

After Magic: Modern Charm in History, Theory, and Practice

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The afterlife of magic in a postmagical world is a rich and fascinating subject, one that might well be a starting point of a historical semiotics.
—Thomas M. Greene, *Poetry, Signs, and Magic*¹

MY INTEREST ATTACHES, LIKE Thomas M. Greene's in my epigraph, to questions about literary form whose answers bear upon history, and at the same time upon questions about literary and cultural history whose answers contribute to poetics—to the study, that is, of formal systems of genre and technique that ride on, but can also dismount from, the systems of reference that Greene calls semiotics. My topic is charm, and the approach taken here plants one foot in history and one in theory. Because some diffidence about the principle of their coordination will commit me to balancing on each for a while independently, let me forswear suspense and divulge right away the hinge on which the following argument will pivot. One flange opens on the mystique of *ineffability*, by which I mean . . . well, something that my readers surely know but that I, as they must likewise know, can't specify: I mean that which, because it defies expression, incites us to say no end of things in the hope of coaxing it forth. The other flange opens on ineffability's complement, which I name *irreference*: the currency of those aspects of language that abstain from denoting the world, in order that they may wield it instead; words that aim not to refer but to take charge, not to signify but to act. A cardinal instance of such linguistic performativity is the conjuror's utterance of a magical charm, which in purest form is pure form indeed, a verbal formula whose irreference compels reality rather than reporting on it.

In Greene's "postmagical world," which is ours, and which for half a millennium has been the realm of modern literature, that function has defaulted to secular operators known as authors. They too deploy words in order to summon ineffable spirits, no longer daimonically unworldly spirits as of old, yet abidingly familiar spirits all the same. Charm is what we most casually call the effect of such modern conjuration; charm

is also, more often and more profoundly than we may recognize, the means whereby that effect is called into being. In regular usage we ask the term *charm*, like its synonyms *entrancement* and *fascination* or its etymological cousin *enchantment*, to name both a process and the result of that process; but while the result that these related terms describe is a subjective condition or induced state of consciousness, *charm* distinctly stays aloof. We might speak of *charmedness* to capture such an experience, but we don't. We use *charm* instead to indicate an energy that dwells without, is felt over or around but not within us, gets intuited as a property of persons or things other than ourselves; and its resistance to internalization exempts it from the kind of psychological reduction to which *enchantment*, say, remains liable.² Like *work* and *play*, those blunter noun-verb utility tools of the literary lexicon, *charm* declines to come inside: with sure tact it keeps its distance, touching but not engrossing us. The coinage "charm offensive" prospers nowadays because everybody can tell it's an oxymoronic joke: charm, we agree, doesn't give offense; neither overwhelming nor invasive, it bases its appeal on tactics of reserve. Analytically elusive, charm in its empirical otherness sustains the sort of ontological discreteness, and solicits the sort of interactive encounter, that we impute, in however qualified a way, to the literary object.

I

First, some history. Why, and with what consequences, should the concept of charm have declined within a few centuries from the sphere of abominable taboo into that of tinsel gallantry? Once upon a time a body of magical thought and practice pervading early-modern culture aroused such horror that its adherents risked obloquy, ostracism, ordeal by water or death on the pyre in the name of the law. What does it mean that this large and polarizing cultural formation should by the advent of the Victorian *fin de siècle* have been cozily remaindered into children's stories, pulp fiction, and parlor entertainment? That it should have become Oscar Wilde's and Henry James's default descriptor for whatever had caught their momentary favor but not so much actual notice as to warrant their calling it anything more than *charming*? That across the twentieth century and into ours charm dangled from girls' bracelets, was professed in schools of deportment, and gave its name to a lollipop, a breakfast cereal, and—in a last twist of the historical screw—an elementary subatomic particle fundamental to the constitution of matter?³ What's the story on charm?

The answer to this question involves what readers of these pages will deem a mere matter of received intellectual and institutional history,

which runs its familiar course as follows. The funny thing that happened to charm on its way to modernity was the disenchantment of the West, under the long slow blows that were dealt it in turn by the three Rs: Protestant Reformation, Enlightenment Rationalism, and Industrial Revolution. Having made viable terms in cottage and fortress with a Catholic Church that was firmly centered on mysteries of its own, charm after Marsilio Ficino and Dr Dee, Martin Luther and Francis Bacon and René Descartes, went the way of all magic. Select detachments defected to the invader, as alchemy changed into chemistry; as medical botany absorbed herbal lore on the way toward biochemistry; as elder therapies of the word were received within the scientific penumbra under the guise of mesmerism, hypnotism, and the psychoanalytic talking cure that led Vladimir Nabokov to deride Freud as “the Viennese witch doctor”; and as, for all I know, the bewitching patterns of ritual dance and the laying-on of hands survived into chiropractic, jazzercise, and kinesiology.⁴

