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A Journey Into The Reflection



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INTRODUCTION

Dealing with the death of loved ones year after year can raise questions and fuel endless, almost unnatural mourning. The time spent contemplating death and its aspects becomes longer and, like it or not, we are immersed in new unknowns. History has a beginning and an ongoing development, but no ending. With each mourning comes a flood of new conclusions and heightened experiences. When we come to experience dogmas, we subject them to a deeper analysis and start looking for ways, the answers to which, as indicated by the dogma, are often missing. Then we reach for science, foreign beliefs, and if the answer is still not visible, we reach out for the “forbidden fruit” such as magic, superstition, occultism or forgotten history.

Living in mourning is a painful process with an uncomfortably pulsating center. Between the waves, we live relatively normally, but when a wave hits, it can knock us off our feet and completely devastate us. We need time and appropriate conditions for regeneration, without which the wound will never fully heal. With subsequent mourning, we want the time between the intensifying waves to matter, and maybe we want to find a remedy that will help us become immune to it without going through all the classic stages of grief.

This is where non-obvious means come into play, the previously mentioned forbidden fruit: magic, unnatural forces, rituals. We ask ourselves: why and how did our ancestors cope in such moments? What can we learn from folk tales, manuscripts and legends? How medieval divinatory necromancy could be utilized as a grieving practice nowadays?

I

Divination¹ is what we call the action of pursuing knowledge of things unknown, as well as things of times past, present and future with supernatural means. Let me extend this definition to seeking or perceiving messages from beyond our plane of existence - the world we live and die in. Call it a theoretical space of abstracts, call it afterlife, or what lurks in the deepest depths of the ocean - places mysterious, untouched, unseen. To me it is all of the unknown, the shadows in the corner of your eye, sounds you cannot identify, blink, and shine, and movement you are not sure was supposed to be there - and the quickened heartbeat, pulsing blood in your head and heightened senses which come with this miniature rush of adrenaline. Energy created by these observations is an essence and real physical outcome of fascination. I like to call this energy, sourced from a particular emotion, magic.

In this sense divination can be both active - observing the world in hopes for finding signs, creating rituals and rites - or passive - the brain registering some kind of unexplained stimuli, usually at first brushed off as a protest of our skeptical minds, later to be interpreted with a kind of pattern, that is pushed to the surface of our consciousness by a splinter of faith in the supernatural. The amount of this type of faith one holds within, I believe, comes like many things with religious upbringing. I write from the point of being born and raised catholic, believer no longer but still to this day subconsciously influenced by the stories within the Bible, which my young sponge-like brain would absorb during Sunday mass.

1. Divination noun - definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes ..., accessed December 14, 2023, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/divination.

Christianity and bedtime stories full of polish legends and folklore, with a pinch of widely European fairy tales and soviet cartoons here, western animations there - all fused together to saturate the fantasy of a child with escapist mind tendencies and fuel a freshly developing imagination. By that notion, I am highly susceptible to passive divination, with little to no intention of noticing things out of the ordinary, yet interpreting them anyway. The main focus of divination does not have to mean immediately tapping into some source of otherworldly knowledge, rather stating open minded and aware of our minds sending us signals through the outside world, and then reading into those signals to gain knowledge we could have possessed, but not fully realized.

II

There are many different types of divination, tools and practices which the human race has accumulated throughout its long existence. Bones, cards, mirrors, crystal balls, ripples of water, wax, flame or apparently virgin fingernails, as seems popular in XV century Europe, are only a few of endless methods used and each of these artifacts and forces gave their own luscious history. Many of them share the aspect of shapeshifting - observed from different angles, changing over time or the reflective and refractive qualities they possess. Their shine or their shadows, essentially different types of occlusion which present when gazed upon an object or surface provide a focal point for observation.

