

ALICE BRITTAN  
**MODERN MAGI**

Philosophers have been much criticized for being magicians.  
—Alain Badiou<sup>1</sup>

SOME YEARS AGO, THE BELGIAN filmmaker Sven Augustijnen made a documentary called “L’École des pickpockets,” in which two masters train an apprentice to relieve people of their personal property without getting caught. The young student, named Palle, does not always impress his teachers, who want people to be robbed elegantly as well as efficiently. Style matters enormously to these men. After one rather clumsy effort, Palle is told, “There you’re not an artist, you’re just stealing.”<sup>2</sup> Just stealing: the words sting. The point is not merely to steal, but to steal beautifully. The difference probably doesn’t matter to the victim, who will care only about the fact that his wallet and cell phone have inexplicably vanished, but it means the world to the master pickpocket. Beauty is the difference between crime and art that just happens to be criminal.

If the men featured in Augustijnen’s film moved from Brussels to Las Vegas they could quit working the streets and get on stage, where their art would no longer carry the threat of a jail sentence. Theatrical pickpockets are a mainstay of modern magic, and they rely on the techniques of *leger-demain* and misdirection that are essential to grifters everywhere. The first person Palle should call when he reaches Sin City is Apollo Robbins, who is the subject of a recent profile in *The New Yorker*, where he is described as a “pickpocket of almost supernatural ability.”<sup>3</sup> Robbins’ stage show is now legendary, but he started out as a teenage shoplifter and he still has a

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou with Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (New York: The New Press, 2012), 92. Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> Sophie Berrebi, “Neither Fish nor Fowl, but Real Bodies: The Films of Sven Augustijnen,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* (Autumn/Winter 2012): 89.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Green, “A Pickpocket’s Tale: The Spectacular Thefts of Apollo Robbins,” *The New Yorker*, 7 Jan. 2013: 38. Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically.

special fondness for street thieves, whose history and methods he has studied carefully, and who return the favour by occasionally coming to his performances and greeting him like a brother (Green 43). Robbins explains that his ability to strip people of their possessions even when they are forewarned and fully aware of his intentions relies on what he calls “grift sense,” which involves “stepping outside yourself and seeing through the other person’s eyes, thinking through the other person’s mind” in order to control their perceptions (Green 42). The connection between grift sense and both art and crime is precisely what makes Robbins’ work so thrilling, and he knows it. He likes to take his act off-stage, sometimes introducing himself to future rubes and sometimes saving the introduction until he returns what he has already stolen from them. His most famous off-stage trick followed the latter model, and it took place in 2001, when he fleeced several Secret Service men assigned to protect Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States, and then presented them with their badges, keys, and some classified documents (Green 38). They were deeply flustered.

These escapades made Robbins famous in magic circles, and they also led to his recent appointment as an adjunct professor at Yale University’s new Center of Excellence for Operational Neuroscience, which is funded by the Special Operations Command (SOCOM) within the US Department of Defense, and directed by Dr. Charles Morgan III, associate professor of Psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine.<sup>4</sup> According to *The Yale Herald*, the purpose of the Center is to teach American soldiers how to get better at detecting deception and earning people’s trust (Stillman). This is precisely what Robbins does, and like all excellent magicians he is an expert at understanding what people pay attention to and why. In fact, he describes his work as “the choreography of people’s attention”; “Attention is like water,” he says. “It flows. It’s liquid. You create channels to divert it.” He also creates frames to contain it, a process that he likens to cinematography (Green 41). The comparison helps to explain Sven Augustijnen’s fascination with the school for street thieves: it’s not possible for a viewer to see what lies outside the visual frame of any given shot in a film because the image ends where the screen does, and it seems that the same is true of perception in the real world, which tends to operate within narrow and predictable confines.

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<sup>4</sup> John Stillman, “Yale Welcomes Special Ops,” *The Yale Herald*, 25 Jan. 2013, <http://yaleherald.com/news-and-features/yale-welcomes-special-ops/> (accessed 15 Feb. 2013). Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically.