In ways like these, some portion of traditional charmed practice evolved into applied science, which is what Sir James Frazer declared, near the dawn of modernism, that it had been all along.⁵ The wizard who breathed a charm was drawing on the most advanced technology at his disposal, which lasted until his engineering descendants supplanted it by a technology that worked better. But charm did not so much *evolve* as it, for the most part, *devolved* into science’s opposite, superstition.⁶ It went into resistance, or rather into hiding. Charm plunged for cover, like its frustrated exponents from Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” who “writhed into the ground” and “dived into the brook” when vanquished by Lizzie’s “silver penny” and the cold-cash covenant it stood for.⁷ Or else charm headed for the hills, and the caves, and the ethnic hinterlands where, after a certain point around the middle of the eighteenth century, it pleased a new metropolitan tourism to make holiday, with Thomas Gray’s “Bard” and William Collins’s “Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands.” In short: charm made itself scarce, and exotic, by taking flight across space and time. Around the world it found temporary refuge among those whom European conquest was swiftly turning into refugees themselves. These included, within the post-Enlightenment imaginary, Queequeg consulting the bones in *Moby-Dick*, the Pacific islanders in tales by Robert Louis Stevenson, Huck’s fugitive African slave Jim, and for that matter Jim’s backwoods white boy Huck, holding civilization at charm’s length as long as he and Tom Sawyer could manage the feat, during the latter’s fondly extended but already expiring interval of unshod boyhood: that enchanted space of juvenile development which Selma Fraiberg has taught parents in more than one recent generation to think of as “the magic years.”⁸ And charm fled back in time to more hospitably dark ages where Michael Scott’s

wizardly “Book of Might” could work wonders from the abbey grave—at least in Walter Scott’s *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* it could, sort of⁹—and where Merlin held sway at Tennyson’s Camelot, and eventually lost it too, thanks to the power that dwelt in ancient, efficacious incantations, back in the day when antiquity and efficacy were mutually aligned rather than, as Mark Twain affirmed through his merciless travesty of Merlin in *A Connecticut Yankee*, opposed.

This much is common knowledge, at least in the outline form toward which common knowledge gravitates. The expulsion of *magic* from the alabaster agora of modernity, and the reprisals and upsets whereby magical thought and practice have doughtily maintained their marginal position in what is less a culture war than an unconcluded guerrilla action that may even now be recruiting the wicca coven on your block—all of that belongs to a history in outline that has been filled in resourcefully by a band of magicologists, from Frances Yates on the sixteenth century to Ronald Hutton on the twentieth, who have my indebted thanks.¹⁰ I, however, am after what came after magic: what was left as a residual element within the cultural mainstream once magic had decamped for parts unknown. I want to understand what’s become of *charm*, which, being a more light and winged thing than those associated magical phenomena, has enjoyed advantages they lack. Charm has resisted inimical modernity more successfully than has the rest of the apparatus of magical culture because it has been better at hiding out—and, in an inherently dialectical return, better at reinfiltrating the newly ascendant culture while nobody is looking. The secret of this success lies, I submit, in charm’s ineffability. For charm has always rebuffed semantic or interpretive appropriation by the forces of rational analysis and exchange whose ascendancy has marked the past several centuries. Like the air around a certain autopiloted ship bearing the Ancient Mariner, the jiu-jitsu of charm eluded attack by giving way before the assailant and then closing from behind.¹¹

It thereby penetrated an offensive that was launched *at* it but in effect passed *through* it; and, having done so, it took up alien residency within the new regime under a set of new names, most of them tellingly foreign-sounding, or, to refine one of my topic’s key paradoxes, significantly insignificant: *élan*, *sprezzatura*, *mumbojumbo*, *panache*, *aura*, *hex*, *prestige*, *mojo*, *flair*, *charisma*. Imperfectly naturalized terms like these remain stubbornly estranged verbal familiars in the English language, and they record with cumulative eloquence the alien status that charm enjoys within the modern order of things.¹² The French have a phrase for it, the *je ne sais quoi*. The curious retention in English parlance of this last expression—a melodiously unwieldy deprecation to which we

resort at moments when we self-consciously crave sympathy at a cognitive impasse—confesses, each time we use it, our faith in a firmly sensed but only peripherally intelligible reality that abides along the borders of the nameable. For what a certain *je ne sais quoi* denotes is an asylum from denotation itself. Once we have called something or somebody charming, we have preempted analysis and foreclosed explanation; or at least that's what we have meant to do. Conversely, once we have analytically explained what makes something or somebody charming, the charm has fled. Witness John Keats: "Do not all charms fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy?"¹³ Even to utter *charm*—the very word is like a bell, book, and candle in one—is to play at recapitulating the performativity that belonged to the utterance of charms in days of old: it's as if to name charm, *per se* or by one of its fetchingly foreign synonyms, is *ipso facto* to cast a little spell.

To resume: when, amid the intoxicating incense of a darkened chamber, scientific empiricism switched on the lights of reason, charm had to perform a disappearing act. And disappear it did: it's not that it ceased to be, but that it shifted register, changed address. Dissolving, diffusing, and dissipating itself over the threshold of the knowable, charm vanished without perishing. It thinned out into a finer tone and became for the modern mind no longer a practical power to reckon on, or reckon with, but an atmospheric effect. It remained invisible to the focussed eye, ungraspable to the hand, inaudible to the interpreting ear, pheromonally ambient rather than pungent to the nostril, and—most important for the purposes of literary history—it remained on the tip of the tongue, which might savor but never name it. For it *was* there; or rather, there it was, and there, and there, insistently present to a sixth sense made up, perhaps, of peripheral traces accumulated by the known five. Charm's status somewhere between the intimacy of intuition and the extravagance of hallucination may go some way toward explaining the fondness for synaesthesia among poets from Shelley to Swinburne and Rimbaud, who rank high among those most susceptible to the postmagical blandishments, and literary opportunities, posed by modern charm as such.

