



WRITING
WITH
THINGS

anarchy and openness on the cusp
of drawing and painting

ira livingston



WRIT _ ING _
W _ ITH _ _ _ _
_ _ _ THINGS

*Anarchy & Openness on the Cusp
of Drawing & Painting*

IRA LIVINGSTON

*Writing With Things: Anarchy & Openness
on the Cusp of Drawing & Painting*
Ira Livingston

ISBN: 979-8-9896199-3-1

Cover Art: Ira Livingston
Cover Design: I.L., Jamison Lung & Duncan Hamilton
Book Design: J.L., D.H. & I.L.
Layout & Typesetting: J.L., D.H. & I.L.
Copyediting: Haseena Milea
Printing: Linco Printing, Brooklyn, NY

Published by Poetics Lab Books, 2023

Poetics Lab;
Humanities and Media Studies Dept.
Pratt Institute
200 Willoughby Avenue
Brooklyn NY 11205

poeticslab.com

*Please direct all inquiries to the author at
ilivings@pratt.edu*

Poetics Lab Books is an imprint of Poetics Lab, an initiative of Pratt Institute of Art and Design in Brooklyn, New York. PLAB sponsors faculty, student, and guest projects on an ad hoc basis. *Poetics* (from the Greek word for *making*) is used in the broad sense to refer to the study and practice of the principles by which things are made. We explore how the traffic among kinds of making deepen and open them via the ongoing experiment of transdisciplinary work. The means are the end.



| | |
|---|-----|
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 4 |
| What I'm Trying to Do Here | 4 |
| Writing With Things | 7 |
| The Cusp of Drawing & Painting | 14 |
| Sublime Visuality | 22 |
| Practice & Theory | 25 |
| No Such Thing as Abstraction or Realism | 28 |
| Animal Crackers | 33 |
| 2. QUALITIES | 36 |
| Primordiality | 36 |
| Play & Anarchy | 38 |
| Entification & De-entification | 40 |
| Primordial Complexity | 42 |
| Duration | 47 |
| 3. DRAWINGS | 52 |
| Here Comes the Night | 52 |
| Biota | 54 |
| The Stars Will Be Your Eyes | 56 |
| Yes & No | 58 |
| Thermodynamics / Lives | 59 |
| Duality / Nonduality | 60 |
| Divinity/Humanity/Biology | 62 |
| Root System | 64 |
| Ambiguous Genitalia | 82 |
| Night Creatures 2 | 88 |
| Encounter | 90 |
| Lover's Lane | 91 |
| Circles 1 & 2 | 94 |
| Spongeworld | 99 |
| When the Morning Stars Sang Together | 99 |
| A Crucial Moment in Evolution | 103 |
| Fragment | 105 |
| Fragment Elaborated | 109 |
| Self-Framing | 111 |
| Fragmentation | 111 |
| A Few More Words | 115 |
| 4. FAIRY CIRCLES | 118 |
| 1. Drawing | 118 |
| 2. Discourse | 122 |
| 3. Entities & Systems | 125 |
| 4. The Tree of Life | 131 |
| i. Arbitrariness | 131 |
| ii. What Is the Tree? | 135 |
| iii. Transfiguration | 139 |
| iv. Vision | 143 |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 153

REFERENCES 153

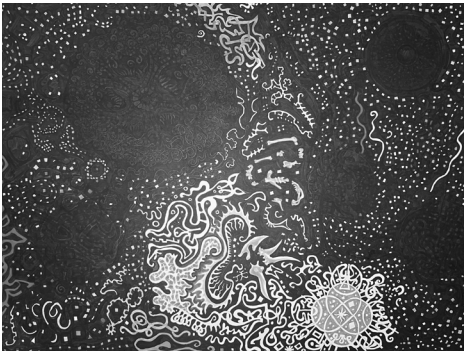
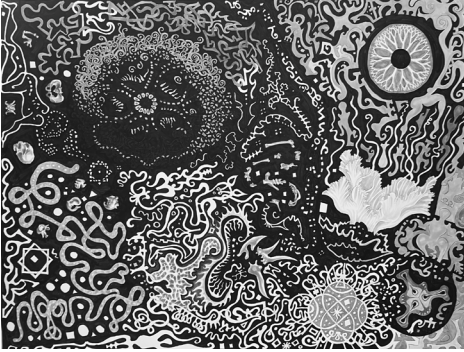
4 Fairy Circles.

In an 11/1/2022 *New York Times* article on the vegetation pattern known as *fairy circles*, *1. Drawing.*

the aerial photos of Namibian landscapes dotted with circlish blank patches caught my attention immediately. It is likely that our brains are wired so that when we see patterns like this, we are inclined to suspect the agency of living creatures—or, more inclusively, of entities, which could also include supernatural beings like fairies—or even more broadly, of systems, which also include entity-like non-entities that are not necessarily alive—at least, not according to officially sanctioned rationalism. The kinship of even radically different complex open systems can sometimes be recognized as a kind of subtle resonance: it's how one system recognizes another. The attention-capturing power of the fairy circles—that is, the complexity of the processes by which they must have come into being, which we infer (even if unconsciously) from visual evidence—may be involved with their ambiguity: the way they occupy the cusp of entityhood, and by occupying it, work to deconstruct the entity/non-entity dualism. The resonance happens because this cusp is where we all live, all of us systems. They interest us. *Hey, don't I know you?*



When I stumbled onto the article, I had just been working on a large drawing—one of a series inspired by Kandinsky's 1926 painting *Several Circles*—featuring circles distributed across the drawing.



If you've been reading this book, you know that my drawings evolve: a dark background often eats away at foregrounded forms, destroying or disintegrating some, honing and articulating others, and moving the drawing—as with the fairy circles—towards an evenly-spaced-out distribution of forms. Some of the circular forms were among the first things I drew; some evolved as the drawing progressed, others were present early but got altered beyond recognition or obliterated, and some emerged only as the drawing progressed. The emergence and destruction of form are not only sequential stages: in system formation (including fairy circles) as in my drawing, they are often simultaneous. The balance between them often shows up in my drawings as individual forms that look like

they are being destroyed and/or emerging, as well as in an overall balance of chaos and order. My drawing process doesn't resemble ecological processes because I have modeled it on them but because it is one of *them*. The quick way of saying how this could be the case is that—like many artists and others—I've trained my conscious mind to tread lightly enough to collaborate with other forces. If that sounds too New-Agey for you and you prefer more mainstream rationalist frameworks, Alan Turing's 1952 paradigm-shifting paper on the chemical basis of morphogenesis, mostly ignored at the time, has since spawned whole subdisciplines, transdisciplines and journals, pointing beyond chemistry to the mathematical universality of the emergence of form. So of course my brain, at the neurological level, dances to many of the same morphogenic tunes that the fairy circles do: if it didn't, I'd have to be some kind of supernatural creature! You can tune into these more resonantly by learning to hold at bay the reductive constraints overlaid by modernist realism and rationalism (which

operate neurologically via such relatively recently evolved brain superstructures as the Default Mode Network, which compulsively organizes experience into selves and linear narratives).

In fairy circles we recognize a Turing Pattern without knowing what specific forces were involved in generating it. Even if other entities were involved—that is, if the circles had been made by termites or Euphorbia bushes—or even by fairies or aliens—why are they shaped and spaced and sized the way they are? Even fairies, it seems, must be subject to mathematical universalities played out in ecosystems. How do they manage to distribute their sprinkles of fairy dust so evenly? Knowing fairies even a little, you can be sure they don't do it by measuring, but maybe just by liking to fly close-but-not-too-close to each other—a principle observed by other flocking and schooling creatures such as insects, birds, and fish as well by trees and plants as they arrange their branches and leaves, and as they distribute themselves across a landscape. Even when angels cluster together to dance on the head of a pin, the pins are spaced out on the pincushion, and the pincushions distributed among households. The range of interactions between clustering and spacing—urban and rural areas, ghettos and diasporas—is part of what Turing recognized as universal. It's part of the intelligence and creativity of systems. *This is the story.*

Scientists argue over competing theories, and it seems likely that the arguments of scientists dance to many of the same tunes—among them, stochastic processes and Turing instabilities—as the phenomena they study. *This is the story.*

This is not to say that the universal trumps the local, particular and contingent—that once you've decided it's a Turing pattern, your work is done and you might as well move on to some other phenomenon. The interest is in the interaction of the universal and the particular—that is, in their deconstructed and non-dual interactions. Thinking about the interaction of the universal and particular is a step on the way to understanding how they are interwoven. The problem is that universality is a 500-pound gorilla, like *gravity* or *fate* or

eternity, but we still find ways of dancing with all of these. We are ways of dancing with them. So are the fairy circles. This is the story.

