Introduction: the magical imagination

If we would know man in all his subtleties, we must deviate into the world of miracles and sorcery. To know the things that are not, and cannot be, but have been imagined and believed ... to observe the actual results of these imaginary phenomena ... is one of the most instructive studies in which we can possibly be engaged.¹

William Goodwin,
*Lives of the Necromancers* (1834)

In the context of this book my term for William Goodwin’s ‘things that are not, and cannot be, but have been imagined and believed’ is the magical imagination. This is perceived as a broad, overarching concept, not only embodying specific magical practices such as witchcraft and astrology, but also encompassing a fantastical mentality informed by supernatural beliefs, folkloric tropes, and popular superstitions.² This is not to assume that the magical imagination was a unified, bounded, stable, or necessarily coherent mode of thought and action. Rather, as this study aims to illustrate, it encompassed multiple and diverse forms of knowledge, social interactions, cultural practices, behaviours, and customs. It is to gain a sense of the scope of such expressions that I have necessarily cast my interpretative net so wide. A single strand of this magical mentality, be it witchcraft belief or supernatural legends, may appear thin and brittle in the nineteenth century, giving an illusion of merely being a lingering cultural ‘survival’, the derogatory terminology of contemporary critics. A broader appreciation of its reinforcing warp and weft reiterates just how strong this mental fabric actually was in this period.

Introduction

The magical imagination therefore resembled what the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss referred to as a *bricolage*, a ‘creative, associational … mode of thought’, a mentality defined by its acquisitive nature and adaptive capacity to fuse disparate elements of totemic or ‘magical’ rituals and practices into a heterogeneous but somehow comprehensible assembly of its own. This positive interpretation contrasts sharply with Christopher Lehrich’s recent claim that *bricolage* is formulated from ‘the shattered remnants of past systems’, or ‘the odds and ends’ as he rather dismissively puts it. In his view this detritus lacks any creativity beyond its ability to form new combinations out of old components. For Lehrich, bricolage is an inert ‘endpoint’ collage rather than a dynamic process.  

This study fundamentally contests this view for rather than reading the magical imagination as consisting purely of residual ideas, concepts, and energies it will be argued that it possessed contemporaneous purpose and vitality. Rather than viewing supernatural beliefs and magical practices as residual remnants it argues for their ongoing applicability as valuable cultural inheritances.  

Sasha Handley has recently warned against conflating witchcraft and ghost beliefs, being rightly critical of the way in which the former has eclipsed and even subsumed the latter into a footnote of academic study. While appreciating that these were two distinct elements this study seeks to avoid imposing false hierarchies of supernatural beliefs, examining both as incorporated aspects of the magical imagination. Implicit to this approach is a view that historians tacitly score artificial fissures into the supernatural worldview when they choose to study its various features as rigidly separate topics. Of course the magical imagination should not be considered as a monolithic entity which required belief in all its multitudinous manifestations at the same time. The extent to which belief in the efficacy of spells, the reality of any given ghost story, or the validity of a particular superstition was held naturally varied from person to person, and in all likelihood oscillated between poles of belief and disbelief throughout an individual’s life. It should be stressed from the beginning that the principal focus of this study is not so much on obtaining some gauge as to this (shifting) extent of belief, something virtually impossible in quantifiable terms, but more on perceptions of these beliefs and the functions in which they were employed.

---


Introduction

Whilst stating intentions it should also be made clear from the start that this study consciously diverges from the predominant and certainly more familiar historiographical narratives of the supernatural in the nineteenth century. In the past two decades considerable ink and effort has been expended on an ever-increasing body of fascinating research into spiritualism, psychical investigations, elite occultism, and literary ghost fiction. Yet with few bold exceptions, historians have not ventured far from topics that can be intellectually justified to their peers on the grounds of their rich cross-fertilisation of literary, scientific, psychological, philosophical, and gendered discourses. Of course this is overwhelmingly due to the wealth of insights that can be garnered from such research, but one cannot help but wonder how much it is also informed by a certain mindfulness as to which topics can be deemed to possess academic credibility and which cannot. The result has been that highly educated scholars have tended to focus on the ‘magical’ beliefs and practices of the nineteenth century’s educated elite, a narrowness that is noticeably absent when historians approach magical mentalities in the medieval and early modern period. Although some practices such as spiritualism clearly crossed social boundaries, the academic focus on predominantly bourgeois approaches to the supernatural has largely eclipsed study of the magical mentalities of the majority of England’s population in this period, especially its urban dwellers. This book hopes to go some small way towards redressing that situation for while it necessarily touches upon these more ‘modern’ supernatural trends, its emphasis is emphatically on what could be termed the popular or plebeian magical imagination.