The principle that perceivable reality begins and ends at the edges of the frame is at work in both filmmaking and picking pockets, and Robbins' gift for understanding and controlling the frame's dimensions has made him a subject of great interest not only to the Department of Defense but also to neuroscientists who study visual cognition.

In their recent book, *Sleights of Mind*, neuroscientists Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde call magicians “the world’s premier artists of attention and awareness.”<sup>5</sup> Macknik and Martinez-Conde work with some of the most celebrated visual tricksters in the world, including Apollo Robbins, in order to understand what their methods of “attention management” reveal about the way the mind, and particularly the visual cortex, interprets what it encounters (56). Macknik and Martinez-Conde argue that all magicians exploit two aspects of visual cognition: first, attention acts like a “spotlight” that brightly illuminates whatever it touches but leaves everything else in almost total darkness; and second, the brain does not like to deviate from routine (56). Spotlights and frames are two metaphors for describing the way the mind edits sensory chaos by choosing to focus on what seems most important in any given moment, which is a crucial skill, although it renders a great deal of information invisible. Magicians know how to make use of this shadow region, and they also know that the brain has great difficulty interpreting data that confounds its patterned expectations about how the physical world works. As Macknik and Martinez-Conde point out, the brain quickly habituates to repetitive tasks and finds energy-saving shortcuts to avoid paying attention to them, which is why people forget whether they’ve fed the cat or locked the front door, and are able to drive to work without thinking about how to get there (58). Neurologists call this process “synaptic plasticity,” and they have shown that it allows the brain to create a stable map of reality so that it doesn’t waste metabolic resources processing the basic facts again and again (Macknik and Martinez-Conde 144). However, habituation also impedes the brain’s ability to explain information that seems to violate the basic facts. People can’t walk through walls, read each other’s minds, or turn into elephants. But what if it looks like they do? Must be magic.

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde with Sandra Blakeslee, *Sleights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals About Our Everyday Deceptions* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010), 42. Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically.

But no one believes in this kind of magic anymore, not really. It has been almost a century since Max Weber placed the “disenchantment of the world” at the heart of modernity, although he also argued that “the growing process of intellectualization and rationalization does *not* imply a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live,” but merely the potential to reason our way toward an understanding of those conditions.<sup>6</sup> Adam Green writes that Apollo Robbins has an “almost supernatural ability” to pick pockets and that on occasion it seems as though the only explanation for his feats is “an ability to start and stop time,” but we know that these descriptions are not to be taken literally (38, 40). They express wonder, but not a sincere belief either in gods or the paranormal. When Simon During characterizes magic after the Enlightenment as “secular,” he captures precisely the spirit in which Adam Green and many others respond to Robbins’ craft: as a source of amazement that cannot be explained by reference to the occult, the divine, or the supernatural.<sup>7</sup> This is wonder without enchantment, in Weber’s terms, but it is wonder nonetheless.

Secular magic, which James Cook calls “magical modernism,” invites us to marvel but makes no claims about what we are marveling at.<sup>8</sup> As Cook writes, it is easy to assume that wonder without enchantment is just delusion aroused by empty trickery, and that stage magic no longer signifies other than as popular entertainment—something to do in Las Vegas between visits to the blackjack table and the Céline Dion retrospective (166). Yet modern magicians and their audiences have always expended a great deal of energy trying to figure out what it all means. In fact, the central imperative of magic without gods seems to be to discover its own purpose and to invite viewers to participate in the discovery. Apollo Robbins says, “My goal isn’t to hurt them [his audience] or to bewilder them with a puzzle but to challenge their maps of reality” (Green 40). A lofty goal for a pickpocket, but not a new one. Like Robbins, many magicians are also amateur historians who study and update techniques that date at least to the nineteenth century, when the magical arts flowered on both sides of the Atlantic, and Robbins’ introspection echoes that

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<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, “Disenchantment,” *Lapham’s Quarterly: Magic Shows*, v.3 (2012): 66.

<sup>7</sup> Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically.