Observation is not a static activity though, our eyes keep on moving from one point to another constantly. Try to look at the smallest of particles you can and not perceive anything else around them, do not change the angle even slightly. Tough is it not? Let's then assume that while gazing upon a specific medium for divination that our vision shifts - and by that the surface observed apparently moves. For a split second it creates a shape or message, only to disappear a moment later. Richard Kieckhefer² mentions the words of Pedro Garcia, a late XV century scholar, who provides explanation for divination from reflections, mirrors in particular:

*The first manner is by gazing at luminous bodies and instruments. The principle here is that the acies of the human mind in one who gazes on such instruments reflects back upon itself, for the luminosity of the instrument prevents direction or concentration of the kind on exterior things, and repels it, and turns it back upon itself, so that it is forced to gaze upon itself.*³

He later on tries to disprove that such practice and power can come from anything else than demonic influence, as Kieckhefer says, nonetheless he gives us an interesting insight into how much of a threat and by that how very real divination in the XV century seemed to be even in the eyes of church and academics. Practiced and fiercely defended by platonic magics, divination and other types of magic was pursued mostly by people who had access to higher education and sacramental knowledge - which would be monks, clerics and scholars. Many of magical formulas, or as they were called then "experiments", found in XV century manuscripts are built on and almost all contain christian prayers and parts of mass.

Depending on which source we are looking at, they either do address demons and devils directly for aid of their powers, like in the Munich Handbook. Among various experiments concerning illusions or manipulation of emotion there can be found experiments with mirrors, crystals, and other instruments meant for divination. On the contrary other documents ask saints, angels or even figures as Christ and Holy Mary for blessings and help to gain secret knowledge.

2. Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites* (Penn State University Press, 1998).

3. Petrus Garsia, *In determinationes magistrales contra conclusiones apologales Ioannis Pici Mirandulani Concordie Comitum proemium* (Rome: Eucharius Silber, 1489)

A great example would be the Prayer Book of King Władysław Warneńczyk⁴ - a Polish king's manuscript from the early XV century containing prayers and techniques for divination from crystals. Even such figures of authority as kings took magic very seriously, hiring alchemists and astrologists and occasionally defending them from the judgment of the Church.

4. Ludwik Bernacki, Ryszard Gansiniec, and Władysław Podlacha, *Modlitewnik Władysława Warneńczyka W Zbiorach Biblioteki Bodlejańskiej Z Uwzględnieniem Zapisków Józefa Korzeniowskiego* (Lwów: Koło Związku Bibliotekarzy Polskich, 1928).

III

All this leads me to ask myself “If we have this many concrete sources on the use of divination, and proof that some institutions tried to uproot the practice, could it have actually worked?” In many forms it has been a part of human culture for millennia. Ancient Greeks tell myths of seers, oracles and prophecies reading signs written by nature, or tales of the living coming in contact with souls of the dead, to learn about the future.

One of the best known Polish legends I have grown up with is that of Master Twardowski - a XVI century nobleman, who for the gain of great deal of knowledge and magical powers sold his soul to the devil. A witty character cheating Mephistopheles, hero of various humorous bedtime stories. He is actually considered to be a real person - one of the magicians in the court of king Zygmunt August. After his beloved wife's death the king hired many talented scholars and magicians in hopes of regaining his lost love. According to the tale, Master Twardowski crafts a magical mirror for king Zygmunt in which he sees his wife. Instead of staying seated as the mage advises, the king jumps out to embrace the phantom, and at that moment the dead wife disappears and the mirror itself breaks. Said mirror can still be viewed in the church of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Węgrów, but it is mounted at an angle from which tourists cannot see their own reflections⁵. To this day it is believed it brings bad luck and holds evil powers.

I find the idea of mirrors and flame reflecting our inner knowledge particularly enticing - a mirror as a gateway between our physical self and some other non tangible space like our mind. In both old legends and modern pop culture, the mirror is depicted as a window to the home of atrocities, a means of transportation for demons and monsters from the worlds beyond. The basilisk turns to stone while gazing upon his own reflection and displays this simple device as a weapon. To really know oneself, to gaze back and understand the truth can be quite terrifying, but just because we do not like what we see does not mean that it is untrue. I wonder if that is why the medieval christian Church sought to end divinatory practices instead of embodying it as they did with so many pagan traditions - can the body so close to God really gaze back upon itself and its imperfections? Or is it easier to assign the visions seen as tricks of the devil?