Of the circles I drew and painted, several of the most prominent were drawn from Ernst Haeckel's illustrations (especially *Art Forms in Nature*, 1899): one represented an Echinoderm (brittle star), *Ophiotholia supplicans*; one was a calcareous sponge, *Leucandra bomba*; one formed around a diatom, *Triceratium mirificium*—and two more represented a Kabbalist motif known as *The Eight-Cornered Jewel*. There were also several snakelike forms: one was a radiolarian, *Collozoum serpentium*; others were tentacles of hybrid sea-creatures. All the circular creatures and symbols—and most of the snake-like forms too—got eroded, broken up, and mostly obliterated—as the black background began to take over. The background began as a way of making the already-drawn forms pop out, then started to become a deformational and destructive force, and eventually began to take shape itself as circles, some where the entities had been and others springing up among these. What happened overall was that a space populated by circular forms (often held in tension with chaotic forces and forms within and without) became a space populated by circular voids (again in tension with the chaotic, clustering and constellating forms surrounding them—and haunting them from the inside). I had not intended to illustrate anything to do with the fairy circles, and even when the circular voids began to appear in the drawing, it only occurred to me belatedly that these had anything to do with the fairy circles. In fact, when the voids began to appear, it was in spite of my intent to create an evenly distributed field of positive forms, not voids. I was pretty sure I had ruined the drawing I had already spent a week on, wasted the time I had spent meticulously realizing intricate forms that only got obliterated. But I kept on, reluctantly letting go of forms I had loved—the same *darlings* that writers are advised to murder—and eventually the circular voids themselves began to multiply and distributed themselves evenly enough to bring the composition into balance again. This balance, I have learned, though never perfect, is when to stop drawing. The ghostly remnants of forms

that haunted the voids remained especially visible when you look at or light the drawing obliquely enough to see the incised grooves of pencil lines. This both made me happy—by deconstructing the dualism of form and void—and uncomfortable, since it violated one of my primary formalist constraints: respecting above all the flatness of the picture plane. Even though these light incisions are barely visible as three dimensional, the subtle violation took the whole drawing to the cusp of painting and sculpture.

The obvious way of explaining how my looking at photos of fairy circles influenced my drawing without my realizing it is just to say it happened unconsciously. Or to say it another way, the fairy circles spoke to me, the way trees talk to each other by their root systems, underground—below language and consciousness, flying under their radar. My eyes and my hands were in the conversation, and language and consciousness came later (awkwardly, as one comes into an already animated conversation). *Hey, what's everybody talking about?*

The *Times* article describes how recent research discounts the theory that the circles are formed by termites and favors the “water stress” theory, whereby the circles are “a self-organized vegetation phenomenon induced by ecohydrological feedbacks.” The aridity and the competition of grass plants for water, together with the properties of the sandy soil, allow the circles to form as water catchment zones monopolized by the plants around them so that no other plants can get a foothold inside them. But the article offers almost no insights into self-orga-

2. *Discourse.*

nizing processes, other than the fact that Alan Turing was the first to describe them scientifically. In fact, the article presents itself as *epistemological* rather than *ontological*, meaning that it concerns the process by which we manufacture knowledge of things rather than the nature of the things in themselves. Accordingly, the overall subject that frames the article is the scientific debate about the circles, not the circles themselves. Presumably this “meta” focus comes from principled journalistic care to report only solidly confirmed facts: you can write that *Scientist A said that X is the case* and even that *99% of scientists believe that X is the case* (if you’ve run the numbers), but not that *X is the case*. The striking headline makes this clear: “In Hunt to Solve ‘Fairy Circle’ Mystery, One Suspect Is Dismissed.”

ASIDE: *A Conceptual Conflict Behind Conspiracy Theory*. The same epistemological emphasis dictates the dominant “meta” focus in political journalism whereby outrageous fake news (even if identified as “unproven”) tends to be framed as *claims that people are making*. It took months of painstaking national investigations before the claim that the 2020 US presidential election was “stolen”—which never had any basis in evidence—could be routinely identified in mainstream media as a “false claim”—though a majority of Republicans still say they believe it. You could maintain that journalists are ethically compelled to stick to certainties, even when it hurts to do so, and, after all, we can be more certain that people are claiming specific things than about what is actually the case. Unfortunately, this fetishization of narrowly verifiable facts leads to the devaluation of truth in favor of *discourse* (what people are saying and how they are saying it, considered as facts in themselves) and *performativity* (the actual effect of what is said, regardless of its truth or falsity). Thus principled journalists are pulled in by the same “people are saying” stratagem used by reposters and other spreaders of fake news. The answer is not likely to be a “return to truth” but a more thoroughgoing understanding of discourse: maybe journalism could evolve if it routinely also considered the counterproductive discursive and performative effects of its own fetishization of facts—that is, of how this fetishization functions as counterfactual. Likewise, political news focuses on *strategies*—such as on how certain claims constitute attempts to gain support or to discredit the other side—rather than on the substance of the claims themselves. Again, note that, in such cases, it may be an uncontroversial fact that people are making such claims, that such claims are being mobilized strategically, and that claims have real political repercussions regardless of their truth or falsity—but this is not the story. For a start, everybody knows that people don’t simply say things—that what they say and how they say it has been largely scripted by rhetorical and psychological logics shaped by their intersections with social, economic and political logics—broadly known as *discourse*. My assertion that *everybody knows* is shorthand—

It’s striking because it’s so un-striking—because it so tenuously qualifies as news. Is the elimination of one theory among many something anybody but the scientists involved is going to care about?

Bickering Scientists is a familiar trope. Such a story can easily be written with a wink to the reader, delivering a little snicker at the satire of squabbling ivory-tower academics. But what pulls readers in—same way the photo grabbed me in the first place—and what grabbed the scientists and even the journalists—was not this petty satisfaction but the way the magic of self-organizing systems speaks to our brains and, under the radar of consciousness, to our bodies. This is the story.

In the *Times* article, ecophysio­logist Michael Cramer acknowledges that “the to and fro between opposing camps has often been nothing less than vitriolic,” but apparently this is just the normal roughhousing of scientists under

the heading of boys will be boys. Cramer reserves the accusation of premature certainty for the media:

“Each publication has been hailed as having finally ‘solved’ the fairy circle ‘mystery’ in the popular media,” Dr. Cramer said in an email, calling such reporting an approach that “is not the norm for science.”

In spite of Cramer’s caricature of popular media as reckless and naive—and thus opposed to scientific circumspection—the main source of the *Times* piece is an article in *Perspectives in Plant Ecology, Evolution and Systematics*—hardly “popular media”—that makes the kind of bald ontological claim you might have thought Cramer was belittling: “Plant water stress, not termite herbivory, causes Namibia’s fairy circles.” In fact, bald ontological claims seem to be standard fare in scientific publications, as in the 2020 article in the *South African Journal of Botany* that makes a rival claim: “Sand circles in stony landscapes of Namibia are caused by large Euphorbia shrubs.” I’m guessing that Cramer would say that naive journalists mistake these bald truth claims for truth, not realizing that this is just an adversarial style of proposing hypotheses that science collectively will sort out in the fullness of time. In any case, the scientist satirizes credulous journalists and the journalist satirizes bickering scientists. The philosopher might be expected to stand back, look down on and satirize both, but my claim is a bit more radical: that *the story*—what is ultimately interesting about fairy circles—for the journalist, the scientist, and the philosopher, as for the visual artist—does not belong to satire but to the sublime—and that epistemology ultimately belongs to ontology.