<sup>8</sup> James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 166. Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically.

of many of his disenchanted predecessors.<sup>9</sup> Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin is generally considered the most influential magician of the golden age, and he too wanted to help re-map reality. He set about this challenging task by modernizing every aspect of his performance, including wardrobe and stagecraft, in order to rid illusionism of what he called “mystification” and “charlatanism,” namely the pretense to the possession of supernatural powers. He repeatedly described his tricks as “experiments,” and called himself an artist (Cook 192).<sup>10</sup>

Like Robbins, Robert-Houdin exploited the bond between magic and crime, and he published many accounts of his adventures among swindlers, gamblers, and confidence men, always being careful to emphasize that his role was to bring them to justice, while also having a ripping good time (Cook 203–05). Cook writes that after Robert-Houdin, “exposé expanded into one of the major themes of modern magic” (205). There are at least three kinds of exposure at work in this theme, and we catch glimpses of all of them in Harry Houdini’s book, *The Right Way to Do Wrong*, which was first published in 1906 and has just been reissued with an introduction by Raymond Teller, who is one half of the magical team of Penn and Teller. Houdini took his stage name from Robert-Houdin, and Houdini’s first book is also an homage to an older genre.<sup>11</sup> In it, the most famous escape artist of the twentieth century reveals the methods used by counterfeiters and thieves, with the stated goal of enabling “law-abiding citizens to protect themselves from the snares of the evil-doer,” but with the implicit goal of heightening Houdini’s own charisma by the time-honored technique of showing how nimbly he moved from one side of the law to another.<sup>12</sup> Two late-nineteenth-century eminences, Alexander Herrmann and Harry Keller, performed the same dance: they advertised their stage show by posing as real pickpockets in train stations and markets, planting stolen goods on the police who were summoned to arrest them and then allowing themselves to be carted off to jail before revealing their true identities (Cook 208–13). The crowds went

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<sup>9</sup> Cook, During, Green, and Macknik and Martinez-Conde all make this point throughout their studies of modern magicians.

<sup>10</sup> In *Modern Enchantments*, During writes that “Robert-Houdin endows his personal invention of magic tricks with all the value and seriousness of creative and artistic originality” (127).

<sup>11</sup> Houdini was born Ehrich Weiss.

<sup>12</sup> Harry Houdini, *The Right Way to Do Wrong: A Unique Selection of Writings by History’s Greatest Escape Artist* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2012), 150. Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically.

wild. Similarly, Houdini's most awe-inspiring feats involved escapes from straightjackets, handcuffs, and prison cells, and reminded everyone, including the police forces of many cities around the globe, that he obeyed the rules by choice rather than necessity. To further underscore how easy it would be for him to switch teams, Houdini bragged that he had turned down a huge bribe to open a school for burglars.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to exposing criminals, modern magicians made a business of disclosing their own secrets, or at least some of them.<sup>14</sup> In *The Right Way to Do Wrong* Houdini gives away many well-known tricks, such as rope ties, fire eating, mentalism, and what we might call the arts of regurgitation, which involve eating and then bringing up various objects, including stones, swords, needles, small animals, and in Houdini's case, keys, although he discreetly keeps this detail quiet. His scientific tone in the chapter called "Sword-Swallowing" is typical:

To accomplish the sword-swallowing feat, it is only necessary to overcome the nausea that results from the metal's touching the mucous membrane of the pharynx, for there is an unobstructed passage, large enough to accommodate several of the thin blades used, from the mouth to the bottom of the stomach. (43)

He goes on to suggest that "the medical fraternity first learned of the possibility of overcoming the sensitiveness of the pharynx by investigating the methods of the sword-swallowers" (43). Here and throughout his voluminous writings, Houdini divides magicians into two categories: highly specialized athletes with a flair for theatre, and fakers. Highly specialized athletes train their bodies to do remarkable things like suppress the gag reflex and disgorge objects from their stomachs, and then they use these strange but easily explained talents to bedazzle their audiences. Fakers, against whom Houdini waged a fierce battle in print and in person for his entire career, were people who claimed to have access to the supernatural. Houdini had

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<sup>13</sup> Ruth Brandon, *The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), 135. Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically.

