



Symbolism & Iconography

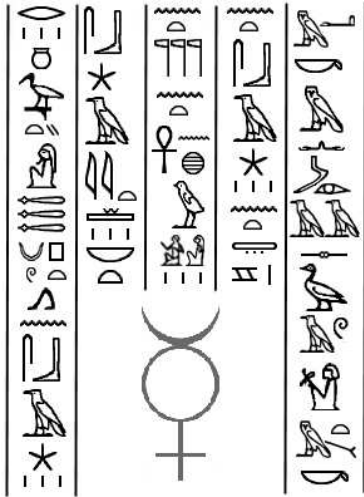
The Grand Book – aka the Book of Books

The earliest human records of the Book are to be found in an Egyptian tale (*The Story of Setna*) dating from the 19th Dynasty. The story tells of a secret artefact, the Book of Thoth, perusal of which will grant the reader knowledge of "the secrets of the gods" and "all that is hidden in the stars". However, it was also cursed, and doomed any mortal who should dare to look at it...

Whether by accident or design, the Book has occasionally been "lost", and entered the hands of ordinary humans. Only the mentally resilient or morally incorruptible may escape its curse, and then only partially (provided they are not driven insane by the revelations on the ultimate nature of reality, too shocking for the delicate human mind to make sense of, that it contains). In the Middle Ages, it inspired the alchemical text called the *Chrysopoeia* (i.e. the "Philosopher's Stone") and the concept of "hermetic wisdom". It is speculated that the book passed through the hands of Galileo Galilei, perhaps inspiring the famous words "Philosophy is written in this Grand Book, the Universe..." Similarly, William Herschel may have been referring to it when he wrote that he had "perused the Great Volume of the Author of Nature and was now come to the page which contained a seventh planet." Jorge Luis Borges (a maker of fictions) was almost certainly inspired by the Book to write the short story *The Book of Sand*; his frantic attempts to transcribe its shifting contents and to discern its infinite layers of meaning probably brought about his blindness. (Homer and Milton, peerless chroniclers of the deeds of Imperishables, may also be mentioned in this regard.)

In actuality, it is an ultrasophisticated Imperishable device, attempts to render which in ordinary 4-dimensional spacetime result in a paradoxical artefact: it has an uncountable number of pages, even though its volume and mass are finite. It contains a page for every subject known to Man or Imperishable, pages whose content and order change constantly according to the ebb and flow of history and knowledge. Though superficially resembling an ancient, leather-bound tome, it is in fact a user interface (Quicksilver's personal terminal) to the Imperishable central computer in which the entire Universe is simulated. The simulation operates at such a fundamental level that it is crudely possible, by adding inscriptions in the Book with a certain specially designed stylus – disguised, in Quicksilver's case, as a quill pen – to manipulate reality directly (provided one knows what one is doing, of course).

The Book appears, to most, as an ancient, leatherbound tome. On its front cover is an inscription in Ancient Egyptian. At the first touch of a new user, the cover ripples and glows with colour, and the inscription is translated into the user's own language:

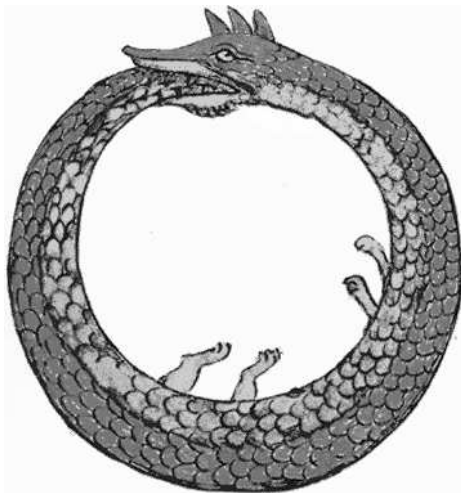


The Book of THOTH, Messenger from the Stars

*All the wisdom of men and immortals,
Of earth and stars, lie in this book,
A curse on those who dare to look!*

It seems to many that the Book is alive. It will penetrate the mind of any who touch it, reflecting back to the novice user the most hidden and secret of their thoughts calculated to drive them to despair and to become the authors of their own downfall. That is why all but the most worthy of ordinary mortals are driven mad by it.

