

Fernando Pessoa

The paths of Mysticism and of Magic...

Initiation

The paths of Mysticism and of Magic are often paths of delusion and of error. Mysticism means essentially trust in intuition; Magic means essentially trust in power. Intuition is an operation of the mind by which the results of intelligence are obtained without the use of intelligence. Power, in the sense of magical power, is an operation of the mind by which the results of continuous effort are obtained without the use of continuous effort. Both, however long they may take to operate, are short cuts to knowledge.

In a certain sense both Mysticism and Magic are confessions of impotence. The Mystic is a man who feels that he has not the strength of thinking in him to get to truth by thinking. The Magician is a man who feels he has not the strength of will in him to get to truth (or to power) by strength of will. The idle girl who guesses things, or guesses at things, is a mystic within her shallow province; she is too lazy to try to know. The peasant woman who tries to keep her husband's love by charms and potions is a magician within her garret-frontiers; she is too ignorant and too weak to strive to do so by direct charm, by persistent seduction. In both cases there is an evasion.

This does not mean — or, at least, it needs not mean — that the results of Mysticism or of Magic are necessarily wrong. It does mean, however, that there is no criterion by which we can distinguish a wrong from a right result in one path or the other. In the Gnosis, where we employ intellect, we have at least the ballast of reasoning; we can at least compare one «result» with another, examine whether they be contradictory either each within itself, or one in respect of the other. We may not reason well, but we do reason. If we go wrong it is because we go wrong and not because we are wrong, as in the other two paths. It is like adding up wrong, where the mistake is not in adding but in not adding well; adding is, nevertheless, the right system to get a total.

This will be clear if we take simple, we might say current, examples of mysticism and of magic. A simple case of mysticism is the common type of intuition that is called «a hunch» in vulgar speech. A man has a hunch that a certain number will have the first prize in a lottery. Now and again the hunch comes out right, but we all know that for every time it comes out right there are thousands it comes out wrong. If it were not so, a gambling club would not be the great business proposition it always is. In this case, indeed, there is an easy way to check the rightness of the hunch: the lottery, once drawn, will show. But how is the mystic's hunch that he has attained unity with Christ to be proved or disproved? He says he knows, he feels. . . . But the madman who thinks himself Christ or the king of some country is as sure of that as the mystic of his intuition.

Take, again, a simple case of magic — spiritism. Spiritism is magic because it is evocation of the spirits of the dead to this life. A séance is made, the spirit of the departed X is evoked, the voice of the medium, the three-legged table or the planchette announces that it has appeared. How do we know that it has? The communication of things known only to one present may be a projection of the mind of that one present. The communication of things known only to the dead man, and afterwards verified, may be a communication from some force, or even spirit, other than the dead man's. And when the spirit gives information of its present abode, by what method do we ascertain if that information is right or wrong? I do not say that all that emerges in a séance or has emerged in séances is wrong; neither do I say that it is right: I say that there is no means of knowing the origin of the information thus received and where the information is concerning other worlds, or things otherwise unverifiable here, no means of knowing either its origin or its truth.

s. d.

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“Essay on Initiation.”