<sup>14</sup> As James Cook writes in *The Arts of Deception*, "For the first time, explaining the behind-the-scenes workings of one's magical performance was becoming almost as important and as central to the professional magician's craft as the more conventional work of designing and performing tricks" (178).

the deepest contempt for these enchanters, whom he regarded as parasites upon credulity and a disgrace to the profession.<sup>15</sup>

Houdini showed again and again that he could reproduce by physical means every proof of the paranormal furnished by mind readers and spiritualists, and he insisted that magic was nothing more than a matter of disciplining the body and then artfully presenting the results of that discipline. Everything else was just stagecraft and glamour, in the early modern sense of that word: “a certain delusion of the senses, and especially of the eyes.”<sup>16</sup> Houdini had no respect for performers who pretended that glamour was real, and he always managed to imply that his own prestige was founded on more solid stuff. This was a ticklish matter, given that he was famous for needle-swallowing and escaping rope ties and handcuffs, acts whose methods he claims to reveal in the pages of *The Right Way to Do Wrong*. Houdini was renowned for his physical strength and dexterity, often advertising his performances with posters that showed him semi- or fully nude, and he was able to do things with his body that other people simply could not.<sup>17</sup> Part of his ability to escape from a straightjacket while hanging upside down hundreds of feet above the street, or from a padlocked coffin thrown over the side of a boat into an icy river, or from a locked cell on a train headed to Siberia, can be attributed to his relentless physical training—from a young age, he practiced holding his breath under water for long stretches of time, for example—but these escapes were also, to some degree, *tricks*.<sup>18</sup> Even now, Houdini’s methods of executing them are not fully known, which is testament to his ability to tell and keep secrets at the same time. At the end of *The Right Way to Do Wrong*, he writes:

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<sup>15</sup> For an exhaustive account of Houdini’s crusades against spiritualists and mediums see Kenneth Silverman, *Houdini!!! The Career of Ehrich Weiss* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 249–384. Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in “Introduction: Magic, Glamour, Curses,” *The Meanings of Magic: From the Bible to Buffalo Bill*, ed. Amy Wygant (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 4. Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically.

<sup>17</sup> Brandon and Silverman both reproduce many of Houdini’s promotional photographs and posters.

<sup>18</sup> For accounts of Houdini’s obsessive physical training, see Brandon, *The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini*, 46–47, 66, 162–63. In *Houdini!!!* Silverman tells the story of the injuries that led to Houdini’s death in 1926: after giving a performance in Montreal, Houdini was repeatedly punched in the abdomen by a young man who wanted to test the legend of the magician’s physical invulnerability (409). The blows ruptured Houdini’s appendix, and he died in Montreal several days later.

How does he do it? That is the usual question I hear asked about my work in the theater. No, dear reader, it is not my purpose to tell you *how* I open locks, *how* I escape from a prison cell ..., having previously been stripped naked and manacled with heavy irons. (147, italics original)

“Some day I may tell all this, and then you will know,” he continues (147). Of course the day never came.

*The Right Way to Do Wrong* continued a tradition that was already well established when Houdini began writing: the magician claims to shine a light on his profession, and then quietly moves his own secrets into the shadows. In fact, the more self-righteous the writer becomes about his willingness to reveal all—look, unlike my competition I have nothing to hide (except what I am hiding)!—the more we can be sure that he is practising the textual equivalent of sleight of hand. My hands are empty, says the conjuror, waving them around in front of the audience—nothing funny going on here.

What works on the stage also works on the page, or so the opening chapters of *The Right Way to Do Wrong* suggest. In a prefatory chapter called “Addressing an Audience,” Houdini tells would-be magicians not to underestimate the persuasive power of their own words, if delivered with panache. When you set up a trick, he counsels, you must recognize that the “experiment and apparatus are both of secondary consideration”: technical mastery matters less than storytelling (18). “Work with determination that you intend to make them believe what you say,” he counsels. “Say it as if you mean it and believe it yourself. If you believe your own claim to miracle doing and are sincere in your work, you are bound to succeed” (18). Houdini did not invent this principle, nor did it die with him. “One of the lovely things about being a magician,” says one of the contemporary performers studied by Macknik and Martinez-Conde, “is that you realize words have strong consequences,” because when used artfully, words can persuade people that “a lame trick” is in fact a “miracle” (122, 123). Everything that a magician says or writes is designed to create this illusion.