4 Introduction

My use of the word ‘imagination’ should not lead one to belittle this raft of magical mentalities as simply make-believe, the dismissive conclusion of Goodwin and numerous other nineteenth-century commentators. It is only in the term ‘imagination’ that one can find a workable concept large enough in which to contain all these various elements. Despite, or perhaps because of the conceptual vagueness of a magical ‘imagination’ or ‘mentality’ it makes a useful distinction from ideology. Ideologies tend to be conscious and more clearly defined intellectual constructs than mentalities, which have a less precise, fuzzier definition indicating more innate, and unarticulated mental processes. Such mental aspects are also less obviously shaped along lines or language of social and political divide such as ‘popular’ and ‘elite’. Appropriating Lucien Febvre’s interpretation of mentalities as ‘the underlying characteristics of the mind’, the magical imagination represents expressions of its most fantastical propensities, not rigidly deterministic ‘structures’ but rather a predilection towards particular ‘operations … capacities or predispositions’. As such the magical imagination can be defined as a mode of cognitive or epistemological interpretation manifested through specific cultural practices. While its emphasis on the fantastical means the magical imagination is necessarily more specific than the popular imagination in general, its parameters are nevertheless broad enough to encompass not just ‘traditional’ expressions of the supernatural but also its transformed, secular, and self-consciously ‘modern’ manifestations in this period.

In this context the magical imagination could be situated in relation to two recent works which explore alternatives to a supposedly normative modern rationality. The aforementioned Christopher Lehrich’s thought-provoking *The Occult Mind* focuses predominantly on the early modern period whilst Jeffrey Kripal’s *Authors of the Impossible* provides a fascinating examination of twentieth-century discourses between the paranormal and the sacred. Heuristically, it would be convenient if the magical imagination could simply be slotted into place as the ‘missing link’ in an evolutionary transition from the ‘occult’ mind to a paranormal mindset. Unfortunately histories of mentalities, magical or otherwise, are rarely that neat. Although some aspects were incorporated into (pseudo-)scientific discourses, one cannot claim this as representative of a plebeian ‘paranormal’ turn. The significant conceptual shifts

---

and recategorisation that accompanied moves from the ‘magical’ to the ‘psychical’ and from the ‘occult’ to the ‘paranormal’ were largely elitist endeavours in this period, a fact recognised by Kripal’s focus on the efforts of learned academics to attempt what might be termed the scientification of the sacred.⁸

The emphasis on ‘imagination’ is not purely determined by its capacity to encompass a range of magical expressions and a useful degree of conceptual elasticity compared with other mental processes. Recently both historians of secular magic and philosophers and sociologists of modernity have turned to the imagination as a means of exploring and understanding the dynamics of modernisation and this study seeks to situate itself within that context. Importantly, my conceptualisation of the magical imagination differs considerably from what could be termed the ironic imagination, not least in the latter’s explicit self-awareness of its own functioning, particularly its knowing suspension of disbelief. This has been advocated by a number of predominantly American scholars who have viewed the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as witnessing the development of various forms of disenchanted enchantment.⁹ Commercial entertainments such as phantasmagorias and magical stage shows encouraged an engagement with the supernatural and enchanted grounded in the certainties of ‘modern’ scepticism; performers and audiences both appreciated such activities as deceptions but willingly enjoyed them as entertainments. From the rise of Gothic fiction in the mid-late eighteenth century the supernatural was fictionalised and transformed from folkloric ‘realities’ to the literary imaginary. This emphasis on modern enchantment has encouraged an appreciation of the antinomies of modernity, emphasising the complicated co-existence of belief and disbelief in, or at least desire for, the ‘magical’.


