeath them two corpses?" The vessel came into port and proved to be bearing the body of a man who desired to be buried in his own country.

It is related furthermore that beasts were obedient to Pythagoras. Once in the middle of the Olympic Games, he signalled to an eagle winging its way through heaven; the bird descended, wheeling circle-wise, and again took rapid flight at the master's token of dismissal.

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There was also a great bear, ravaging in Apulia; Pythagoras brought it to his feet and told it to leave the country. It disappeared accordingly and when asked to what knowledge he owed such a marvellous power, he answered: "To the science of light." Animated beings are, in fact, incarnations of light. Out of the darkness of ugliness forms emerge and move progressively towards the splendours of beauty; instincts are in correspondence with forms; and man who is the synthesis of that light whereof animals may be termed the analysis, is created to command them. It has come about, however, that in place of ruling as their master, he has become their persecutor and destroyer, so that they fear and have rebelled against him. In the presence of an exceptional will which is at once benevolent and directing they are completely magnetised, and a host of modern phenomena both can and should enable us to understand the possibility of miracles like those of Pythagoras.

Physiognomists have observed that the majority of men have a certain facial resemblance to one or another animal. It may be a matter of imagination only, produced by the impression to which various physiognomies give rise, and revealing some prominent personal characteristics. A morose man is thus reminiscent of a bear, a hypocrite has the look of a cat, and so of the rest. These kinds of judgments are magnified in the imagination and exaggerated still further in dreams, when people who have affected us disagreeably during the waking state transform into animals and cause us to experience all the agonies of nightmare. Now, animals—as much as ourselves and more even than we—are under the rule of imagination, while they are devoid of that judgment by which we can check its errors. Hence they are affected towards us according to the sympathies or antipathies which are excited by our own magnetism. They are, moreover, unconscious of that which underlies the human

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form and they regard us only as other animals by whom they are dominated, the dog taking his master for a dog more perfect than himself. The secret of dominion over animals lies in the management of this instinct. We have seen a famous tamer of wild beasts fascinate his lions by exhibiting a terrible countenance and acting himself as if he were a lion enraged. Here is a literal application of the popular proverb which tells us to howl with the wolves and bleat with the sheep. It must also be realised that every animal form manifests a particular instinct, aptitude or vice. If we suffer the character of the beast to predominate within us, we shall tend to assume its external guise in an ever-increasing degree and shall even come to impress its perfect image on the Astral Light; more even than this, when we fall into dreams or ecstasy, we shall see ourselves as ecstasies and somnambulists would see us and as we must appear undoubtedly in the eyes of animals. Let it happen in such cases that reason be extinguished, that persistent dreams change into madness, and we shall be turned into beasts like Nebuchadnezzar. This explains those stories of were-wolves, some of which have been legally established. The facts were beyond dispute, but the witnesses were not less hallucinated than the were-wolves themselves.¹

¹ Among the appendices to the second part of the *Zohar* there is a short section on physiognomy, and it embodies some very curious materials. We learn, for example, that if a man who has certain specified characteristics of colour and feature should turn to God, a white blemish will form on the pupil of his right eye. He who has three semi-circular wrinkles on his forehead and whose eyes are shining will behold the downfall of his enemies. A man who has committed an adultery and has not repented is recognisable by a growth beneath the navel, and thereon will be found two hairs. Should he do penance, the hairs will disappear but the swelling will remain. A man who has a beauty-spot on his ear will be a great master of the Law and will die young. Two long hairs between the shoulders indicate a person who is given to swearing incessantly in an objectless manner. It will be seen that these details belong to a neglected part of the science, and I am a little at a loss to know how Éliphas Lévi would have pressed them into his service, if he had been fully acquainted with the work which he quotes so often.

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Cases of coincidence and correspondence in the dream-state are neither rare nor extraordinary. Persons in the state of magnetic ecstasy can see and talk to one another from opposite ends of the earth. We ourselves may meet someone for the first time and he or she will seem to be an old acquaintance because we have encountered frequently in dream. Life is full of these curious occurrences and as regards the transformation of human beings into animals, the evidences are on every side. How many aged courtesans and gluttonous females, reduced almost to idiocy after threading all sewers of existence, are nothing but old she-cats egregiously enamoured of their tom.

Pythagoras believed above all things in the soul's immortality and in the perpetuity of life. The endless succession of summer and winter, day and night, sleeping and waking, illustrated amply for him the phenomenon of death. For him also the particular immortality of human souls consisted in persistence of memory. He is said to have been conscious of his previous incarnations and if the report is true, it was something suggested by his reminiscences, for such a man as he could have been neither impostor nor fool.¹ It is probable that he came upon former memories in his dreams, while simple speculation and hypothesis have been constructed as positive affirmation on his part. However this may be, his thought was great, for the real life of our individuality consists in memory alone. Those waters of Lethe

¹ It happens that the hypothesis of reincarnation was personally unwelcome to Éliphas Lévi, and he did not know enough of Zoharic Kabalism to realise that it is of some importance therein. The traditions concerning the teaching of Pythagoras must be taken at their proper value, but there is no question that, according to these, he was an important champion of what used to be called the doctrine of metempsychosis, understood as the soul's transmigration into successive bodies. He himself had been (a) Æthalides, a son of Mercury; (b) Euphorbus, son of Panthus, who perished at the hands of Menelaus in the Trojan war; (c) Hermetimus, a prophet of Clazomenæ, a city of Ionia; (d) a humble fisherman, and finally (e) the philosopher of Samos.

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pictured by the ancients were the true philosophical type of death. The Bible appears to impart a divine sanction to this idea when it is said in the Book of Psalms that "the just shall be in everlasting remembrance."¹

¹ *In memoria aeterna erit justus.*