But it will not do to baldly state, “This is a miracle!” No one is persuaded by a simple lie. A magician’s patter has to delude without seeming to do so—the web of subliminal suggestion, false inference, and strategic omission must be invisible in order to be fully convincing. The same is true of *The Right Way to Do Wrong*, with its tell-all claims that never quite deliver but pull the reader closer and closer to the page in the attempt to see through



the words to the truths they hide. As a writer and as a performer, Houdini was a master of this kind of hide-and-seek. His namesake, Robert-Houdin, recognized that modernizing magic required stripping away aesthetic excess, and Houdini radicalized this insight by removing most of his own clothing and, eventually, all stage props other than those that were strictly necessary for whatever stunt he was about to perform. In the end, he even removed the theatre and performed outside. As Matthew Solomon writes, one of Houdini's central innovations was "to do away with concealment" because he realized that audiences were enthralled by the illusion that they could see everything.<sup>19</sup> Shortly after publishing *The Right Way to Do Wrong*, Houdini premiered two new acts that capitalized on the allure of total visibility. First, he freed himself from an oversized metal milk can filled with water and placed in the middle of the stage; then he replaced this act with the Water Torture Cell, which was made of transparent glass and filled with clear water, thus allowing viewers to watch every second of his efforts to release himself from manacles and get out of the Torture Cell before he drowned (Solomon 89–91). Shortly afterward, Houdini began performing outdoor escapes before thousands of people. What could a man hide while jumping from a bridge and clothed only in handcuffs?

More to the point, what did the throngs of people who lined the bridge and the riverbanks think they were seeing? This question leads us to the third theme of exposure within modern magic, namely the attempt to reveal the truth of how perception and cognition work. When Robert-Houdin retired from the stage, he embarked upon a second career as a kind of amateur ophthalmologist, building an instrument called an "iridoscope" that allowed him to examine and document the structure of his own eyes (During 124). Simon During argues that Robert-Houdin's interest in the physical workings of the eye can be traced to his earlier writings, where he ponders the fact that conjurers use the phrase "to have a good eye" to refer to "the ability to attract the audience's attention and hence elicit the sympathy which intensifies the mystery of a performance" (124). At around the same time that Robert-Houdin was drawing detailed illustrations of his iris, scientists were

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 81. More generally, Solomon argues that Houdini "fundamentally reoriented magic by moving it beyond the confines of the theater and into the real world," in part by his involvement as an actor and producer in the development of the American film industry (80). Subsequent references to this text will appear parenthetically.

studying the way magicians and spiritualists “short-circuited observation” in order to create convincing illusions (Solomon 23). However, even in the late nineteenth century, it was clear that studying the physical structure of the eye would not reveal how people are made to see and in some cases believe things that they know to be impossible. “Maps of reality” are made and revised by the mind’s interpretation of the raw data gathered by the senses, which is why magicians are so intimidated by children. A young child’s eye works much as an adult’s does, but children’s minds are “not sophisticated enough to be fooled” because their expectations of the physical world have not yet stabilized, and as a result their attention is hard to control (Macknik and Martinez-Conde 153).<sup>20</sup> Seeing and observing are not the same thing.