Regardless of whether we view magical mentalities as over or underlying more rational conceptualisations of the world, their potential clearly extended beyond the boundaries of the latter. The rational, the logical and, indeed, the ironic set limits on the possible that the magical imagination ignored. Yet the existence of both suggests the potential plurality of magical and rational mentalities within a single individual, reiterating an antinomial position in which people were capable of maintaining seemingly contradictory but concurrent modes of thought. Therefore while sympathising with this approach this study questions the seemingly intrinsic bias towards disbelief (or at least its temporary suspension) in works on antinomian modernity, a bias that arises from the ironic imagination’s formulation as knowing indulgence, a stance that inherently avoids threatening its own ‘modern’ rational foundations. Challenging that imbalance, it will be argued that the agglomeration of supernatural aspects in the magical imagination testifies to the previously underestimated extent of genuine belief in the fantastical in the nineteenth century. Of course the operation of the magical imagination did not exclude the possibility of disagreement, division or even oppositional disbelief. It was a way in which individuals and communities could approach, constitute, navigate, and understand their urban world but it was neither sufficiently self-conscious nor rigid enough to demand conformity; rather than closed meanings it offered open interpretations which naturally engendered tensions. Given this it was also unable to operate as a sustainable oppositional mode of thought for subaltern groups, though later chapters will suggest that it could intermittently articulate such views. While being treated with scepticism or self-knowing deception by some, the magical imagination clearly differs from the ironic imagination in that these were not its default positions. Here rationalism had to vie with the power of the imagination and the very real belief it could foster.

Beyond this ironic engagement with secular magic, the imagination has been variously conceptualised and employed by theorists of modernity. Johann P. Arnason has argued that modern culture derives from confrontation between Enlightenment and Romanticism, not to be conceived as narrow historical epochs but as labels for the broader cultural forces of reason and imagination. This division between an ability to variously imagine or rationalise the modern world necessarily generated different perspectives, even different modernities, a point that will be developed later. These polarised responses supposedly offer us ‘the cultural infra-structures of interpretation’ by which we can understand

---

10 Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities*, p. 42.
Introduction

modernity. However, in the mode of the antinomy approaches indicated above, this study suggests a more ambiguous confluence between such opposites, for while under Arnason's criteria magical mentalities form a popular expression of Romanticism, the functionality of the magical imagination necessarily includes rationalising and pragmatic components too. It is this that renders the magical imagination more than just make-believe, escapism, or mere perception. Rather it grew from, was sustained by, and found functional application in the nineteenth-century urban experience.

This study explores two general levels of engagement with the magical imagination; the individual and the collective. This has resonance with what Cornelius Castoriadis has termed the ‘radical imagination’ and the ‘social instituting imaginary’.12 The ‘radical imagination’, socialised into the individual but encouraging resistance to socialisation, possesses many of the empowering aspects of the individual applications of the magical imagination, for it is directed towards the individual psyche seeking to give meaning to the existing world rather than constructing mere fantasies. In particular its supernatural elements offered a distancing perspective from mundane reality, potentially disrupting the accepted ‘weight’ of normality, though how people chose to interpret and fill that distance varied. By contrast the ‘social instituting imaginary’ is the means by which collectively created meanings are institutionalised within societies. This study examines how the collective applications of the magical imagination tended to operate at the local communal level, where its mainly narrative instituting of meaning was less formalised than in Castoriadis’ larger society. As such, the magical imagination has both resonances with and divergences from other formulations of the modern imagination and these will be developed throughout the course of this book.

The application of a shared mentality to a group or section of society is always problematic given that it potentially encourages a homogenous, straitjacketing view of past thought processes that obscure diverse individual perspectives. At the same time there are issues of how we gauge change, over time and between individuals. Just as magical mentalities were not monolithic nor were they static, for they interacted

with changing social, cultural, technological, and historical circumstances. This diachronic dimension raises the awkward question of how (far) mentalities develop and transform, and to what extent underlying modes of thought remain broadly the same even when expressed in different ways. To apply a term like the magical imagination to a group’s modes of thought and behaviour requires characteristics that are not just distinctive but also pervasive and relatively persistent.  

A further problem, ever the issue for cultural historical interpretation, is how far we as observers and analysers are prescribing defined mentalities that were not viewed as such by the people we are applying them to, thereby granting them an artificial coherence and self-awareness. In doing so we risk acting like nineteenth-century folklorists who made explicit and self-conscious what had been a largely implicit, more subconscious mode of thinking. The observer altered the observed by recording it, and thus detaching it from the cultural, environmental (and mental) context in which it thrived. This subsequently led these aspects of the magical imagination to be distinguished in contemporary discourse as those which were unusual, conceptually distinguishing them from perceived (or promoted) norms of thought and behaviour.  