It was not just nineteenth-century poets who fell for charm. Even over in the minor arcana of novelistic and expository prose—the verbal medium we firmly, and in the main rightly, associate with the practical disenchantment of the modern world—charm was quick to reinhabit premises that modernity's broom had swept clean. Why do we call so many eminent prose authors Victorian sages? What made it second nature for George Eliot's contemporaries to regard her as a kind of sybil? Think of the vatic way Matthew Arnold flourishes the critical touchstones of great poetry, or of his formulaic intonation of key phrases like "sweet-

ness and light" and "the best that is known and thought in the world," which, waiving the question of what they do or don't mean, by dint of sheer recitation across Arnold's text acquire an uncanny power, which has inflected their reception by acolytes and iconoclasts alike.¹⁴ Better yet, and back behind all these sages, ponder the case of Thomas Carlyle. He it was who, detouring permanently out of the kirk into the printing house, improvised the role of the Victorian sage. With the oratorical thunder he stole from a deserted pulpit, Carlyle fulminated left and right from a perch seemingly above ideology; from an Asmodean (which is to say, magical) "coign of vantage," as he put it in *The French Revolution*, which transcended the didactics and polemics that had hitherto typified nonfiction prose.¹⁵ And he did so in a prose aggressively outlandish, an English compounded from German syntax and Scots burr, the hoarse voice of an anchorite crying in the wilderness of modernity and enjoining belief in transcendental profundities conjured out of nothing but pure earnestness, undogmatic belief itself. Carlyle made such heavy weather of quacks and mountebanks, took so obsessive an interest for example in the magical charlatan Cagliostro, because he was more than half an impresario-shaman himself.¹⁶

The ironized, circumvented, or interrupted conjuration was not new with Carlyle, of course. It had constituted a rite of modern passage at least since Christopher Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus*, William Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, and John Milton in *Comus* used it to validate better illusions of their own, within a dramatic medium that upstaged the performance of magic with the magic of performance. These were the examples (alongside that of the arch-disenchanter Miguel de Cervantes) that Walter Scott pursued into fictional narrative. With an epoch-making string of historical novels, the Wizard of the North drew regularly on scenes of witchcraft whose uncanny grip he just as regularly broke, by breaking them down for explanation on historical, ethnological, or psychological bases to which an enlightened mind might subscribe.¹⁷ And it was on these same bases that bourgeois realist fiction in the wake of Scott erected its Victorian manses of grown-up make-believe. Charm being a discreet part of the life of the bourgeoisie, the novel form that imitated their life had reason, not only to exert charm, but also to represent its action within the plot. Nothing else accounts so well for the ubiquity of charm in novels by that least romantically inclined chronicler of familiar things, Anthony Trollope. The one extended discussion of fictional charm that I have found anywhere in Victorianist scholarship, Christopher Herbert's, offers an admirably balanced discussion of charm's pros and cons in Trollope's depiction of human affairs.¹⁸ Yet Herbert overlooks that hardened realist's proclivity to impute the old *je ne sais quoi* to a

nondescript neighborhood, or an unprepossessing bit of landscape, which goes nearly undescribed because, by the logic of ineffability that I wish to illustrate here, it's precisely in its nondescript character that the charm of the scenery resides.

Still more remarkable is what happens again and again within a minority tradition of Victorian fiction that abandoned Scott's example and unapologetically made effectual, unrationalized magic a major piece of the action. Novels by William Harrison Ainsworth, Marie Corelli, George du Maurier, and others catered to a widespread taste for what might be termed Victorian magical realism, in which necromancy appears a phenomenon as real as anything else, within plots where magicians have a hand and even demons get speaking parts.¹⁹ What's odd for our purposes about these occultist novels is the cozy proximity with which the working of magical charms in them adjoins charm language used in our ordinary, banal sense of trivial politesse. In the novel that Edward Bulwer-Lytton aptly titled *A Strange Story*, after a Rosicrucian adept gets a set of small-town gossips worthy of Margaret Oliphant out on the dance floor as if "at a witch's sabbat," the genteel dames acutely remark, "It is witchcraft!", only to cool down right away into the bathos of small talk and add: "But how charming!" Even in the wild Australian climax where the flagging mage enlists the physician-narrator's assistance in some last-ditch, hell-bent, wizardly rehab, the latter raptly, and gratuitously, confides how "the words took their charm from the voice and the eye, the aspect, the manner, the man!"²⁰ If all this sounds like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it ought to. I count in that novella a round fifty occurrences of the word *charm* and its cognates, all of them well on the near side, which is our presumptively disenchanting modern side, of a *fin-de-siècle* balance counterweighted by the fantastic donnée of the uncanny portrait. At an additional meta-level the narrative figures, in the personal fascination of Lord Henry's spellbinding rhetoric, Wilde's own plot to seduce the reader by patterns of melodiously inlaid words that gesture at once toward the indescribable and the unspeakable—and that, inasmuch as they do this, bend Wilde's prose toward the condition of verse. The magic *in* the text and the magic *of* the text go proxy for each other, both being verbal modes of action induced over distance, the real effects of spoken or written causes.

II

Thus far the first, diachronic division of my topic, grasped in terms of literary history. I have not been able to purge from its exposition traces

of the second, synchronic division of my topic, which is the ad-hoc literary theory of charm as a modality of verbal behavior. To put the theory crudely: workers of charms literally don't know what they're talking about. They never did. Even back in the glory days of magic, a charm's efficacy lay in the words it comprised yet not, to the best of any human knowledge, in the *meaning* of those words. Semantically considered, the uttered charm drew around itself a circle that repelled interpretation and, with it, denied the premise of fungibility that enables paraphrase, translation, and expropriation or export on any terms other than scrupulous verbatim recitation. Thinking of this semantic *irreference* as charm's cloak of ineffable invisibility turned inside out, for all to see but none to understand, permits fresh appreciation of its historical survival. The resistance that a verbal charm poses to comprehension, even by the adept who utters it, forms an analogy to the sheer performativity of the unmeaning speech act whereby charm workers do things with words.²¹