In a recent book, Alain Badiou complains that philosophers have sometimes been unfavourably compared to magicians, who captivate people “by artificial means” and lead them to “unlikely truths via the paths of seduction” (92). Being a philosopher, Badiou finds this comparison a little unflattering. Perhaps he is worried about the equivalence that Plato draws between magicians and sophists, which several centuries later will be visible in heated debates about the difference between magicians and true prophets.<sup>21</sup> As Morton Smith famously argued, throughout the ancient Mediterranean, magicians were understood to be in league with demons and spirits, and were seen as peddlers of untrustworthy, fleeting, and often illegal forms of persuasion; by contrast, prophets brought divine news, and had to be reckoned with carefully. The Roman Empire was filled with miracle workers who claimed to be the bearers of revolutionary wisdom, and a great deal was at stake in the ability to distinguish likely truths from unlikely ones—not least, the authority of the Pharisees as interpreters of Mosaic law, and the stability of Roman rule.<sup>22</sup> Badiou does not want to be classed with the fakers and the sophists, but at their best, modern magicians are philosophers in their own right. That most magicians are amusing (unlike most philosophers) should not be held against them. They reveal the unlikely truth that our senses de-

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<sup>20</sup> Macknik and Martinez-Conde speculate that people with autism may be similarly immune to attention management because they don’t follow the visual and verbal cues that magicians use to control what the audience perceives. See *Sleights of Mind*, 72–74.

<sup>21</sup> Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1978), 70. Subsequent references to this text will appear parenthetically.

<sup>22</sup> I draw these claims from Smith’s study of the status of magicians in Palestine and the territories controlled by Rome around the time of Christ. See *Jesus the Magician*.

ceive us all the time, quietly tucking away distracting or troubling pieces of information so that we can keep our minds focused inside the frame.

When the anthropologist Michael Taussig refers to “the magic of the state” he emphasizes how much is at stake in the ability to manage attention.<sup>23</sup> It seems that our minds are made to be managed, insofar as the brain works very hard to minimize the amount of work it has to do in daily life; the more ‘facts’ that can be habituated rather than closely examined at each encounter the more energy the brain can devote to other tasks, and this neural “adaptation” to normality is precisely what makes us vulnerable to social and political structures that aim to define what reality looks like (Macknik and Martinez-Conde 58). After the events of September 11, 2001, an email attributed to Osama bin Laden claimed that the attacks were meant to humble the United States by “crushing its towers, disgracing its arrogance, undoing its magic” (qtd in Wygant 12). Here, as in Taussig’s use of the term, magic refers to prestige, which was originally a synonym for glamour, or sensory delusion, and closely linked with witchcraft (Wygant 4). The allegation is not that wizards run the state, but that the state creates an inescapable aesthetic or sensory regime that controls the perceptions of its citizens as surely as a magician does.

Whenever a magician points a finger and cries fraud, we know that he is trying to clear the theatre of rivals. Robert-Houdin wrote a book ridiculing most of his peers and precursors, and then Houdini wrote a book ridiculing Robert-Houdin. This kind of patricide is another pattern of exposure within modern magic, on both sides of the proscenium. Osama bin Laden said that he wanted to undo the magic of the United States, but it is obvious that he wanted to practice some state magic of his own, and that he used terror to try to seize control of the stage. Terror gets people’s attention, which is perhaps why it has played such a prominent role in the history of magic. Like many magicians, Houdini was obsessed with death and physical cruelty, and he had a large collection of snuff photographs depicting real executions and scenes of torture, which he brought to life in a stylized and controlled form in his performances (Silverman 162).<sup>24</sup> Audiences love to watch people in danger, and nothing thrills like the prospect of seeing someone suffer and die. This

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> In *Modern Enchantments*, During traces “cruel magic” to the nineteenth century and shows that many magicians collected photographs of torture and execution (130). See 130–34.

kind of voyeurism was crucial to Houdini's career, but even a suave gentleman pickpocket like Apollo Robbins plays with the pleasure we take in seeing someone lose control of their body so fully that they can be robbed of their most personal possessions, including some of their clothes. We wonder how it is possible for someone to be touched so intimately and not even notice.