Two points of view can be observed about the mirror. Firstly it helps recognize oneself as an imitation of God and compare to realize their own imperfection - a tool of humility while the word of God is the perfect mirror. Secondly and more often a device of the devil, the master of illusion and deceit which shows untrue images, leads to curiosity of dogmas, lust and other sins flowing out of it. Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet in her book “The Mirror”⁶, after quoting John of Sailsbury and other figures openly critical towards divination says:

5. Lidia Kawecka, “Zwierciadło Strachu. Tajemnicze Lustro Jana Twardowskiego W Węgrowie,” Onet, April 25, 2021, <https://www.onet.pl/turystyka/onetpodroze/wegrow-zwierciadlo-strachu-tajemnicze-lustro-jana-twardowskiego/vrq154w,07640b54>.


6. Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History* (London: Routledge, 2002).

The explanation was always the same, confirmed by present-day inquiries: the mirror's reflection can trigger a hypnosis or trance state. The brilliance of the instrument prevents the onlooker from fixing his gaze on anything else, and with his attention captured, blinded, and turned inward, he begins to perceive supernatural communications, sometimes from God, but more often from the devil.

Before that she mentions:

Before it helps to put the world in order and maintain the conscious self, looking into the mirror leads one's gaze on an indirect course marked by echos and analogies, a course that seems to attest to an invisible "elsewhere" in the heart of the visible. Form without substance, subtle and impalpable, the mirror image manifests a diaphanous purity, a revelation of the divine source, from which all likeness emanates.

IV

 After the fall of the Roman Empire and the collapse of trade markets and ancient mirror-making techniques, the mirror production was a very tedious and expensive process only the richest could afford. Such materials as glass or metal were not easy to come about and mirrors made of them were possessions looked after, treated with respect as family heirlooms, used and adored for generations. I like to believe that the adoration and longevity gave these objects magical potential and generation by generation transformed them into artifacts. Various stories surrounding them and shifting into more and more fantastical with passing time give these material things a background richer than many people, who then did not get to live as long as we do. An artifact - somewhere between object and human, with inherent history and wisdom embedded into it - makes for an instrument both intriguing but feared as well.

The glass production in the Middle Ages was far from perfect, surfaces warped, covered with bubbles and stains, making the images seem peculiar and distant from reality. They would play tricks on the vision and present ominous figures and scenarios which gives great potential to interpret these as signs. The demonization of a mirror, and all reflective instruments for that matter by the medieval Church has imprinted itself on how we perceive looking glass nowadays. Even though most mysticism around its demonic properties have been debunked in the Renaissance while optics were studied more, to this day

the mirror is quite an unsettling thing. We observe the other us in reflective surfaces with caution, even though we know all the physics behind the piece of glass. Common spread fantasy makes us believe that there might be more to the eye than we see at first glance.

V

It is truly a shame how we distrust what we are seeing though. The platonic mages suggesting that reflections and brightness can tell us more about ourselves is in the end based in reason and the human ability of critical thinking and analyzing. For what is daydream born of meditation if not a reflection of our subconscious thoughts, desires and fears? As a determinist I believe we are bound to make the decisions that we make because of the way we have been conditioned by experiences of the past. Nonetheless a practice like divination - looking into oneself in this trance-like state - can give us valuable insight into those decisions we have not yet made, we are making now and how the past ones have influenced the course of our story. Understanding of future, present and past. Trusting in our own judgment and intuition can indeed gain us access to the apparently hidden knowledge, not quite as the medieval Church feared though I think.