The irreference of charm language had begun facilitating its emancipation from the domain of exchange value and portable property well before that domain was installed with anything like its full modern force. The witch who misremembered or altered the spell she had been given—or who, although the very difficulty of this supposition makes my point already *per contra*, took a whack at a *précis*—was either playing with fire or, more likely, coming up stone cold. The rote basis of the magical rite reaches optimal expression in the case of those incantations that are, and always were, completely unintelligible from a semantic standpoint. There's a good reason why *abra cadabra* and *hocus pocus* live on among us as the default formulae for verbal conjuration, and the reason lies in their staunch refusal to mean. Maybe *hocus pocus* does derive from the transubstantiating or magical language of the Latin mass, *Hoc est enim meum corpus*—a plausible derivation of course, but one that, far from undermining my proposal about charm language, underscores it. As an article of cultural meaning, magic's magpie theft or mockingbird replay of the sacred word from the altar is of course hugely significant. However, the sacrifice that concerns me is the linguistic one, the violence done to sense. By whatever benighted process the eucharistic performative *Hoc est corpus* became the rhyming jingle *hocus pocus*, at some perhaps quite early point its propositional reference was lost, and it became a mighty piece of nonsense, whose might in fact was premised on its nonsensicality. Which was also the idea when in necromantic black sabbaths, or the textual grids or spirals to which certain spellbooks are addicted as to crossword puzzles, a sacred writ or prayer was intoned backwards.²² Its orthodoxy was thereby *dispelled*: spilled or de-canted from referential into purely cultural meaning. Its naughtiness skyrocketed toward the infinite, in proportion as its semantic denominator plunged toward zero.

Charm thus made good its own etymology; for the word derives not, as we tend to think, from *charisma*, although the pervasiveness of that false etymology bespeaks our citizenship within the state of things that Max Weber analyzed a century ago under the sign of “disenchantment,” with its polarized standoff between bureaucratic and charismatic politics. Charm comes not from *charisma* but from *carmen*, the Latin word for song; the term is akin to *enchantment*, *incantation*. From the first, that is, charm has owned that condition of music to which Walter Pater memorably said all art aspires.²³ No wonder it made its modern escape so nimbly, like Prospero’s spirits at the incursion of profane reality, into air, into thin air. It was air all along, unstopped from that phial the human windpipe, and diffused across that threshold the larynx in the impalpable, suasive form of human voice.²⁴

And pure voice at that, voice carrying no more verbal cargo than it takes to carry a tune. Was it “speech half-asleep,” asks a Browning dramatic monologist bemused in his very ignorance of Spanish by the “soft meandering Spanish name” his lady has let fall, “Speech half-asleep or song half-awake?”²⁵ By the same token, Browning’s narrator in *The Flight of the Duchess* wants to know, after eavesdropping on an incantation, “was it singing, or was it saying?” (ll. 512). At its quintessence, word magic has kept this question wide open for centuries, by means of a lyric incitement to intervals of readerly *Sprechstimme*. *Tra la. Lulla lullay. Hey nonny nonny. Hot cha cha*. Bold Sir Lancelot’s *tirra-lirra* in Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” may sound a tad too much like birdsong, and thus flirt too closely with onomatopoeia, to qualify as premium-grade charm; but we are there for sure when “Mr. Sludge, The ‘Medium’” lets loose in the middle of Browning’s séance-busting monologue with a remarkable iambic pentameter running, and as ever I quote verbatim, “*Fol-lol-the-riddle-liddle-iddle-ol*.”²⁶ A table-rapping Yankee phony Mr. Sludge may be, but at this moment he keeps hi-fi faith with his spiritualist profession’s roots in incantatory shamanism. In the process he looks down the American line to Little Richard’s *Wop-bop-a-loo-bop-alop-bom-bom* and to that sage enchanter who, having put the bomp in the *bomp-a-bomp-a-bomp*, made my baby fall in love with me.²⁷

How do you spell *ram-a-lam-a-ding-dong*, anyway? I ask because the charm synonym *spell* suggests another theoretical development within our topic. Charm in its nonsensical irrelevance has a way of raising consciousness about the system of language on which referential meaning rides. Magic entered the early modern period as a pronouncedly inscribed matter: spells were written down in books, whence wizards would spell them out, with that exactness on which orthography set its punctilious, earnest if unstandardized seal. This emphatic recourse to writing no doubt constituted a technical improvement on those assists

to memory that had been formerly provided by earlier technologies of rhyme, meter, and, with special salience in the Anglo-Saxon corpus where riddling charms abound, alliteration. If *hocus pocus* and *abra cadabra* are not forgotten among us, that's because they were built to last. Every teenage reader of *Harry Potter* worth her salt figures out within seconds where the transparently adapted killing spell *Avada Kedavra* came from. For this she has to thank the vowel repletion and palindromic symmetry that survive J.K. Rowling's ill-considered swerve from nonsense toward reference: the whiff of the *cadaver* which *Avada Kedavra* aims to produce ought to be the kiss of death to its efficacy as charmspeak.