It is not hard to see that to some degree Houdini's escapes dramatize a struggle for personal liberty. Ruth Brandon, one of Houdini's most insightful biographers, notes that his "popularity was greatest where authority was harshest," and that in Germany and Russia, "the two most authoritarian states in the world," his success was immediate and "phenomenal" (105). The sight of a man sweating and bleeding as he frees himself from chains and handcuffs seemed to literalize the audience's own desire to escape the state and triumph over the police, which is why it is ironic that decades after his death Houdini's techniques were copied by the CIA. Or perhaps this is not ironic, but perfectly fitting. During the cold war, American intelligence drew on the expertise of many magicians to produce *The Official CIA Manual of Trickery and Deception* and to train spies to use sleight of hand and misdirection to outwit the Soviets (Macknik and Martinez-Conde 234–36). Democracy or Soviet dictatorship: these were the terms of the conflict, as Americans understood it. And who better to keep Americans free than Houdini?

Apollo Robbins' collaboration with the Department of Defense via Yale's Center of Excellence for Operational Neuroscience might seem less symbolically resonant, given that Robbins does not stage his audience's desire for freedom in any straightforward way, and he certainly does not sweat or bleed on their behalf. On the contrary, his patter is so disarming and his gestures so deft and delicate that his audience doesn't know what he is doing until it is done, and even then they don't know until he tells them. If this experience revises a map of reality, as Robbins hopes, then surely it does so by showing that our minds and bodies are being touched all the time without our notice. Our senses register information that we never become aware of because our minds are busy elsewhere, and our beliefs about the world are constantly being managed by all the forms of attention framing that constitute any given society. Robbins was hired to teach American military personnel how to interact with the citizens of fragile states like Afghanistan because he knows how to gain trust and guide perception, but like Houdini's (posthumous) relationship with the CIA, there is something paradoxical about a magician who works for the government. Yet many wisdom traditions

place this very paradox at the heart of social life: the tricksters who disrupt the social contract by stealing and lying and sowing every kind of mayhem are also in charge of maintaining order. The Greek-Roman-Egyptian god Hermes is an excellent example of this principle, and not just because he was closely associated with magic. Shortly after his birth, tricky Hermes was given a wand, but over the centuries he also became the patron of city limits, legitimate trade, and truth telling. People who know how to break frames are best qualified to repair and rebuild them—and then to break them all over again, just so we don't forget how it is done.<sup>25</sup>

Of all the frame-breakers, there is one whose reputation sends almost every rival begging: Jesus of Nazareth. Kenneth Silverman opens his encyclopedic biography of Houdini with an epigraph from a Greek “magical papyrus” that dates from the fourth century A.D. and records this spell for escaping from bonds:

Say, “Hear me, O Christ, in torments; help, in necessities, O merciful in violent hours, able to do much in the world, who created compulsion and punishment and torture.” Say it 12 times by day, hissing thrice eight times .... “Let every bond be loosed, every force fail, let all iron be broken, every rope or strap, let every knot, every chain be opened, and let no one compel me.” (n.p.)

These kinds of papyri proliferated throughout the ancient Mediterranean, and the genre is thought to pre-date Christ by about five hundred years.<sup>26</sup> These spells anticipate the gospel of Matthew in which Jesus tells his disciples, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” a passage that has posed considerable interpretive difficulty for biblical scholars (qtd in Gager 69).<sup>27</sup> Whatever these words meant to Jesus, biblical historian John Gager is confident that Christ's followers heard an echo of the ancient magical practice of cursing enemies by ‘binding,’ or rendering immobile, and ‘loosening,’ or restoring freedom of

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<sup>25</sup> See Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: North Point Press, 1998). On the importance of Hermes-Trismegistus to the Italian humanist study of classical magic, see Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011), 103.

<sup>26</sup> John Gager, “Curse Tablets and Binding Spells in the Greco-Roman World,” *The Meanings of Magic*, 69–72.

