

# THE GENII SESSION

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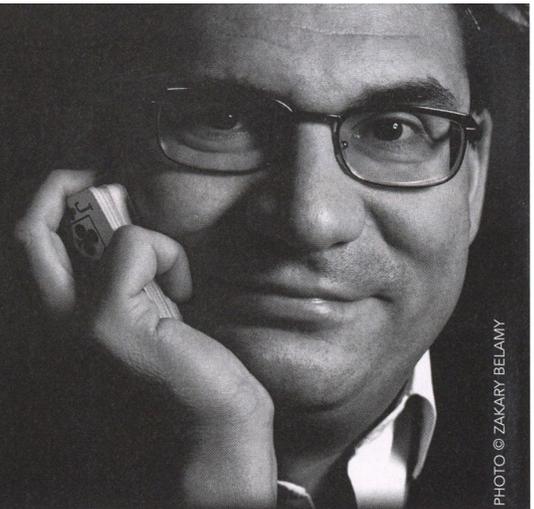


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## CARD MAGIC IS THE POETRY OF MAGIC

I'VE ALWAYS WONDERED what Hofzinser really meant when he said that "the performance of card magic is the poetry of magic." Actually Hofzinser used this quote several times in different versions in his correspondence with his students and friends. Once he wrote that "cards are the poetry of magic," which I thought is a bit strange, since an object isn't really poetry, but what you do with it might be poetic. In a recording of a lecture at The Magic Castle, Dai Vernon mentions a young man who asked him: "Why is card magic the poetry of magic? Where is the poetry? It's just a deck of cards." We are not told what the Professor answered, but in this short essay I would like to make a few observations on this subject, which I find more than just of passing interest. I don't have the definite answer to this question, which I find to be fundamental to the understanding of magic in general and card magic in particular, and as always it is just my opinion, but I hope to open a door and I invite you to step into a seldom visited room of our complex magic castle.

Poetry belongs to the literary arts, but has a form and a fascination all its own. Similar to painting, poetry has come a long way from its classic form to the sometimes very original and unusual present day interpretations, so much that I find it hard to easily define. However, and regardless of a precise definition, what remains constant is that poetry, as opposed to the prose used in short stories or novels, builds on elements of aesthetics. In his stage show *Dante's Divina Commedia*, the famous Italian actor Roberto Benigni talks about poetry and says that like a microphone is the extension of voice, or a telescope is the extension of the eye, poetry is the extension of beauty. That's a very nice way of putting it.

Looking at the grammar of communication which poetry uses, I find the use of metaphors to be crucial. Besides adding to the beauty of the form, metaphors do one important thing which every strong and memorable magic

trick also heavily builds upon: they appeal to the imagination of the reader, arguably better than prose. There was a time in the history of civilization—from its beginnings to maybe the end of the Enlightenment—where the imagination was man's most used and most important instrument to perceive and feel the world around him, and a vital component of his most profound beliefs about himself, life, and the universe. Although today we might think that the ability to use the imagination has been partially superseded by speed and visual perception, the fundamental function of the imaginary in the creation of our inner world has remained. The increasing success of sects, new age type of philosophies, and self-help books, are simply different manifestations of man's constant search for spirituality in a larger sense. The language of spirituality is full of metaphors and symbols.

Antoine Court de Gébelin, in an essay included in his *Le Monde primitif, analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne (The Primitive World, Analyzed and Compared to the Modern World)* of 1781, maintains that Egyptian priests had distilled the ancient *Book of Thoth* into the images of the Tarot cards. Although there is no historical evidence for this, and Tarot cards were invented by the Italians in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there called Tarocchi, after playing cards were already known, there is no doubt that the values and suits in their varied forms are symbolical and allegorical in nature.

Let's connect this to card magic. If you make a list of the 10 strongest card tricks—or call them "most commercial card tricks" if this is your focus—what would they be? I can't know what your list is, but I will guess that on this list is Paul Curry's "Out of This World," "Ambitious Card," "Card to Wallet," and Dai Vernon's "Triumph."

How did I do? Before you think that you have stooged yourself, let me make my point: do you realize that none of these tricks are visual, quick tricks? Your list probably doesn't contain Paul Harris's "Bizarre Twist," or the "Multi

Pip Card," nor any flashy Four-Ace-Production, all highly visual tricks. I find it most interesting to note that the really strong and memorable card tricks are almost all conceptual: after a relatively long preparatory phase the effect takes place at the moment the climax occurs. Nonetheless, because of the trick's inherent symbolic meaning and the appealing plot, the trick is interesting (appealing to the logos) and fascinating (appealing to the pathos) at every moment, provided it is capably performed.

The classic effects in the list above have an intrinsic symbolic meaning, and it isn't necessary to dress them with a lot of presentation any more than a cook would use the finest ingredients, then smother them with a heavy sauce that kills their inherent qualities.

Symbolism instills meaning in a trick without explicitly having to define or even mention the meaning to the audience. The term "subtext" is used in linguistics and the arts. It defines a further level of meaning beneath (Latin: *sub*) the surface of a spoken language or work of art, and provides an additional dimension of expression. Subtext is about implicit, symbolic meaning—about something not overtly announced by the performer (or author, or actor). Rather, it becomes *something understood* by the observer as the piece unfolds.