To the already strong patterning devices of repetitive magical prosody the written book has long added something else. I mean the boost that the visual permanence of fixed marks on a page imparts to the apprehension of language's structural design, as a first-order abstraction from the fluency of the merely spoken. It is in abstraction of this kind that an analytic consciousness of linguistic systems begins, which may explain why further evidence of the magic spell's ambivalent entanglement with analytic consciousness greets us in the unlikely provenance of another charm synonym, the word *glamour*—a word that in American English, uniquely among words like *honor* and *ardor* and *rumor*, has stuck like a transatlantic limpet to its frenchy orthography ending in *-our*, epitomizing my former point about the rote, conservative character of charm language clear across the ouija board. *Glamour* stems from the same root, *gramma*, to which we owe the ostensibly unmagical discipline of *grammar* and its medieval cognates *grimoire* (for a sorcerer's book of charms) and also *gramarie*, repeatedly to be found in Scott and Tennyson. Grammar at the level of the sentence, like spelling at the level of the word, explicates features of language that, being in the first instance less functional than systematic, tend to operate independently of reference, beyond or beneath the notice of ordinary word-users who are engrossed, as they should be, by the conveyance of meaning. The quasi-Saussurean structuralism of charm language thus reveals its kinship with the cultural symmetries, so often held in place by ritual magic practices, that fascinated the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.²⁸ The inclusion of both *glamour* and *spell* within the extended lexicon of charm indicates yet again charm's traffic with invisible yet ambient properties: not demonic agents in this case, but structures of the word-wielding mind. In no respect, before the Enlightenment or after, have enchanter departed more radically from humanity's linguistic business as usual than by their professing language in a way that, whatever else it might evoke, evokes an altered, heightened consciousness of how language works. In this respect if in no other, the poetics of charm and the poetics of nonsense as practiced by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll share a common border.²⁹

III

Conceived in this way as hermeneutic sense's literally insignificant yet indispensable other—whether a supplement to meaning or its condition of possibility—charm exhibits its deepest literary affinity when we turn to poetry. The formal networks of rhythm and sound deployed by the poet overlap to a conspicuous degree with those the traditional charmer uses in making magic; a like convergence arguably obtains between the designs that both species of culture-worker cherish to spellbind an audience. This convergence may have become more pronounced in Romantic poetry, and the subsequent literary tradition it sponsored, than at any time since verse made its decisive modern crossing from manuscript into print. As with increasing insistence the nineteenth century witnessed a proliferation of readers, of publications, and of prose formats catering to a new public's thirst for immediacy of information and accessibility of entertainment, poetry maximized its distinction from these newfangled discursive dominants by hoisting the standard of artifice and entrenching itself ever deeper into form. Well before the showier advent of modernist poetics, Romantic and Victorian poets were already obliging the nineteenth-century reader to approach the language of verse as overtly artful, and so to apprehend content as a function of structure.

That last formulation resumes the continuity of means with ends that at the start of this essay I declared essential to the workings of charm. Along the coordinates laid down there, the intersection of form with content, of all literary cruxes the most crucial, is where charm's verbal irrelevance becomes expressive of charm's empirical ineffability. Poets' longstanding attraction to subject-matter deriving from outposts of magic that subsisted within the modern world participates in a larger gravitation, which is the pull of poetry toward topics that lie beyond reason's historically lengthening reach: the outer and inner weather of nature and the passions, the divination of spiritual reality, the aftermath of an injustice or a heartbreak beyond redress.³⁰ While the attraction of such themes is surely intrinsic, their literary appeal has always had something to do as well with the sheer expressive difficulty they pose, and so with the poet's self-appointed mission to articulate the ineffable and say what can't be said. Failure in this difficult, gallant endeavor is not dishonor, provided that the failure itself be articulated with a scrupulosity worthy of the attempt. Such methods of keeping a broken faith veritably define the modern tradition in poetry, which is one reason why broken rites, ceremonial interruptions and deferrals, enjoy such prominence there. Witness William Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper," the great odes of Keats, D. G. Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel," W. B. Yeats's "To the

Rose upon the Rood of Time”: ritual failures all, each performing a communicative breakdown that constitutes a second-order appeal to the communing reader. Recurrence to magical themes has let poets show with much versatility how, even where charms in their elder sense no longer avail, the charm that has migrated into poetry retains a performative strength like unto that of old. It may not be too much to say that in lyric, as in larger modes like drama and fiction, the magic the modern text wields may depend on magic’s acknowledged, nay programmatic, defection from the world the text represents. In stage-conjuration terms that are furnished by the riveting prologue to Christopher Nolan’s self-descriptively titled film *The Prestige*, it is a default on the text’s initial Pledge (now you see it) that prompts the Turn (now you don’t) that then enables its Prestige (aha, here it is): the keeping of the bootlegged Pledge as it reappears on other grounds than promised, and by other means than anticipated.³¹

Just this is the metanarrative structurally implied by that charismatic modern lyric “Kubla Khan.” The three odal turnings of Coleridge’s famous poem lay out three moments in the fortunate fall of the poet as modern mage, according to three phases in the relation between the word and the world. Strophe one turns on the all-sufficiency of a verbal fiat:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

(ll. 1–5)

The emperor is every bit as good as his word, and the word pays obedient homage in return. Kubla Khan decreed the dome, and Lo!—or, as the poem puts it with a serene sangfroid, that we may have gotten used to but shouldn’t, “So” (line 6)—a pleasure-dome there duly was:

So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

(ll. 6–11)

As the iambic verse expands from tetrameter to pentameter, to suit the imagery’s widening vista, the rhythm keeps neat and undisturbed pace

with the meter. Alliteration and internal rhyme (“fertile” / “girdled,” “ancient” / “incense”) blossom in place as if embedded in a garden of verses, while with an even hand “And there” and “And here” survey the larger layout of the whole.