The need for gaining knowledge comes from many places, and a prominent one that stands out is loss. There is greed and pride of course, but the need of knowing for reassurance is tightly bound with our experiences of loss - and it has been reflected in the common uses of divination in the middle ages. Most of the divinatory formulas in manuscripts treating about necromancy are for retrieving goods that have been lost or stolen. In his chapter on divination in the “Munich Handbook” Richard Kieckhefer⁷ shares numerous XIV and XV century

accounts of people who have consulted magicians about identifying the thief, as well as the deceitfulness of the demons asked for guidance. Who now knows what these scryers saw then in their crystals. Was it dim shapes interpreted by subconscious, delusions of naive men, tricks of con artists or some real unearthly powers at work - everyone came to see them in hopes of help where all other hope seemed gone. When in desperate need we tend to turn to more skeptic means such as magic, because well, what else really is there? After we have tried everything that makes sense why should we, the people of reason, rule out that there might indeed be unseen forces at work. Maybe we can harness them so they will work in our favor?

The last resort of a logical mind is abandoning logic. Making sense of a hopeless situation and seeking a solution to an unsolvable problem is a primarily human behavior. Whatever we love and hold dear we cannot let go, and if we were to lose it there would be nothing we would not do to get it back. Orpheus walking down the steps of hell for Euridice is such a compelling story which survived thousands of years exactly because regardless of the times in which it is told, sacrifice for love and denial of death is a universal experience. Same goes for King Zygmunt August, what else could he have done to see his too early departed wife again, than seek help from the magi?

7. Richard Kieckhefer, “Divinatory Experiments,” chapter, in *Forbidden Rites* (Penn State University Press, 1998).

VI

Such is the power of legends that they carry over the experiences of people who lived in different epochs, yet felt and grieved just as we do today. They extensively wrote about it too. An example would be the XVI century Polish poet Jan Kochanowski. He lost his daughter Orszulka to illness when she was no older than 30 months, and afterwards while mourning, wrote a series of nineteen threnodies in her name where he vividly expresses his emotional state throughout the months after the unexpected death of his child. In this statement of agony which he displays, anger at himself, his daughter and God we see real love. After all the greater is the love, the greater will the grief be. In “Threnody XIX or a dream”⁸, the last in the cycle, he is visited in a dream by a vision of his mother holding his daughter. She consoles him, claiming that where Orszulka is now there is no more sorrow and earthly pain. She does scold him as well for dwelling on the death of his child in vain as a death at the age of two years old is nothing by a blessing - she did not manage to blemish her soul with sin yet, while not living long enough to experience the hardships of being a woman. She says:

*Just like a fire that reduces dry wicks to ash,
You must allow time to pass on, your thoughts are rash.
Do you really conceive us to be dead, simply undone,
Living on in a dark place, bereft of the sun?*⁹

These words are originally reasoned by the Christian belief in an immortal soul, but I also like to interpret it as our loved ones living on in our memories. Somewhere in my mind, maybe my subconscious, there is a place where all my loved ones passively reside, and much like Jan's mother, they visit my consciousness in dreams. Not often, but quite frequently after I fall asleep, I find myself in a familiar setting, usually of my childhood home and there my grandmother Ariana will be. Not like a memory which I get to relive, we both know that she is gone in the real life, and here just visiting. She tends to wear the most extravagant outfits I would never see her in during her whole lifetime. She carries herself proud and ecstatic, as if only now she was really living. We meet in this strange space in between the flesh and bone world of the living, and this other world, which I can not possibly know much about.

Maybe it is the afterlife, maybe it is just the space beneath my skull, but one thing I am certain of is that my grandmother is not alone. At some point she always has to go, she is meeting someone or has an errand to run. It is as if she has already moved on from this whole “death” deal and now has an infinite amount of fun to attend. I am happy for her, as wherever she is must be a great reward for all the suffering she had to go through in the past life. Sometimes I envy her though. No more fear of death and what comes forth. Does anything come forth? How nice would it be if there was nothing at all, and how nice would it be if I got to see her, my grandfather, and other family members again, maybe meet some of the ones I never got to in my life? And I would after all, see my truly best friend, Gacek the cat.