Suddenly, in the middle of all the Scientist X said this and Scientist Y said that rehearsed in the *Times* article, there is

which (full disclosure) I’m using to avoid having to rehearse the relevant social and cultural theory by casting its conclusion as common sense—but is not itself a conspiracy theory. The hallmark of conspiracy theories is that they posit discrete people—or highly and consciously organized and coherent groups of people—as the agents. If they do sometimes also recognize structural or systemic causality, they mostly insist that it is trumped—its strings are ultimately pulled—by personal agency. Once when I was doing my best to make some common ground in a random conversation with an anti-vaxxer, I said something about how corporations rig the game so their profits trump what people actually need, but he just said flatly, *it’s not corporations, it’s Bill Gates* (who, he said, was putting microscopic computer chips into vaccines). I felt like he was telling me that he was allergic to any explanations involving structural or systemic causality; only personal agency would do. (This was a conversation stopper for me, since I’ve been taught to make arguments about how persons are subordinated to systems and structures. It occurred to me later that I could have said, “yeah, but did you know that Bill Gates is being controlled by Dick Cheney, a lizard person being kept alive by organs harvested from the poor?” I believe that, while factually untrue—probably—this version more accurately captured the psychopolitical dynamics involved.) Such monolithizing personification is marked even in the misplaced definite article routinely used by racists and conspiracy theorists (as in the phrases *the Jews, the Blacks, the gays*). My point here is that *conspiracy theory arises from a reactionary response to the conflict between systematic and personalized agency.*

a stark and unqualified ontological assertion: "In Namibia's sandy soil," the movement of water by plants (via roots drinking and leaves perspiring) "creates a vacuum effect that moves water from the interior of fairy circles toward the plants' roots at the circle's fringe and beyond." Just like that! What happened to journalistic decorum? To epistemology? To the lede? To the euphoria bushes? To editing? Seems like, amid the sustained labor of circumspection, there was a sudden guard-lowering and backlash or reverberation of ontology. This backlash—along with the attributive otherings and reversals between scientists and journalists—makes the push and pull of epistemology and ontology seem more like the pattern-generating forces they purport to describe. *Which was created in the image of which?*

3. *Entities and Systems.*

Ecologist and one of the study authors Stephan Getzin is quoted as saying, "Plants are forced to create these circles to redistribute water to maximize their chances of survival," adding that "we call it ecosystem engineering."

These kinds of statements play out a typically uncomfortable compromise in the ongoing push and pull between entity-based reasoning and ecosystematic thinking. Plants seem to be cast as knowledgeable, strategic, selfish and forward-thinking actors, though they are "forced" to behave thus. Being "forced" might seem to take away whatever personified agency is otherwise being attributed, but the construction itself enforces a misguided entity-versus-environment dualism—the same one that enables humans to disastrously misattribute to themselves separateness, nobility, privilege, and sovereignty—as in the old story that we struggle nobly to carve

out a realm of freedom, order and rationality (once known as *the white man's burden*—and just because that term is no longer used, it doesn't mean the politics of that story have changed much). You might think "ecosystem engineering" suggests that ecosystems do their own engineering, but as the term is actually used, it's ecosystems that get engineered by personified entities, usually species.

I've come around fully to the felicity of attributing entity status to systems; it's personification I'm opposing, especially when it takes the most reductive and destructive aspects of how humans understand themselves—as engaged in a struggle for domination and control over their environments. In other words, *I'm against the personification of humans too.*

One could blame Getzin for sloppy, plant-personifying language—or perhaps the *Times* reporter for latching onto the most reductive thing he said when they were conversing with him—but these kinds of blaming would (again) be shifting too much agency to personified entities. Either way, we might say, the point is the dominance and recalcitrance of personification—in science as in journalism. Personification is more than a trope—a figure of speech—and thus an object of study that belongs to literary studies or rhetoric. It is better understood as *itself a system*. For example, we have a legal system set up to blame personified entities rather than systems, to enforce narratives that attribute agency and responsibility to particularized subjects (which is why the police and the law are part of the same system with movies and television series about police and the law), not to mention other sprawling and ubiquitous financial, political, social and cultural apparatuses of personification.

But as I suggested above, what I'm doing in the previous paragraph is mostly just what philosophers and discourse analysts are trained to do: to try to get the upper hand on scientists and journalists by trying to show their positions to be discursively scripted—that is, by showing entities that they are the pawns of systems. One of the

reasons it never works, though, is because scientists—in their ever-renewed philosophical naivete—say that the epistemology, the language, the discourse, the tropes, the ideologies are more or less superficial and ultimately don't compromise the substance of the science. For philosophers, a next step toward further discursive sophistication could be to understand *their own positions* as scripted—but you can't escape the orbit of this hierarchical one-upsmanship by asserting your super-sophistication!

The way of escaping is by anarchism. This does not mean a free-for-all (almost always a way for those already empowered and entrenched in a hierarchy to reinforce their positions) but a leveling of the playing field that begins (1) by rejecting implications that anybody or anything is a person (this includes humans and even divinities), and (2) affirming that we are all entities. This is a form of anti-humanism in the sense that it rejects the delusion of human privilege as such, exposing it as destructive to humanity (hence the Anthropocene). At the same time, though, it rejects those who maintain that the earth would be better off without humans: we must be as precious and holy as any other creature. The anarchic sacredness of humans and life includes all complex systems—solar systems, ecologies, even supply chains (the metabolic systems of modern life).

Accordingly, it is a satisfying step in the right direction to see a reductively entity-based account (termites) be beaten by the ecosystematic account of water stress. Stress is a hallmark of systems. It can be their Achilles Heel or the grain of sand they build their pearls around. In the 19th century, the germ theory of disease deployed its modern, entity-based account to displace more ecosystematic explanations—especially the old theory of humors, whereby health is not about expelling an invader but re-establishing a dynamic balance. The fully entity-based account was unsustainable, like modernity generally: there had to be a backlash. Stress emerges as a characteristically postmodern complication. There may be entities involved—such as us and the invading germs—but stress

is what gives the germs a foot in the door and a foothold once in. Complexity—the frictions of multiply nesting systems, subsystems and metasystems—makes them subject to stress: entities are necessarily positioned at the nodes of networks with many moving parts—and there are always conflicts. So we must move back/forward towards an ecosystematic model when we understand that germs by themselves cannot necessarily cause disease without the cooperation of immune systems (which function as a “fifth column” in the us-versus-them model), and must move even further when we understand that, on the other hand, immune systems can cause auto-immune diseases without germs (part of the backlash of making self/nonself distinctions in the first place), and further still when we understand that immune systems, like all systems, are multiply nested in and wired into other systems, thus subject to the stresses of our psyches and families and jobs, the relentless forces of capitalism, a range of identity-based oppressions, ideologies and religions, climate change, and so on.

In his book *The Cosmic Serpent*, anthropologist Jeremy Narby tells the story of how he overcame the epistemological bias of dominant modern rationality—and with it, his condescending attitude towards what South American shamans told him they had learned from spirits. In the process, he recognized that the knowledge indigenous peoples say they got from spirits—especially concerning elaborate ecological relationships—could hardly have been gleaned in any other way. (How could you stumble onto the discovery that the psychedelic effects of ayahuasca could only be accessed if you cooked it for many hours together with one other plant, when neither of the plants was a food source in the first place? Is it likely that people had a systematic practice of slow-cooking and drinking random combinations of vines and leaves and bark?) He came to believe that shamans were in direct communication with DNA (the shared medium of all living creatures on earth), and he proposed mechanisms whereby that could be possible—by stretching but not breaking scientific rationality. One could paint Narby (1) as a wild-eyed apostate “gone native,” (2) as a scientist uncommonly committed to modern rationality in a Sherlock Holmes way (“When you have eliminated all which is impossible,

then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth") and as such, compelled to reduce spiritualistic explanations to rationalistic ones, or (3) as one seeking to open up a middleground among rationalities. In any case, there is no way of factoring out the risks of this cross-epistemological engagement. Even in the most expansive scenarios, where scientists and ayahuasqueros sit down together with mutual respect, can Big Pharma be far behind? Whatever the scenario, for indigenous people—and for the rest of us, faced with climate change and all the other fallouts of modern economic rationality—the existential risks that bring us to this encounter could hardly be higher.