The good Khan’s Apollonian regime of “And” and “So,” however, soon entrains a “But,” as a Dionysiac antistrophe kicks in to disperse such placid logical masonry. Discursively, prosodically, punctuationally, the smooth surface suddenly buckles. Versailles fades to the Bastille, civilization discloses barbarism, all hell breaks loose:

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

(ll. 12–16)

From many things worth remarking in this abrupt transition the student of charm picks out the word in the middle, “enchanted.” Note first its emergence as a third term cast up by the realms of the “savage” and the “holy” earlier in the line: the sequence seems to task “enchanted,” like magic itself within the modern dispensation, to mediate between the extremes of value those words represent. Whether savagery and holiness were contrary states or adjacent ones was a Rousseauian question that continued to exercise post-Enlightenment social thinking in Coleridge’s time and beyond it, into the era of an anthropology that couldn’t help founding ethnic hypotheses on the description and interpretation of magical practices. In either case, as foes or as neighbors, the “savage” and the “holy” were ripe for rivalry, in a version of the antithetical contest among incompatibles that eventually shut down Coleridge’s poetic career—but only after charging it here with quite another brand of energy than had informed the restful adequations governing the events, and prosodic symmetries, of strophe one.

Based initially on stable binaries, the text now turns dialectical instead, in fractal epitome of the whole ode’s three-part structure. The *abab* rhyme scheme of lines 12–16 repeats that of lines 1–5; but this time the rhymes act like the images of chasm, moon, and woman they render—night-life celebrities making a comeback from their strophe-one repression: feminine, insubordinate, unfulfilled. Yawningly exposed enjambment underscores the syntactic precipitancy of “enchanted,” which reverberates in the likewise enjambed “slanted” and “haunted” above it and beneath: these rhymes, feminine as noted and just a little mutually aslant into the phonetic bargain, bristle with energies of unre-

quital that are figured unmistakably in the simile of the wailing woman, more subtly in implied relations between the “slanted” and the true, the “haunted” and the absolved. Ashimmer with unfinished business, the poem now displays a wildness as conspicuously dynamic as the opening strophe was fixed and definite, and “enchanted” occupies the axial point on which its dynamism slues. The apparently done deal or Pledge that was Xanadu proves to rest on an animating surplus still very much in process, a vortical Turn for which the animus is no longer bureaucratic decretal but charismatic incantation.

Charm works on, behind the scenes of Kubla’s frictionless decree and under his imperial radar, effecting more than meets the eye, and recording its effect on a soundtrack that ravishes the ear. As the antistrophe proceeds down-chasm, a “mighty fountain” bursts forth that “flung up momentarily the sacred river” (ll. 19–24). Taken either as the headwaters of the river Alph or as a geyser-like eruption from its subterranean caverns (ll. 3–4)—as a source or a resource—the fountain image challenges the claim to originary authority that is vested in Alph’s name. Like everything else in Coleridge’s antistrophe, the noisy fountain with its heavy breathing and dancing rocks (ll. 18, 23) figures a choric power antecedent to the alphabetically articulate order and all it underwrites: the psychoanalytic law of the Father, Kubla Khan’s sovereign word, and the divine *fiat* of Genesis that these recall. The “tumult” (l. 28) of this pantheistic fluency induces in the Enlightened mind, as usual, panic: a reaction symptomatically revealed in the techniques of riot control that go on to fill out the antistrophe and rein it in. For the last lines of this section, the tamest in the poem, constitute a faint parodic reprise of the naively confident rhetoric and binary symmetry from strophe one:

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
 Floated midway on the waves;
 Where was heard the mingled measure
 From the fountain and the caves.
 It was a miracle of rare device,
 A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!
 (ll. 31–36)

The imagery of this bland sestet is (literally) mainstream, its compromised acoustics nothing if not retro—whether we attend to the reported sounds or to the prosodically foursquare sound of the report itself in the third and fourth lines. The whole feint represents a weak attempt to call back to order, on the old terms of symmetrical disposition and Enlightened equilibrium, the radical energies from below that have dismantled and superseded the *ancien régime*.

To this palpably staged failure succeeds, in the epode or final strophe, not a triumphant resolution, exactly, but a subtler, charmingly conceded failure that constitutes, in effect, our poet's wizardly Prestige. Acknowledging that unsucccess in the old magic is the modern poetic condition, Coleridge undertakes to redefine the terms on which a power like magic's might be wielded in latter days. For it is with the fluent imperfections of charm-as-song that the poem takes its airy last stand:

A damsel with a dulcimer
 In a vision once I saw:
 It was an Abyssinian maid,
 And on her dulcimer she played,
 Singing of Mount Abora.
 Could I revive within me
 Her symphony and song,
 To such a deep delight 'twould win me
 That with music loud and long,
 I would build that dome in air.

(ll. 37–46)

The incantatory power of "symphony and song" lives only in a remembered visionary past and in the optative possibility of its future revival by a belated, would-be enchanter, at an undisclosed venue where "all who heard should see them there" (ll. 48). While charm may do its old stuff again some day and so reconvene a magic clan around the frankly shamanic figure of the rock-star poet, the barrage of "could," "would," and "should" establishes that his mojo isn't working now.

Unless, of course, it is. Unless that "dome in air" is none other than the one we see, and have seen from the first lines of the poem, by simple virtue of hearing the charm that is in, or rather *is*, the poem: an air-built song, a palace of breath. On this supposition, the mere postulation of a structure of belief that has been once, and might be again, suffices for the attenuated life of modern charm, willingly suspended, like modern "disbelief" in Coleridge's later formulation of that essential concept, between a wish and a prayer.³² Within that pre- or postrational, sub- or supracognitive life of melodious irrelevance lies the realm of a thousand names and none. I mean the realm obliquely hailed in the poem as "Mount Abora," a name perfectly charming in that nobody knows for certain what it denotes. Possibly it derives from an Ethiopian (Amharic?) playland of mountain palaces that was stigmatized by Milton in *Paradise Lost* as the false paradise "where *Abassin* Kings thir issue Guard, / Mount *Amara*"; but if so, then Coleridge adapted it phonemically to suggest an aboriginal condition, before the alphabetic fall, when the empowered

word flowed from the mouth, *verbum ab ora*.³³ I mean the realm called “Xanadu,” whose meaning, if it was ever known to John Livingston Lowes, died with him and consequently is now free to charm everybody in pop culture, if my limited experience of discos in Chicago during the ’70s or London around the millennium is anything to go on. And I mean the realm called, in the very last word of the poem, “Paradise,” which in one sense means as much as you like but in another becomes, its referent long since forfeited, a word for Coleridge and Baudelaire and Pound to conjure with.