The grammatical toolbox of subtext contains metaphor, simile, and analogy. Subtext therefore becomes a fundamental component of art. Every good magic effect has at least one subtext; first and foremost the classics. This is one of the major reasons the classics have survived through time and across cultures. In this sense, the Linking Rings are about freedom; the Gypsy Thread about death and resurrection, or immortality; the Floating Lady about transcendence; a gambling demonstration about the mastery over fate and the seduction of Lady Luck. Houdini's escapes were very popular in his time, especially (but not only) for the socially deprived, because they symbolized social and personal emancipation and freedom.

All good tricks have an intrinsically fascinating subtext. Don't undermine it with an inadequate presentation. When a performer understands and respects the subtext of a magic effect during its performance, it will be more dramatic, artistic, and *entertaining*.

Although all props we use—I prefer to call them *instruments*, but that's another essay—have a symbolic potential, I really believe that playing cards are those that have the most profound and most complex appeal to the human being. And I would dare to say that this is regardless of the person's social status, age, sex, cultural, or ethnic background. To those who say that card tricks are boring, I would like to offer an alternative point of view by suggesting that a card trick, coin trick, and even a mental trick using a magic slate is not boring because of the cards, the coins, or the slate, as these are mere instruments, albeit important ones, but that it might be the performer's personality, his competence, his likeability, his choice of effect (not trick), and eventually his presentation that make the "trick" boring. The fact that some of the most beloved and successful performers, such as Juan Tamariz, René Lavand, and Ricky Jay, perform almost exclusively with

playing cards is strong empirical evidence.

This evocative quality playing cards have is at the core of what we would call a strong trick.

A secondary thought, which can be deduced from the above, is that playing cards that do not look like playing cards sustain a loss of their inherent symbolic power. This is the reason I personally never use cards with jumbo indexes or oversized cards, and I use jumbo cards only in very few and exceptional cases (such as Ken Brooke's "Flying Ace" or the Lewis/Kaps "Sidewalk Shuffle").

It is said that we should learn at least one poem by heart. I think that for us magicians it could be Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," which is a timeless piece and has inspired many artists in other fields to this very day. If you don't want to learn it by heart, print it and carry it with you as a bookmark or in your paper or electronic agenda and read it from time to time—it really is beautiful on many levels. I carry a copy in the back of my old-fashioned leather diary and it reminds me of my belief that card magic can be the poetry of magic. To close this column I would like to offer an English translation by Edwin Zeydel done in 1955.

### The Sorcerer's Apprentice (1779)

By Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

That old sorcerer has vanished  
 And for once has gone away!  
 Spirits called by him, now banished,  
 My commands shall soon obey.  
 Every step and saying  
 That he used, I know,  
 And with sprites obeying  
 My arts I will show.  
 Flow, flow onward  
 Stretches many  
 Spare not any  
 Water rushing,  
 Ever streaming fully downward  
 Toward the pool in current gushing.  
 Come, old broomstick, you are needed,  
 Take these rags and wrap them round you!  
 Long my orders you have heeded,  
 By my wishes now I've bound you.  
 Have two legs and stand,  
 And a head for you.  
 Run, and in your hand  
 Hold a bucket too.  
 Flow, flow onward  
 Stretches many,  
 Spare not any  
 Water rushing,  
 Ever streaming fully downward  
 Toward the pool in current gushing.  
 See him, toward the shore he's racing  
 There, he's at the stream already,  
 Back like lightning he is chasing,  
 Pouring water fast and steady.

GENII SESSION, continued on page 39

GENII SESSION, continued from page 19

Once again he hastens!  
 How the water spills,  
 How the water basins  
 Brimming full he fills!  
 Stop now, hear me!  
 Ample measure  
 Of your treasure  
 We have gotten!  
 Ah, I see it, dear me, dear me.  
 Master's word I have forgotten!  
 Ah, the word with which the master  
 Makes the broom a broom once more!  
 Ah, he runs and fetches faster!  
 Be a broomstick as before!  
 Ever new the torrents  
 That by him are fed,  
 Ah, a hundred currents  
 Pour upon my head!  
 No, no longer  
 Can I please him,  
 I will seize him!  
 That is spiteful!  
 My misgivings grow the stronger.  
 What a mien, his eyes how frightful!  
 Brood of hell, you're not a mortal!  
 Shall the entire house go under?  
 Over threshold over portal  
 Streams of water rush and thunder.  
 Broom accurst and mean,  
 Who will have his will,  
 Stick that you have been,  
 Once again stand still!  
 Can I never, Broom, appease you?

I will seize you,  
 Hold and whack you,  
 And your ancient wood  
 I'll sever,  
 With a whetted axe I'll crack you.  
 He returns, more water dragging!  
 Now I'll throw myself upon you!  
 Soon, O goblin, you'll be sagging.  
 Crash! The sharp axe has undone you.  
 What a good blow, truly!  
 There, he's split, I see.  
 Hope now rises newly,  
 And my breathing's free.  
 Woe betide me!  
 Both halves scurry  
 In a hurry,  
 Rise like towers  
 There beside me.  
 Help me, help, eternal powers!  
 Off they run, till wet and wetter  
 Hall and steps immersed are lying.  
 What a flood that naught can fetter!  
 Lord and master, hear me crying!  
 Ah, he comes excited.  
 Sir, my need is sore.  
 Spirits that I've cited  
 My commands ignore.  
 "To the lonely  
 Corner, broom!  
 Hear your doom.  
 As a spirit  
 When he wills, your master only  
 Calls you, then 'tis time to hear it." •