The Himba bushmen who live in the Namib have several accounts of the fairy circles: that the supreme being Mukuru created them and endowed them with magic powers, or sometimes that a dragon sleeping deep in the earth breathes out fiery bubbles that burn away the grass when they reach the surface, or that gods and humans used to walk together and while the human footprints were long ago erased by time, the indelible and ever-renewed footprints of the gods remain. These kinds of explanations seem right to me.

Like the spirits that inhabit the rainforests of Central and South America, in Narby's account, the deities of the Himba—no less than the fairies invoked in the western name for the circles—posit agency and intelligence that exceeds specific natural, realistic, personalized entities. Such spirits could not be convicted in any courtroom by any set of laws designed to personalize blame. The reason why I have so warmed to the entification of systems (though it goes against my both my humanistic and my anti-humanistic training) is because it seems like the best way of engaging their intelligence and agency—one that captures their entity-likeness without reducing them to discrete material creatures. And, it seems, they must continue to be situated as supernatural to the extent that the dominant idea of nature is not capacious enough to include ecosystematic agency and intelligence. This situation is at least a step on the way to deconstructing the interlocked dualities of nature, divinity (the supernatural), and humanity. Understanding that it's life and gods and intelligence and agency all the way down is

currently—as our discursive ecosystem has evolved—incompatible with scientific rationality, but this need not be the case—and if we survive long enough—if we are to survive—this will change. As Wittgenstein so succinctly put it, *if fleas were to develop a rite* (or even a full-fledged religion), *it would refer to dogs*: the sacred is a performative way to mark that whose vital importance we forget or take for granted at our peril. One way or another, the future is Gaian.

The modern take is that primitives and premoderns, bless their hearts, lacked the knowledge that we have built over centuries through reason and science, and—lacking Occam's Razor—were forced to posit menageries of fantastic beings where we see only impersonal forces at work. With a little more perspective (made possible by our postmodernity), we can understand that premoderns cultivated ecological knowledge and ways of life over millennia that we have mostly lost, to our peril, and for our own survival and flourishing as a species need to regain and reinvent. As science expands to reckon more fully with the systematic and ecological, will its own destructive hubris merely be fed, or will the science/mysticism boundary become more porous and generative, enabling scientists and shamans to sit together, showing each other Powerpoint presentations, taking ayahuasca and talking with spirits? I don't pretend to know which of these paths—or which combination—will prevail, though Powerpoint and ayahuasca seem likely in any case.

All agency and intelligence, including our own, is downloaded from the systems in which we participate; it could not be otherwise. The vast superiority of the subconscious operations of the brain (and of ecosystems) to consciousness is clear if you imagine trying to consciously regulate all your myriad bodily functions, intricately wired together as they are. Imagine the single little Wizard-of-Oz homunculus of consciousness seated in a fractal and multidimensional hall-of-mirrors control room of floor-to-ceiling dials and screens and switchboards.

ASIDE: *Intelligence All the Way Down.* Just after writing the words “life and gods and intelligence and agency all the way down,” I stumbled onto an article in which roboticist Joshua Bongard, speaking of human bodies composed of tissues composed of cells, avers that “what we are is intelligent machines made of intelligent machines made of intelligent machines, all the way down.” On one hand, this might just be more of the same old mechanistic—even nihilistic—rationalism, but notice that Bongard doesn't just demote consciousness but—and this is what strikes me as promising—promotes the intelligence of living systems and subsystems in general, resulting in what looks like a generously anarchized (democratized, if you prefer) leveled playing field. What you might have thought would be an uncomfortably odd coupling of mechanistic rationalism and New-Agey animism is unapologetically being peddled by roboticists in the *New York Times*. Is the worm turning?

But that's not all, since the Wizard is also charged to monitor and coordinate with how the brain and body are connected to subsystems and metasystems in which we participate and on which we depend—such as the gothically complex operations of every single cell (with their DNA and metabolic infrastructure) or of epically intricate ecosystems.

4. *The Tree of Life.*

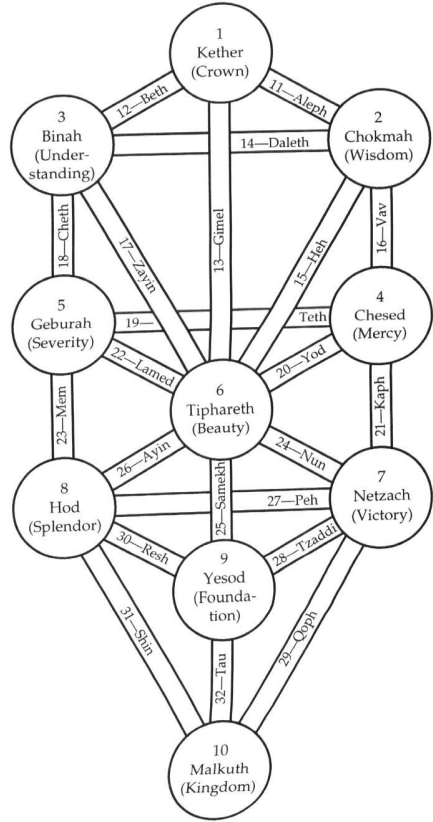
I have always been interested in mystical systems for their mind-changing potential—but I am also interested in science fiction for the same reason. Science fiction works because it doesn't correspond exactly with the world we think we know, while science itself—or so we are told—aspire to correspond ever more perfectly with the world. In this, science resembles the old fantasy of an ideal language in which words and things would line up perfectly; the categories of language would be carved out along the "joints" of worldly kinds of things. It's the way a butcher looks at the world. There are other ways.

Even in philosophy, though, something in me recoils from over-investment in abstract categories that seem arbitrary. Like conspiracy theories, such explanatory regimes can function obsessively to organize what might otherwise be chaotic. Science and philosophy can be comforting, like religion. More often than we think, the utility of such schemata in engaging the world—often marketed as realism or truth—may serve their utility as control fantasies. No special shame in this, though: all systems need to build their bubbles and find their foci. We should never forget, though, that for millennia, the idea of an earth-centered universe not only seemed patently obvious (after all, every day and

night we can watch the sun and stars wheeling around us), it also worked well enough to make surprisingly accurate astronomical calculations—admittedly, with some glitches and massaging. The same can be said for ideas that still seem common-sensical, such as the referentiality of language, or constructs such as the self: they work well enough—though some of the glitches and damage control operations are disastrous.

My allergy to arbitrariness is less a well-thought-out philosophical scruple (though it may incline me to philosophy) and more like a neurological condition. For example, I have always had a mental block, when setting the table, about which side the forks and knives and spoons go on. I've set tables hundreds of times and the supposed logic of what-goes-where has been repeatedly explained to me, but it never sticks: when I'm not paying attention, my mind tosses it out. This is also why I had no interest in history—at least as it was taught to me early on, as a series of random dates and events to memorize. Of course, language itself is an almost entirely arbitrary enterprise, but one learns it as one learns a city: not by studying maps but by living and moving around in it, like a slime mold learns a maze. I lived in San Francisco off and on a long time ago; I couldn't begin to draw a map of it but I discover whenever I visit that I can easily find my way around. I was going to say *I still know my way around*, except I don't, not in the usual sense of *I* and *know*. I just follow my feet. This is exactly our relationship with grammar: it is downloaded and encoded so deeply in our brains that we follow its rules almost effortlessly, but if asked what rules we are following, only a trained grammarian could give much of an account.