It’s too late for the self-evidence of the verbal fiat from strophe one, too late even, beneath the waning moon, for that demon lover who never does arrive in strophe two—whose absence is indeed the secret of his power, as with the Abyssinian maid’s voice, long dissipated as reverberation within the acoustic *abyss* that her epithet harbors. The parquetry of sound that builds up the line “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan,” where every syllable transformatively exfoliates from the nonsense nugget “Xanadu,” is a tough act to follow; but the anagrammatic riff in “A damsel with a dulcimer” makes for a most creditable encore. Sheerly optative where it has nothing to declare, charm abides with Paradise and Xanadu and Abora in a soupçon of milk and honey half forgotten and so half fancied, amid the modern imperfection that Wallace Stevens knew poetry must summon into the thrice-woven circle of flawed words and stubborn sounds.³⁴

The presence of absence, loss as the ground of gain: such were the roomy Romantic pockets from which magic-haunted Victorians from Tennyson and Browning to Wilde produced their surprises, and bestowed them as favors on rising poets of the century to come. In this light the *fin-de-siècle* memberships that Yeats concurrently held in the Rhymers’ Club and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn emerge as twin aspects of the same commitment, one that he shared with Ezra Pound and H. D., Stéphane Mallarmé and Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Valéry.³⁵ The last of these writers entitled his principal poetry book simply *Charmes ou Poèmes* (1922), leaving the reader to wonder what distinguished the two whenever poetry asserted its “marvelous” kinship—as Valéry went on to call it in *The Art of Poetry*—with “the miracles and prodigies of ancient magic” and with “purposes of enchantment,” by confiding “far more in the efficacy of its sound than in its significance.”³⁶ That poems and charms might be one and the same was an intuition that came with the literary territory of the century in which, if not modernism, then virtually every modernist, was born.

Measured against earlier epochs, this territory was a diminished estate. The ineffable is not the great and terrible sublime; irrelevance is but

a chapter in the book of nonsense, which in turn forms just a part of literature's multifariously loyal subversion of the word; and, while the chant of the nonsemantic pervades and sustains a broader range of literary effects than we are accustomed to acknowledge, a verse prosody or prose style that relied on that melody alone would quickly come to nought. All the same, it is the zone of overlap among ineffability, irrelevance, and incantation that has staked out a space where modern charm can live in writing. And charm, as I've been saying all along, is a survivor.

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NOTES

1 Thomas M. Greene, *Poetry, Signs, and Magic* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2005), 21.

2 The discussion of "Enchantment," for example, in chapter 2 of Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), while judicious and capacious, stays within the orbit of a psychological aesthetics of effects and affects. Acknowledging with reference to language poetically wrought that "fluctuating intensities of affinity and involvement are conjured out of the bare bones of intonation and modulation" (63), her attention to receptive experience omits to consider—as charm's comparative stand-offishness invites us to consider—how such conjuration gets done, how enchantment may be a deed as well as a state. While Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), recognizes in enchantment "an uneasy combination of artifice and spontaneity," she too privileges "somatic effects" and complexes of "feeling" (5, 10).

3 Leaving commercial allusions to fend for themselves, let me observe that the emerging taxonomy in nanophysics recognizes six flavors of quarks and groups them into three pairs: the sensible up/down and top/bottom pairs, plus the uncannily zany pair charm/strange. Aptly for our purposes, the charm quark, so named "on a whim" in 1974, is like its fellows irreducible. See <http://particleadventure.org/quarknaming.html>.

4 Vladimir Nabokov's English foreword to *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Putnam, 1989), 8.

5 Sir James George Frazer's position is fully formed in the first, two-volume edition of *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1890). Among notable thinkers who have turned Frazer's reduction back onto his own work, as itself a kind of late-Victorian conjuration, see R. G. Collingwood, *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folklore, Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology*, ed. David Boucher, Wendy James, and Philip Smallwood (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 195–96, 216–17; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. A. C. Miles (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), 18: "Die Lösung ist nicht beunruhigender als das Rätsel [The solution is no more disquieting than the riddle]"; and, more generally, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002).

6 On the Enlightenment adaptation of the term "superstition" from its former role in the Church's contention with heresy, see Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250–1750* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 25 *et passim*.