8. Stanisław Fischer, “Tren XIX Albo Sen,” poem, in Jan Kochanowski: Treney (Kraków: Krakowskie Towarzystwo Wydawnicze, 1946).

9. Jan Kochanowski and Barry Keane, “Threnody XIX, or: A Dream,” poem, in Threnodies, and, the Dismissal of the Greek Envoys (Katowice: Biblioteka Śląska, 2001).

As much as I dream about Ariana I dream about Gacek. In those dreams he is either dying again and there is nothing I can do to save him, or on the contrary he is very well and seems looked after. We do not talk, we never really did before, he was too high and mighty for that. We sit together and I get to touch his warm fur again. Smell the autumn wind in his black coat. He looks at me with yellow eyes with complete understanding but I do not cry until I wake up. There is no reason to cry while he sits beside me.

When I fall asleep often I dream of them and it is all more or less normal and bright again, but then as always I wake up and am faced with an empty reality without them. All the things we were going to do together in the dream world, the question I was about to ask right before waking. And now it is only me and a spider on my wall, seeing through me not because he has got eight eyes, but as I feel so bleak and transparent, suddenly hollowed out by a passing memory just experienced, seeing through me poses as an easy task. Even the spider can see there are parts of me missing, but how is it that no one else does? Or no one else reacts at least.

VII

Everybody knows that everyone holds some kind of bottled up grief, but with the emergence of modern medicine and sterile dying environment known as hospitals we try to no longer perceive death as a part of life, and acknowledge the impact it has on the living. We hide it like something ugly out of fear, and then we face regrets when it becomes personal. Was it right for us to put our loved ones in a facility or hospital? To die in this strange four walls in this strange bed, by the ticking of machines and a foreign hand fixing the pillow if they're lucky?

One of the things my grandmother said before dying is that she is happy that she gets to die in a hospital, so she will not suffer. It is a choice between the physical torture and the fear of death which not being in the comfort of your own home and family amplifies. Only very few have the privilege of dying painless in their own beds, taken care of by loved ones. The hospital is the very last human stress of human life we experience.

Being away makes us worry about our home, our unfinished business, our kids, our pets, our spouses and everything we leave to their own devices. It would always be a worry, but this perverted isolation of a small white room makes perfect conditions for anxiety. And after? You have one hour of sitting there, with the lifeless corpse, so alike to a poor wax figure, the machines gone silent and the feeling of your soul bare in the space where the deceased used to reside, crumbling away to leave hollow space. Then they take them away, some men

in weird costumes preventing them from touching the corpse with their living skin, already waiting by the door of a room in which someone was alive, feeling, thinking, just a short while ago. You turn away not wanting to see this ordeal of your loved one becoming just a bag of meat needing to be transported, but even though you are not looking you know it happens anyway. The entirety of you is boiling with anguish but one part of you, which has been just ripped away, and you can feel the cold wind howling through it. A bizarre painful contrast, which no painkiller to help you, as everyone else who is with you (if you are this lucky to not be alone) also feels and just as you are trying to dismiss. Unsuccessfully. You try to talk about it, but how can you? It is a subject so unreal and avoided everyday that you don't even know what you should say. From what Kochanowski writes in his "Threnody I"¹⁰ it seems like people did not always know what loss means, or how to console their friends even in the XV century:

*'In vain these tears' - caring friends may claim.
By God, what of this world is not then vain?
All is vain! We grope for rational cheer,
But the presence of grief is all too clear.
Error - the age of man! Where lies the ground:
To grieve, or my reason violently confound?*¹¹

We are not taught what death is and how it feels. Unprepared, we step on it like a landmine, and as our world explodes people we used to know well become distant. They were not taught what to do in the face of death either, aside from how to avoid it in the most efficient of ways. Parents do not take children to the funerals because "they are too little to understand". They