I always had the arbitrariness problem with the Tree of Life, a central focus of Kabbalah. I could never remember the names of the *sefirot* (the ten attributes or emanations that comprise the Tree) and which went



where. I also had a longstanding problem with the tree as it is typically understood—as showing how divinity is stepped down progressively to the material universe (reinforcing a dualism, hierarchy, and linear emanation narrative)—but my problem with arbitrariness persisted after I learned the non-emanationist interpretation.

Why ten sefirot instead of four or eleven or a hundred? Why this one on the right and that one on the left? How can it even be characterized as a tree at all—with emanations deriving from a single source the way branches come from a single trunk—when the diagram clearly stresses the way they interconnect—converging as well as diverging—in what looks like a closed loop or circuit—a rhizome or network with nodes at its intersections—which is exactly what a tree is *not*? I marveled that practitioners have allowed their thoughts and experiences to be organized by something so arbitrary, to invest in a language so arcane, and to enter into arguments over particularities so contingent—though as a longtime academic, I have plenty of experience with what Freud called *the narcissism of small differences*. You may notice here that I gravitated toward the familiar trope of bickering mystics (or academics); my allergy to arbitrariness meant I was inclined to disavow it in myself and attribute it to others (which is why this manoeuvre is known as *othering*). In other words, arbitrariness is a straw man in this argument, but as far as I'm concerned, anyway, a recalcitrant one.

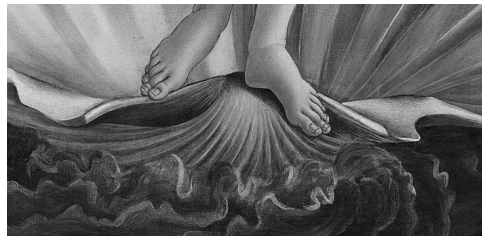
Of course, in calling the Tree arbitrary I am not talking about pure arbitrariness—as if one were to pick ten words at random from a dictionary and build a system around them. Even in this more purely arbitrary case, though, one could—through creative interpretation—build elegant structures of meaning. This patterning and meaning-making from arbitrariness is often cited as a fundamental tendency of the human mind. We obsessively seek and are drawn to pattern—whether manifest or latent—so much that our brains are inclined to imagine it where it may not exist. We are so attached to pattern that we are incapable of generating random sequences of numbers and have to rely on computers to do it for us. In a sensory deprivation chamber, we tune into our heartbeats and the rhythmic woosh of blood in our veins

and arteries, and soon after, we begin to hallucinate. Of course these are just minor empirical examples; arguably, much of the cherished orderliness of our selves and worlds is precariously papered over a bottomless rat's nest of arbitrariness and contingency. But this is also exactly the world-building that systems do and the system-building that worlds do. *Eros*, the principle of resonant and expansive connectivity, also known as love, also deified as *Venus*, emerges from the chaotic foam of the choppy waves.

This is why we are at home in this universe, arguably why this universe was made for us, why (if so inclined) we can consider ourselves a crown of creation: because we sit atop this particular rat's nest of contingency and arbitrariness. If the mass of an electron were different—by some unimaginably tiny amount—neither we nor our universe would exist at all. The capacity to make meaning out of arbitrariness is far from uniquely ours. We share it with the universe and our fellow systems.

Still, recognizing that the sefirot are meaningfully arranged only defers the arbitrariness. It's easy to understand, for example, why the sefirot *Chesed* (kindness, mercy) and *Gevurah* (discipline, rigor) would be situated opposite each other and that they could be cast as leading ethical or psychological tendencies—or generalized into more abstract principles. But the arbitrariness comes rushing back when we ask why these particular principles, this particular opposition, should be understood as more universal or important than any other. Even if we recognize it as a fruitful heuristic—a potential entry point into profound contemplative explorations—what makes it more worthy than any other set of principles of being included in the Top Ten List that constitute the sefirot? And why should *Gevurah* be situated on the righthand pillar of the tree, between *Hokmah* (wisdom) and *Netzach*

ASIDE: *Ductile Infanthood.* I just closed my eyes and picked two words randomly from a dictionary: *ductile* and *infanthood*. *Ductile*—meaning flexible enough to be hammered out finely—can be understood as a kind of opposite of *infanthood* (because *infanthood* is not a single substance extended into a life but the first step of an open-ended metamorphic process)—but we can go deeper by considering the two principles as a dialectic or a balance, as facets of the same phenomenon (kinds of potentiality), or even as opposed and the same. The paired adjective *ductile* and noun *infanthood* suggest the productively vexed relationship between the attribute of a thing and the thing itself. Admittedly, I'm off to a clunky start here, but several hundred years of interpretation by diverse groups of devotees should be enough to spin ductile *infanthood* into a full-fledged belief system. As I tell my students, even a bad idea can be a good starting point if your creative process is (a) open and (b) rigorous enough—that is, if (a) *Chesed* and (b) *Gevurah* are balanced; or if (a) the convulsive metamorphoses inaugurated by *infanthood* coexist with (b) rigorous ductile continuity. (See what just happened there?)



(victory)? Again, no doubt we could generate compelling rationales that would resonate with our experience and feelings (one need only consult the kabbalistic literature), but in all likelihood we could do the same if the two were reversed, or if they were displaced by some other opposition.

According to the book of Genesis, the Tree of Life stands at the center of Eden alongside the Tree of Knowledge. Eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge—

ii. what is the tree? the knowledge of good and evil—is what causes humankind to be banished from paradise, also known as *the Fall of Man*. The serpent's account supports the idea that such knowledge is too lofty and godlike for humans, but a more kabbalistic account is that dualistic knowledge (especially when arranged in hierarchies like good/evil) is itself the problem: it is wrong-headed and keeps you stuck, distancing you from the divine (or, if you prefer, from less reductive and more profound awareness—or even from more scientific thought)—starting with the subject/object distinction between knower and known (a variation of epistemology and ontology)—and that *this* constitutes the Fall in itself. Consequently, practicing deconstruction—the displacement of dualistic and hierarchical thinking—can be redemptive, part of *tikkun olam* (repair of the world). More than just a cognitive or intellectual process, this can be a hard-won spiritual achievement. Just because you've understood it on a case-by-case basis doesn't mean you've displaced it as a way of thinking and feeling: you may be able to expound eloquently about deconstructing the distinction between originals and copies (one of the core dualities targeted by the philosophical practice of deconstruction), but if you still tend to invest in other more recalcitrant dualities—such as tending to characterize your own positions as rational and others as irrational—you haven't even gotten close to nondualism. Thus, though I have for many years studied and practiced and taught philosophical deconstruction—and for a few years studied kabbalistic nondualism—my ongoing attachment to the strawman of arbitrariness—which is inevitably part of a dualism (in opposition to *meaning* or *necessity*)

-is a kind of stuckness characteristic of all dualisms. Of course, your own most recalcitrant dualisms may well differ from mine. In any case, the most important and radical change does not come from *the front*-from the avant-garde: in the old Daoist parable, the shepherd does not lead the flock from the front but follows it in order to bring along the stragglers. We are held back not by the failure to see or find a way forward but because of what continues to hold us back, as by the legacy of deeply embedded trauma.

Genesis has almost nothing to say about the Tree of Life-perhaps an indication of its holiness and unfitness for being described in language, since, after all, it is to prevent fallen humans from getting their hands on it, after expelling them from paradise, that God places cherubim and a flaming sword to block their access. Accordingly, the Tree of Life was bound to be a center of the esoteric tradition of Kabbalah, where only devotees stand a chance of approaching it.