- 7 "Goblin Market," lines 442–43, in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R. W. Crump (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979), 1:22.
- 8 Selma Fraiberg, *The Magic Years: Understanding and Handling the Problems of Early Childhood* (New York: Scribner, 1959).
- 9 Sir Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, canto 2, in *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. J. Logie Robertson (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1904).
- 10 Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971); Terry Castle, "Phantasmagoria and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie," in *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995); Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002); Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).
- 11 "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), lines 427–30, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997). Subsequent citation of Coleridge's poetry is to this edition.
- 12 Exoticizing the verbal tools of esoteric magical power is itself an ancient practice that outsources the ineffable. In the first century of our era, Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis* followed Herodotus and Plato in deriving magic from Zoroaster in Persia. Two centuries later the Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus denied that occult terms are "without signification; but let them be indeed unknown to us . . . yet to the Gods all of them are significant, though not according to an effable mode; nor in such a way as that which is significant and indicative with men through imaginations; but either intellectually, conformably to the divine intellect which is in us; or ineffably, and in a way more excellent and simple, and conformably to the intellect which is united to the Gods." *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians*, 1821 trans. Thomas Taylor (Sturminster Newton: Prometheus Trust, 2004), 189.
- 13 *Lamia* (1820) 2:229–30, in John Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978).
- 14 See, in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), "The Study of Poetry," 312–14; "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," 245; *Culture and Anarchy*, 416, 426 *et seq.*
- 15 See Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, ed. K. J. Fielding and David Sorensen (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 1:141 (part 1, book 4, chapter 4: "The Procession"); and the later Faustian invitation to the reader to "take an Asmodeus' Flight" at 2:102 (part 2, book 6, chapter 6: "The Steeples at Midnight").
- 16 Carlyle's account of "Count Cagliostro" (1833) forfended its subject with the apotropaic epithets "thaumaturgic moralist and swindler" and "Quack of Quacks." *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (Boston: James Munroe, 1839), 4:6, 11. See also the framing of Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) in thaumaturgic terms: from an initial socioeconomic "enchantment" (book 1, chapter 1) the argument advances through the necromantic medieval revival of book 2 into a culminating invocation that summons the spellbound "Captains of Industry" to action (book 4, chapter 4).
- 17 The approach taken in Scott's late *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) is unwaveringly rationalist and reformist.
- 18 Christopher Herbert, *Trollope and Comic Pleasure* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), chapter 3 ("Charm and Desire").
- 19 William Harrison Ainsworth, *The Lancashire Witches* (1849); Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886); George du Maurier, *Trilby* (1895). This tradition within the lumbering Victorian novel has received less attention, understandably, than its counterpart in the charm-friendlier genre of the short story or tale.

20 Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *A Strange Story* (1862; London: Routledge, 1889), 104, 353. This author's Rosicrucian affinities inform his earlier magical novel *Zanoni* (1842).

21 J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), leaves unconsidered, among its many examples, to what if any extent a magician's spell constitutes a performative act, much less a perlocutionary one.

22 On these texts largely considered, including a running census of the long-standing palindromic word square "SATOR AREPO," which acrosticized the letters from the Paternoster or Lord's Prayer, see Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009). Davies's international history repeatedly confirms the earlier point that spells were often unintelligible to their users, not just to their lay clients. See also Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), 402–39. We might think of charm language's irrelevance as restoring even those who can read to a temporary and localized state of illiteracy, indeed infancy in the etymological sense.

23 Pater, "The School of Giorgione" (1877), in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 86.

24 On the magical thinking long and widely vested in extraverbal practices of human voicing, see Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations* (London: Reaktion, 2014), 15–16 et passim.

25 "The Flower's Name" (1845), lines 20–22, in *Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), 1:416, which is the Browning edition I cite throughout.

26 "The Lady of Shalott" (1842), line 107, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1969), 359; "Mr Sludge, 'The Medium,'" (1864), line 83. Sludge hazards a weaker reprise at line 137 with "fiddle-diddle-dee."

27 Little Richard, "Tutti Frutti" (1955); Barry Mann, "Who Put the Bomp" (1961).

28 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (1916), trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

29 Elizabeth Sewall's excellent book *The Field of Nonsense* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952) is full of pertinent remarks on number (pp. 64–67), grammar (p. 118), reference (p. 38), magic (incompatible with true nonsense, p. 40)—and affinities between nonsense and poetry (*passim*). See also David Sonstroem, "Making Earnest of Game: G. M. Hopkins and Nonsense Poetry," *Modern Language Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1967): 192–206.

30 See Collingwood, *The Philosophy of Enchantment*, 228: "The greatest triumphs of art are achieved in the expression of feelings for which practical life provides no outlet: longings that are doomed to frustration, or rebellion against the tragedy and futility of life itself." In that these triumphs are for Collingwood cathartically salutary, they risk recapture by the utilitarian regime against which he ostensibly writes. On rationalized culture's tolerant "containment" of "enchanted fugitives" such as spirituality and eroticism, see Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 62.

31 Michael Caine's voiceover, framing the opening five minutes of the film, is accessible on line: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL_qIGJ4000. Nolan's 2006 film is based on Christopher Priest's novel *The Prestige* (New York: TOR, 1995).

32 "That willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith": Coleridge, in chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), in *Collected Works*, work 7, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 2:6.

33 John Milton, *Paradise Lost* IV.280–81, in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957). Leslie Brisman, *Romantic Origins* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), sifts further derivations for Alph and Abora, in the course of

a deft assessment of derivation and originality. The great scholarly compendium in these matters remains John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), where pp. 374–76 on “Abora” exemplify the syncretic method.

34 Wallace Stevens, “The Poems of Our Climate,” line 24, in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1955). Such density of irregular sonic interplay marks what Andrew Welsh, *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), follows Northrop Frye in identifying as the “charm-melos” radical of lyric: see especially chapter 6, “Charm.”

35 See Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004). Timothy Materer, *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995) finds in Pound’s writings early and late a “conception of himself as a magus illuminated by the golden dawn of wisdom” (69). When Materer calls James Merrill’s spiritualist epic *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982) “charmingly silly” (5), the difficulty of placing that stray adverb in context crystallizes one motive behind the present essay.

36 Paul Valéry, “Poetry and Abstract Thought” (1939), in *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 74.