<sup>27</sup> See Matt. 18.18

movement and will (70). More broadly, when Jesus carried out the miracles that heightened his prestige—restoring sight and hearing, exorcizing demons, healing injuries and illnesses, and raising the dead—he was working within a long-standing magical tradition, which is why his detractors dismissed him as a mere magician, and therefore a fraud.<sup>28</sup>

Jean-Luc Nancy is just one of the contemporary philosophers who returns to the New Testament, and particularly to the figure of Jesus, in order to discover what can be learned when we read scripture without faith. Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, who also read the gospels with a secular eye, are most interested in what Christ the revolutionary can teach us about the nature of political power, both historically and in the present day, but Nancy's focus is primarily on Jesus' interventions in the realm of the senses.<sup>29</sup> Throughout *Noli mē tangere* Nancy argues that the primary role of the parables was to re-educate the senses, or to teach new ways of listening and looking that would make the disciples capable of receiving the ideas that Jesus wanted to teach. He could not speak plainly to his followers, because until he opened their eyes and ears they were incapable of understanding a view of reality that exceeded or radically challenged ordinary patterns of perception. The parables are often *about* hearing and seeing, but they are also trying to change what it means to hear and to see. As Nancy writes, "only the parable can open the ear to its own ability to hear" differently.<sup>30</sup> The hardest but most important lesson is the one that takes place at the mouth of Christ's tomb, where he stands, newly-arisen, and greets Mary Magdalene with the words, *Noli mē tangere*—Do not touch me.<sup>31</sup> Mary stretches her hand toward him, and in many European paintings Jesus reaches his own

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<sup>28</sup> Jesus' relationship to Old Testament magicians and prophets is explored in several essays in *The Meanings of Magic*. See pages 1–114. Throughout *Jesus the Magician*, Smith studies the allegations of magic made against Jesus and the defense made by his disciples in the gospels.

<sup>29</sup> Much of Giorgio Agamben's work studies the theological origins of economy and politics. Badiou reads the Pauline epistles as secular inspiration for social revolution in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli mē tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, trans. Sarah Clift, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 9. Subsequent references to this text will appear parenthetically.

<sup>31</sup> This scene takes place in John 20.17. The King James Bible translates the original Greek in which John was written as "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father." As Nancy points out, the original Greek is *Me mou haptou* (do not touch/hold me), which in Latin translation becomes *Noli mē tangere* (do not touch me). See Nancy, *Noli mē tangere*, 15.

hand toward her, their bodies almost touching in the moments before she runs to carry the news to the disciples. All the senses are under scrutiny in this scene of miraculous return, which is why Mary wants to brush the body with her fingers to verify that is real.<sup>32</sup>

Of the resurrection, Nancy writes, “This is not a magical trick” (15). He insists that it is “the very opposite” of a magical trick because the crucified body does not literally come back to life (15–16). By this disavowal of magic, Nancy wants to emphasize that he reads the resurrection without enchantment, and as an event that demands secular interpretation. In *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong reminds us that Jesus never called himself the Son of God, and that it took several centuries after his death for his followers to turn the premise of his divinity into stable doctrine. Christ insisted that he was mortal, and called himself Son of Man.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the resurrection was a totally unintelligible event, which is why Mary stretches out her hand in astonishment toward the mortal being who has arisen from the grave. Her eyes cannot be telling her the truth, she thinks, and neither can her ears. Perhaps touch will resolve the mystery. In Nancy’s provocative reading, Christ refuses this touch because he does not want the mystery resolved. His departure is his final parable and last lesson on the inadequacy of the senses and all routine forms of attention to apprehending the teaching he brings. Touch will not answer Mary’s questions. She and the disciples must learn to attend differently to themselves, each other, and the world. Why should we not call this re-education magic? The trick is never the return of the dead, but the reinvention of the living.

“There you’re not an artist,” says the magus to the inept pupil in “L’École des pickpockets.” It is curious that a street thief should care so much about elegance when his job is to be unnoticed. Perhaps his dignity requires this flourish. Or maybe he insists upon gracefulness because it is unnecessary, even uncalled for, and for this reason it heightens his elusiveness. The quicker his hand, the stronger his alliance grows with all that is invisible in the world. Like Mary Magdalene, the artist-pickpocket wants to

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<sup>32</sup> Nancy develops this reading in *Noli mē tangere*, 3–66.

<sup>33</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 80–81.

touch what is extra, unaccounted for, not yet available to the mind, because these fugitive things are the source of all transformation and renewal. Art, magic and faith are just different names for this everlasting human need to reach outside the frame.