You might wonder how the Tree could be nondualist if it is defined by its binary distinction from the Tree of Knowledge-and by the same token, how you could have nondualism at all if it is in dualistic contrast to dualism. You can't! But pluralism and/or unicity can include duality without privileging it. In fact, curious ambiguities and house-of-mirror effects in the Genesis account suggest that the two trees may be one-and after all, we live on a planet where the largest single organism is a grove of quaking aspen-or is it the planet itself? And there is a tradition that the two Trees are "bound at the root."

The kabbalistic tradition portrays the Tree of Life as a visual diagram; practitioner and artist David Chaim Smith calls it a "map of reality" and scholar J.H. Chajes calls it a "map of God." These are the same thing-if you are a non-emanationist who believes that divinity and the universe are one-that divinity was not stepped down in stages to yield material reality (a common interpretation of the ten sefirot or

emanations that form the Tree). Chajes calls the sefirot and the networks of relationships among them "facets of the divine." Shifting to characterize the sefirot not as successive branches of a tree but as facets of a single jewel (*sefira* is sometimes asserted to be etymologically related to *sapphire*) de-hierarchizes them. In other constructions, Chajes emphasizes the tree as non-representational: "like today's Venn diagram, it was used to visualize abstract relations"; his characterization of the sefirot as a set of "skeleton keys that unlock all of reality" shifts further from representation to something defined by its performativity—that is, something that does something rather than representing something: it opens gates to something itself unrepresentable. The sefirot are specifically "skeleton keys" because each is pluripotent; rather than being keyed to individual locks (pegged to specific discrete categories)—which would constitute an anti-kabbalistic nominalism in which only particularity exists, positing a one-to-one correlation of words and things—"each *sefira* comprises all ten." This is a consequence of how each is defined relationally in a dance with the others (as always with the dynamical components of systems) and thus (if you want to get more technical), how holographic self-similarity (the way the whole resembles the parts) coexists with self-difference (the way the heterogeneity of the whole—the way it differs from itself—resembles the heterogeneity of the parts). Writing that the Tree functions "to orient the student-practitioner"—as a kind of compass—Chajes moves still farther away from representation and from dogmatic ideas that "reality is divided into exactly these ten categories": the map and compass are parts of a process—as are signposts or doorways or paths—that can help the practitioner on the way to accessing what is beyond language, diagrams, images, and cognition.

Notice that, in the preceding paragraph, I've organized various accounts of the Tree into a spectrum that moves from representation to performativity: a heuristic arrangement that itself constitutes either a path, a dialectic to be played out, or a duality to

be deconstructed. It also works well as an account of the dynamics of my drawing.

Tree, map, faceted jewel, a set of keys, a compass, "a kind of hydraulic system of networked hubs"; "the endlessly prolific generator of reality itself"; "a memory-palace-like matrix of layered, patterned information"; a constellation, bunch of grapes, chains, flaming coals, springs of water, "combinatoric spinning wheels": this potentially infinite list doesn't mean that the descriptions or what is being described are impressionistic. Metaphors function similarly in scientific accounts: each way of describing an atom (for example) brings particular insights and mistakes. The old solar-system model of the atom might be a good start, but it wrongly suggests a system comprising a specific number of discrete parts. Instead, we are told, each of an atom's components are both particles and waves, and the whole thing is less an old-fashioned, common-sensical thing than a buzzing hive of relationships, a cloud of probabilities, making the whole thing/nonthing an exact opposite of how it was first postulated (as an indivisible chunk of matter; *atomos* meaning *uncuttable*). You might notice how uncannily this account of the atom might apply to the Tree of Life as well.

Each account or image of the Tree comes with various powers and problems: the tree grows upward (good for suggesting the progress of the practitioner to the divine) while the grapes hang downward (good for suggesting the way the divine moves into its manifestations); the hydraulic system is good for conveying systematicity and dynamism but mistakenly suggests a schema of channels and flows (often expressed in the dualities of form and content, matter and energy, bodies and life force). Moreover, the sefirot are sometimes represented in other forms entirely, especially as concentric circles or spheres, sometimes as a hubbed and spoked wheel, a menorah, architectural forms (a pyramid, tower, three-pillared building, throne) and anthropomorphic forms. Chajes asserts that each image is "symbolic rather than iconic," meaning that it bears an arbitrary relationship to what it represents rather than one of resemblance, but this comes with its own baggage by suggesting a duality of arbitrariness and resemblance.

I came to terms with the arbitrariness of the tree by coming to terms with the nondualism of arbitrariness and meaning. The short version is that I came to understand the

iii. transfiguration Tree as a primordial or pluripotent system (as it must be in order to be a model or a map of systematicity itself), as an exemplar of the kind of complex, open system that is at once closed/open and universal/particular. Its interwoven arbitrariness and meaning is necessary if it is to participate fully in the same interweave of the world, by which we understand its evolution as a mix of fate—that which was baked in, bound to happen—and contingency; of the overdetermined and the underdetermined.

Imagine a terrarium or aquarium—an *ecologarium*, to use Samuel Delany's term—completely sealed in glass, allowing essentially only one input: light. In fact, you can buy small glass-enclosed terraria like this that can live for many years. Our planet is such a system—a plant-oxygenated bubble sustained by the single external energy input of sunlight—and thus a kind of analogue of the Tree, a self-contained constellation sustained by the continual influx of *Aur En Sof*—the streaming light of divinity. The components of a sealed terrarium—including plants and animals being born, reproducing, and dying; chemicals being assembled, broken down and recombined at the atomic and molecular and cellular level by assorted creatures and processes; and even larger structures that continually accrete and erode—all cycle through various stages, some yoked tightly to each other and some marching more loosely to their own drumbeats. At any time, the mix of kinds and numbers of components may differ: there may be thousands of tiny plankton present at one moment (or, at other scales, supermassive black holes or galaxies), but the next time you look, most of these may have been eaten and others outgrown their plankton stage to become larger plankton-eating creatures themselves. These cycles—a collective metabolism—may not simply reproduce the same sets of creatures and ecologies over and over through the same sequences of phases but generate new sets of relationships, new phases and creatures that might turn out to be relatively stable, or might fall back into their old patterns never to be seen again, evolve into new three-ring-circuses

or collapse into quivering slime—or might manage to pull themselves together, crawl phoenix-like out of the slime and get busy again with world-building. This convulsive kaleidoscopic process is our world: a tapestry continually being woven and unwoven, a knot constantly being tied and untied (not necessarily in succession but simultaneously), morphing and reconstellating into new configurations. *Our world*, like systems generally and like the Tree of Life, is a *transfiguration machine*.

I use the ecologarium as a basic example of a complex open system to stress that the number and kinds of entities and relationships in a system may be variable; we sense that there must be a minimum threshold of complexity for a living system but we are probably not going to be able to specify it once-and-for-all by saying there must be x number of components in x number of relationships; this threshold is what I've called *someness*: it refers to a plurality—one might say a *singular plurality* or a *whole plurality*—that is inherently unspecifiable (uncountable). To access the radical openness of the field of possibilities, we might imagine other universes in which the kinds of particles and speed of light were different (this could have been our universe if things had fallen out slightly differently—or in other words, our universe could have been—and at least in some parameters, still could be—another universe); alien kabbalists for whom the Tree of Life might have four or a hundred sefirot. This arbitrariness—better now to call it *spontaneity and openness*—is characteristic of all systems: it is the extent to which they march to their own drumbeats—the way circus performers manage to juggle (they could do card tricks or play musical instruments instead) while unicycling on a tightrope. A book obeys the same physical laws as a rock or a tree; gravity and electromagnetism don't care much whether it's *The Divine Comedy* or *Mein Kampf*—and yet, while books and language (like other systems) can be said to carve out a realm of freedom, they connect back to the world, which they leverage in turn. Archimedes said, "Give me a lever and a place to stand and I will move the earth": this is exactly what systems do. They remain embedded in the world, in one sense becoming even more embedded by enhancing the

traffic between themselves and the rest of the world. There is not necessarily a correspondence between their components and the world's, no alignment with the joints of the world: before genetic life and alphabetic writing, there was no such thing as ATGC and ABCD. The fact that they span those joints while remaining attached is what makes them *muscular*. The Tree does what language and what systematicity itself does: leverages your attachments to the world while making you both more detached and a more intimately embedded participant in it.