10. Stanisław Fischer, "Tren I," poem, in Jan Kochanowski: Treńy (Kraków: Krakowskie Towarzystwo Wydawnicze, 1946).

11. Jan Kochanowski and Barry Keane, "Threnody I," poem, in Threnodies, and, the Dismissal of the Greek Envoys (Katowice: Biblioteka Śląska, 2001).

tell them the person who died “went away” or “is not here anymore”. All these elusive, foggy answers never actually convey any message about death, but they do teach that death is unspeakable. The pattern of learning nothing and active avoidance continues. And so we isolate our mourning, closing it within ourselves and further deepening the frustration of unbearable loss. In the end the specters of our loved ones which appear in dreams are the only ones who we can talk to.

VIII

The mornings after such dreams are a painful ordeal of opening up the half closed wounds and vibrantly relieving loss. It makes me wonder, is it possible, even in the slightest, to open up the door to this inbetween waiting room while awake? All of my lifetime I have spent daydreaming every spare minute, and how exactly is day-dream different from a night-dream? In both there is no complete control of events unfolding as the mind automatically feeds itself the material triggered by outside influences, reminders of something personal like a *deja vu*. In day-dream state there occurs the possibility of shifting circumstances of the scenario, repeating and rewinding it until satisfactory. But if I let the vision run freely without interrupting it I often find myself falling asleep, and the day-dream turns into almost a night-dream. I could imagine, that is what the trance-like state the medieval necromancers put themselves in felt like - between fantasy and reality, science and magic, the demonic and the divine.

The scrying rituals of the middle ages found in documents such as Munich Handbook¹² or the Rawlinson Manuscript¹³ are multi-sensorial meditations often built on convoluted structures. Burning frankincense and myrrh, drawing magic circles with swords, inscribing names of demons on polished surfaces and of course long incantations probably best embodies the word “ritual” and what we associate with it today. I am inclined to believe the whole complicated ordeal is not only a form of a recipe for a successful divination, but a means of

creating the right ambiance. Additional steps surrounding the main action of scrying put the practitioner in sort of a state of ecstasy or excitement so dense it is almost palpable, which I refer to in chapter I.

With such a high level of immersion it is more plausible to interpret the observations which are made as signs, or form conclusions based on daydreams. It is not uncommon to seek the presence of the ones we lost in the world around us. They lived and shared memories with us in the same time and space, so various, often most random things remind us of them. The smell of an apple pie, the sound of a clock, somebody else’s laugh, the color of bottle green. All of these random aspects make for great artifacts for perceiving the unseen presence - an act of a little divination.

12. “Munich Manual of Demonic Magic.” Wikipedia, September 28, 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munich_Manual_of_Demonic_Magic.

13. “Ms. Rawl. D. 252.” Medieval Manuscripts. Accessed December 14, 2023. https://medieval.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/catalog/manuscript_8428.

CONCLUSION

While writing this I feel like I have been scrying - the words I type being the reflection of my thoughts. Process of creation rooted in going down and down into myself to decode my own emotions. Deep below the surface of awareness I find myself thinking about the ones I have lost. They are showing me the traditions we have made together, and how I can still cultivate them - not out of guilt or unhealthy attachment, but understanding why these small traditions have come to be. How they have created the artifacts I use as catalysts for my grief nowadays. A slow transformation is in progress, less and less the artifacts make me sob, and more and more they make me smile. It feels like being a piece of hot iron - softened by extreme circumstances and molded with heavy hits of a hammer. It takes a lot of effort and patient suffering to be changed, but that is the essence of grieving. As Judith Butler states in *Pre-arious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*¹⁴:

By the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say “submitting” to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.

Divination could perhaps be an effort to detect and better understand the metamorphosis we are going through while mourning. A desperate reach, but in the end resourceful trip into the reflection of the grief, contemplating its core, and coming back changed. Kind of a tiny katabasis.

14. Butler, Judith P. *Pre-arious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso, 2004.

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