As will be examined in a subsequent chapter, the delineation of various contemporary mentalities served an ideological function in promoting some as ‘norms’ and eclipsing or distancing others. In part this study is intended as a compensatory attempt to appreciate a mode of popular nineteenth-century thought that has been overshadowed by our predominant emphasis on rationalisation or, at best, a (culturally) elitist counter-rational Romanticism in this period.  

It necessarily approaches the magical imagination at least once removed, not by arrogantly claiming direct insight into intimate thoughts but rather by viewing the way these mentalities found expression, as actions and cultural practices, in the modernising urban environment. In short, it makes intimations about the mental world of many urban dwellers by studying the effects of such beliefs, exploring the powerful relationship between people’s perceptions, responses, desires, fears, and plans, and

15 Craig Calhoun suggests Romanticism was as significant as rationalism in the construction of modernity and it is testament to the power of a discursive ‘rational’ modernity that it is still frequently positioned as oppositional. See Calhoun, ‘Postmodernism as Pseudohistory’, pp. 75–96.
The magical imagination as agency

the way these internal processes were then externally manifested in the prosaic realities of individual and communal lives.16

The magical imagination as agency

This study transposes to a modernising, urban, Western environment the functionalist theory of magic that the pioneering anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski applied to the Trobriand islanders. He observed that magic provided a sense of control in situations of insecurity and impotence, offering the powerless some form of influence over a chaotic, powerful environment. Serving short-term individual or social psychological needs, magic granted a sense of influence in circumstances through its institutionalisation of hope and fear, assuaging anxiety and defending against feelings of impotence by granting the confidence to act in manifesting one’s intentions.17 If application of Malinowski’s functionalist interpretations of magic may seem both dated and culturally specific to the Trobriand Islanders it is worth emphasising that anthropologists are increasingly coming to appreciate not just the presence but the role of magic in modernising societies.18 This approach may engender obvious criticisms that the cultural gulf between early twentieth-century Trobrianders and English urban dwellers was too wide as to enable any application of such theories. Yet to not at least consider the potential application of such a theory to nineteenth-century England is to merely perpetuate occidental notions of the West.


as inherently more ‘rational’ than alleged ‘primitives’, an obfuscating and highly dubious viewpoint that holds us enslaved to late Victorian imperialist notions of innate racial superiority. Few anthropologists would now accept Lucien Levy-Bruhl’s divide of a ‘primitive mentality’ compared to a rational Western one, a division that even he came to soften in later works when he declared a ‘mystical mentality’ was ‘present in every human mind’.  

The broad historical narrative of urbanisation has been presented as the story of increasing human control over nature, and therefore one that appears to offer an overarching explanation for the increasing redundancy of magic in this period. However, this study will consider the ways in which the nineteenth-century urban environment generated new anxieties: feelings of powerlessness in the face of socio-economic forces (poverty and unemployment), faceless bureaucracies, changing living and working conditions, an evolving physical environment which included threats such as epidemic disease and crime, and the growth of the unknown crowd as cities gradually increased in size and density. The risks from invisible forces in the supernatural world were replaced by the invisible forces of a developing capitalist economy and the cities that frequently formed its hubs. Such forces and fears only intensified during the long nineteenth century and it is the nature of hindsight to obscure the scale of such uncertainties, if not in quantitative terms then certainly in the way they occupied people’s minds.

Given this, it is one of the central contentions of this study that magical mentalities were not a mere enclave of anachronistic ‘tradition’ ghettoised in modernity. Rather than portraying magical beliefs and practices as mere ‘survivals’ and the fantastical as merely an escapist psychological refuge from the real, it argues for a more rigorous reinterpretation of the magical imagination as a cultural resource that granted an empowering sense of agency in the nineteenth-century urban environment. Illustrative of the urban dweller’s adaptive faculties, the magical imagination will be analysed as a way in which individuals and local communities managed uncertainty, offset feelings of impotence, and thereby provided a sense of control in a world that seemed increasingly out of our grasp.

---


20 For the eighteenth-century development of this trend see Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities*, p. 311.

21 See Wrigley, *People, Cities and Wealth*, p. 74.