Openness and spontaneity would continue

to exist even if the beginning and end were known (birth and death for living creatures, a Big Bang and possibly a Heat Death for the universe): the middle is open. This is one form of the coexistence of closure and openness. We know the diver will start from the platform and disappear into the water, but what flips and twists will they perform along the way; what splash will they make? The beginning doesn't determine what follows it and the end doesn't trump what precedes it. Or to put it a bit more cynically: the ancient dictum that you can't call someone happy until and unless they die happy illustrates the rigid narrowness of a narrative perspective—in fact, all stories end badly, more or less!

Life may well exist on thousands of other planets in other forms—just as life might have existed, might exist now beyond our recognizing it, or may yet exist in countless alternative forms on this very planet if any given evolutionary zig were to be a zag. Other futures are possible. Life may even exist based on other elements or at other scales. As I said above, we can even imagine—or at least imagine that we could imagine—life existing in other universes based on entirely different sets of particles and forces attuned differently, but even so, these would have to be capable of entering into relationships that could achieve a sufficiently dynamic stability to qualify as life. Presumably, life in any universe would require



some minimal level of complexity and openness and stability and dynamism. Q. Could the Tree of Life or any model be applicable not just to the particularity of our world but to the stability, complexity, dynamism and openness that must be fundamental qualities of any living universe? That is, could they be a set of skeleton keys, potentially valid not just for the current configuration of our world but—at the very least—for other possible futures? A. If they were not, they would also fail to account for the openness of the present of our universe, our world, our own little lives, or even this very sentence, which (if the previous sentences are any indication) might still sprawl out to prodigious length—or go off the rails entirely. Q. Are these the exact four trans-universal qualities (*stability, complexity, dynamism and openness*)—these four and no more? A. Of course not: even the complexities of language (the particular constellations of meanings these words carry in English) insure that this could not be the case, but it's a start. Of course, any assertion about what is possible in other universes is highly suspect. Even if we could mathematize the fundamental qualities and build computer models with different values (for elementary particle masses and force strengths and so on) and run them to see which ones are stable enough to survive and flourish, we would still be limited by our own analytical, creative and model-building intelligences, which have been shaped by our own universe. Still, discovering a stable and evolvable combination—even in this virtual or hypothetical form—would be revolutionary; it might lead us to build viable artificial life or make new discoveries about our own universe. The hypothetical is a real doorway, an opening, just as every zig and zag of evolution or thought, every wobble, could be the start of a new trajectory. Imagining other universes is a step on the way to access the radical nature of the openness and spontaneity of our own.

The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge.
- Hannah Arendt

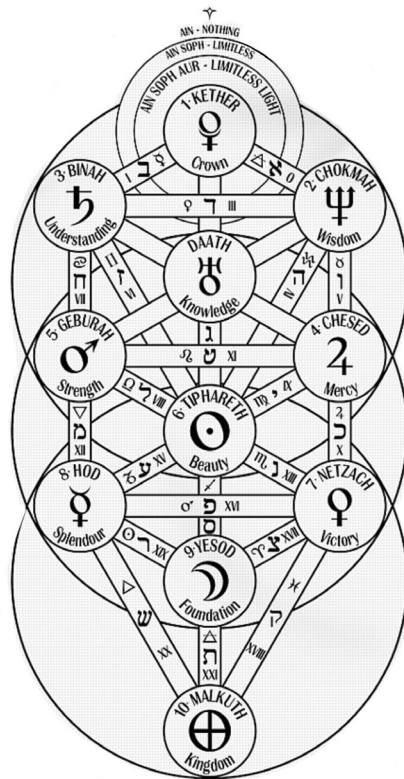
There are two traditional versions of the tree, one where *Da'at*—knowledge—mediates between *Keter* (the crown) and *Tiferet* (beauty; see diagram on page 144) and one where *Da'at* is displaced and the overflowing fullness of divinity—*shefa*—streams directly from *Keter* into and through *Tiferet* (diagram diagram on page 145). Clearly, this ambiguity is related to the open question of whether there are two trees in Eden—a Tree of Knowledge and a Tree of Life—or whether they are one—and the question of how we should understand knowledge: as a lesser form of what in its higher form might be called *awareness*, more attached to information than to meaning (an argument nicely supported by the anagrammatic equivalence of *da'at* and *data*), and ultimately as more of an obstacle than a gateway?

Including *da'at* on the Tree—what might be called the knowledge-centric position—would seem to make eleven sefirot. This poses a problem because the classical mystical text *Sefer Yetzira* dictates that there are “ten and not nine; ten and not eleven”—and besides, if there were eleven, it would upset many interlocking arguments that make use of *gematria* (the numerical values assigned to Hebrew letters and words). The knowledge-centric faction sometimes addresses this problem with the proposition (1) that *Keter* is not itself a sefira but more like the unrepresentable godhead that is above the ten, or (2, as in the righthand diagram, below) that

Da'at is not technically a sefira itself but more like a zone or hub via which the upper sefirot interact. These propositions trigger my arbitrariness allergy, striking me as after-the-fact massaging to make the numbers come out right.

Why should the tradition even in its heterogeneity retain and legitimize an interpretation that is so clearly wrong—one that is explicitly identified as such in Genesis by the derogation of the Tree of Knowledge in favor of the Tree of Life? Is it because the attachment to knowledge is so entrenched and tends to be such a vested interest of those (scholars and mystics, among others) who expound on such matters? Or, more generously, is it in order for practitioners to come to the displacement of da'at by themselves—by which the Tree of Knowledge becomes the Tree of Life? Again, rather than representing a dogmatic proposition and purported truth about reality (a piece of knowledge about the world), the two trees play out a fact about practice: that one needs to be displaced in order to engage the other. The displacement of the Tree of Knowledge by the Tree of Life yields the realization that dualism had been illusory all along: this is the sound of one hand clapping.

It is necessary to retain the Tree of Knowledge because, as per Blake's Proverbs of Hell, "if others had not been foolish, we should be so"—and, we might add, if we had not been foolish, we still would be—and furthermore, "if the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise." Of course dualism relentlessly reasserts itself: does this mean (1) that the path of foolishness would, in the fullness of time, reach wisdom—or (2) that the fool eventually will give up on his insanity (defined as the kind of stuckness that does the same thing over and over, expecting different results) and switch to another path, since "one never knows what is enough until one knows what is too much" and "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom"? Blake left the ambiguity because it is necessary, much as Wittgen-

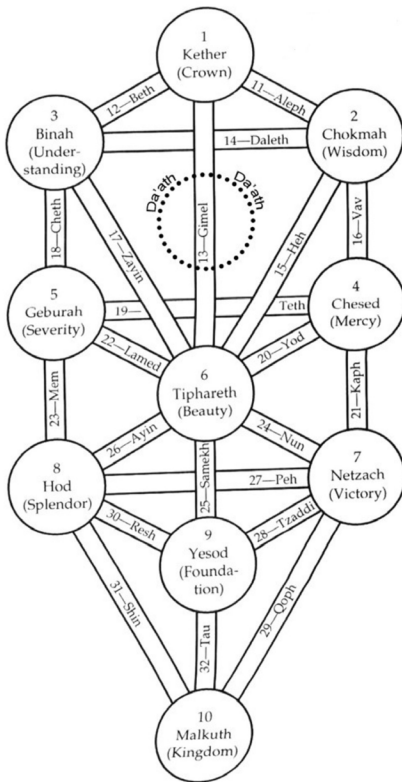


stein found it necessary both to propose and to renounce the propositions of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

Wittgenstein's ladder stands for knowledge itself. To put it another way: knowledge is an *aporia*; a non-passage that nonetheless functions as a necessary step. There is no going through it to get to where you're going, but there is also not likely to be any way of getting to where you're going without coming up against it—even beating your head against it for years—before you begin to figure out how to get around it. Even the knowledge-centric faction comes around (after persisting in its folly) to incorporate objections, splitting the dualistic difference (between those who elevate and those who would dethrone knowledge) by stipulating that *Da'at* includes a lower form that is the obstacle to be displaced in order to access the higher, which is the gateway.

Of course your obstacles will be the sites of your breakthroughs; it could not be otherwise. The question of why the tradition should retain a "wrong" interpretation that continually has to be displaced echoes the most fundamental questions of why should there be a fall and a redemption, a *tzimtzum* (a contraction or withdrawal of divinity) and a *tikkun* (repair), not necessarily as narratives (as stages in a linear eschatological arc) but even as a simultaneous dance of opposites. Why should there be divinity and a universe—or as the question is often posed scientifically, why is there something rather than nothing?—or religiously: why did God create the world? Why shouldn't the world have



remained nestled—undifferentiated, unmanifest, immanent—in the lap of the divine? The short answer is that it does so remain, no less than we are never born from the ecologies and other systems in which we are embedded. The slightly longer answer is that the question implies a duality: pure undifferentiated oneness is based on a dualistic exclusion and subordination of plurality and difference. What would divinity be if it could be boxed in on all sides by everything that it is not? Immanence must coexist somehow with a circuit, a going out and a returning, even if the circuit is itself immanent: this is the Tree of Life. Separation—the way the strands are teased out from each other—is necessary for them to be braided together. The one and the many shimmer, and in the process, obstacle and gateway are fully nondualized. *The two are two, the two are one, the two are many, and the two are none.* By *none*, we understand (finally) that there is no gate, no path, no obstacle, no destination. We are already here and we always have been. The words of the sentences “the two are one” and “the two are none” are short and easy—probably the simplest sentences in this book and maybe the simplest sentences I’ve ever written—but how do you go about realizing it?

One answer: by Beauty (Tiferet). As someone attuned in particular to the visual, I am continually struck by the beautiful, nonlinear and usually fractal fullness of the visual field, a cornucopia spilling and sprawling out its treasures around us at every moment. This visual fullness is how I am able to understand what it means to say *my cup runneth over* and *thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies*: think of the cubist tables of Picasso, Gris, and Braque, filling to overflowing the visual plane, mixing words and things, spilling into overlapping and tilting planes and into collage and sculpture. The visual is how I can be struck by the divinity of the world.

Attunement to the visual is, of course, not the only way to access beauty and fullness beyond knowledge. The transcendental waterfall of Jimi Hendrix’s song “May This Be Love” is more likely to have manifested itself for him in the form of sound—the fountain of music



continually welling up and spilling over that he channelled via the trippy synaesthetic misty rainbow roar of his guitar—an ongoing creative wellspring that displaces the self entirely and (exactly as I understand the visual) that he describes as an ongoing fountain of his wellbeing.

My attunement to the visual is not an achievement or something I've systematically cultivated; it seems like a neurological tendency; it may even be a pathology (an escapist refuge, a hiding place, a bubble). I think of Mary Shelley's assertion that her vocation as a novelist had its roots in her narrative daydreaming as a child, which she called her "refuge" and "dearest pleasure"—except that the visual is non-narrative, anti-narrative, even a refuge from narrative (my own haunted family-of-origin having provided plenty of tragic narratives from which to escape). To call the narrative and the figurative—the latter which I associate with the visual—*neurological* styles is a way of opening them up—refusing to demote one at the expense of the other—though as far as I'm concerned, the everywhere-all-at-onceness of the visual/figurative transcends the plodding linear path of the narrative (as, flashlight in hand, it winds its narrow way through the dark woods)—but, having already acknowledged it as my own neurological style, and still being subject to recalcitrant dualities, I may not be the most trustworthy on this account.

As a conspicuously visual embodiment and form of transmission of knowledge (if we are using knowledge in its most generous sense), the Tree is unusual—an outlier among heavily text-based (and/or mathematics-based) modern epistemological apparatuses. The way it weaves together the textual and the diagrammatically visual is also a nonstandard practice, not just because the dominant ways of relating text and image tend to be binarized (as in images that function as illustrations of texts and texts that function as captions of images), but also because we use different brain systems to process text and visual images and thus toggling back and forth between them is part of what makes engaging the Tree especially conducive to brain remapping in the process. This is why the intimate mix of text and image is an ongoing form of visionary art.

As my drawings and writing amply demonstrate, my own intelligence is figurative but not diagrammatic—even anti-diagrammatic. I suppose this is much of why I struggle with the Tree. Accordingly, I understand it as a continuously metamorphosing knot that is at once a multi-chambered heart, slowly beating or breathing like glowing embers “which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness”—to subtle but kaleidoscopic glow and sparks—a dynamo that convulsively phase-shifts, a haptic fractal pattern shimmering with someness—with nondualized unicity and plurality. This is my contribution—though of course it is anything but mine: *the diagrammable rewilded*.

My second large drawing inspired by Kandinsky’s *Several Circles* was a bit more formalist; a black-and-white field of shapes (next pages). I yield the last word to the drawing.

I had learned from the first drawing how the large size intensifies the impossibility of focusing simultaneously on the forest and the trees; this operates differently in a small reproduction but is, I hope, still visible. It isn’t something I try to do to the viewer (which I would call a *mere effect*) but something that comes about honestly, by which I mean that it reflects the way I get lost in the composition of the drawing—in the openness of the process by which the drawing evolves. For me in making the drawing—as for viewers, I’ve found—focus also shifts continually from one ambiguously dazzling figure to similar adjacent figures, so figures emerge and dissolve as attention wanders, yielding a slightly hallucinatory quality. This shiftiness and trippiness enacts the central concern of this essay: it is a figurative embodiment of the conflict between ecosystematic and entity-based dynamics, i.e., transfiguration. Figure and ground interact more or less as equals—a dynamic brought about because I paint the dark ground around the figures (rather than painting light figures on a dark ground), which makes the ground a more active partner of the figures.

ASIDE *Fractal Fourness*. Imagine an essay in four parts in which the fourth is divided into four sub-parts. The essay concerns four very different topics—say, fairy circles, drawing, discourse, and Kabbalah—but the topics overlap without lining up perfectly with the sections. The sections are different from each other—and from themselves: each includes substantial elements of the others. Some topical threads run through them all (systematicity, nondualism) and even (arguably) an overall arc whereby the author comes to understand himself as a kind of kabbalist—but among arcs and throughlines and frameworks there is ongoing conflict between unicity and plurality that cannot be resolved into a neatly subordinated structure. It is all orchestrated, but anarchically. It could be an aberrant version of what has come to be a dominant form: *the braided essay*, if a crow could braid fractally with random twigs and shiny things. The four topics line up roughly with different disciplinary terrains—science, humanistic

Figures interact on a level playing field—a sustained middleground—with the components of figures and with meta-figures and with voids—non-dualistically in the sense that all of these count as figures, as players—and all include circles. This shimmering of unicity and plurality is also not an effect I've sought to produce but the transfigurative state I inhabit in the process of making it; the openness of the sweet spot of transsystematicity (by which I mean the relationship of systems to their subsystems and metasystems). Here is where we are most anchored and most free, most in and out of the world.

knowledge, visual art, and mysticism—whereby legitimacy in one would tend strongly to undermine legitimacy in the others. We have already named the face-saving place reserved for such failures: we call them *essays*, that is, *attempts*—and yet somehow I have managed to fail and to foil even this, by not attempting in good enough faith to flatten each of the elements to play nicely enough with the others. Q. Why would someone do this—spend so much time, so much attention, so many words, so much eyesight, to place such an essay at the end of a self-published book where it is almost certain to elude any potentially interested reader? Can you imagine, say, a biologist somehow acquiring this book and actually reading it until they reached this point? One might as well have literally buried it! A. Like Samson, I use my magical strength to bring the epistemological structure down around me! *Let...it...come...down!* (howls)