The Ouroboros – literally “tail-eater”, a widespread¹ mythosophical symbol standing as a metaphor for the “uncaused causer”, the transcendent creative force that endows itself with the laws and preconditions defining its own existence and whose future actions bring about its own origin. It is frequently depicted in the guise of a serpent (snake or dragon) that devours its own tail:



Theodorus Pelecanos, *Synosius*

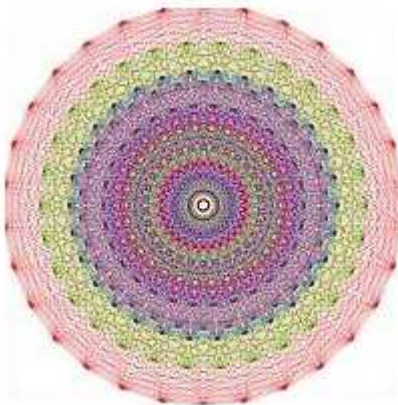


Lucas Jennis, *On the Philosopher's Stone*

¹ e.g. in Hinduism, the *shesha naga*

Quicksilver uses it to explain the function of the Book – that it is based on a circular causality, in which, though it is composed of matter², subject to the laws of physics, it is linked to an Imperishable simulation of the universe so perfect that it is, in a sense, *more fundamental* than the laws of physics that underlie it. (This is possible owing to the remarkable properties of Dark Matter.) Quicksilver’s mission also involves temporal circularity, since his goal is to enable Celeste to effect the discovery that underpins all of Imperishable society – thus the technology that enables the entire adventure to unfold. (These two notions of causal circularity are, of course, connected)

The E8 Group – the mathematical structure (a Lie group) that forms the basis of the “Exceptionally Simple Theory of Everything” recently proposed by Antony Garrett Lisi. It can be represented graphically thus:



A similar-looking design adorns many of the Imperishables’ artefacts – notably the reverse cover of the Grand Book, where it is combined with the OUROBOROS, and in representations of the Celestial Pole and, consequently, of the PRIME MOVER.

In fact, something like this structure really does function as a Theory of Everything (rather more complicated, unfortunately, than Lisi could foresee!). It was first discovered by Celeste Heavens in April 2009 while she was studying for her PhD at the University of Herefordshire. It predicts the existence of two novel classes of fundamental particle, corresponding respectively to what astronomers previously called Dark Matter and Dark Energy. These particles have some remarkable properties – exhibiting spatial and temporal nonlocalities for instance; and they appear to obey a form of Mach’s Principle, such that the behaviour of any single particle is governed by the spatiotemporal distribution of all other such particles. This nonlocality extends back all the way to the Big Bang, and it is not inconceivable that calculated manipulation of their current arrangement – via a vast computer simulation, for instance – could impinge upon the initial conditions from which the entire Universe evolved, and the symmetry breaking that gave rise to the particular laws of physics that hold today.

² actually, Dark Matter – which is just our modern word for what in Hellenistic and Mediaeval times would have been called “Chrysopoeia”

This is the basis of all Imperishable science. What is more, it is thought (though not known with any certainty, neither by Man nor Imperishable), this muddle of forward and backward, and top-down and bottom-up causation, can ultimately admit of only one logically consistent solution; being unique, it has the force of logical necessity. The Universe exists, in effect, in order to bring itself into existence, and it would be impossible for it not to.

(Rather, in fact, like a snake eating its own tail...)

The Circumpolar Stars – in Ancient Egypt, these were called *ikhmu-sek*, “The Imperishable Stars”, because they did not enter the land of the dead – the *Duat* – below the horizon:



“The Imperishable Stars”

Thus in IMPERISHABLE iconography, the Circumpolars symbolise their immortality, and proximity to the Pole (the symbolic location of the Prime Mover) denotes one’s degree of influence within their hierarchy. Hence their designation “Circles of Power”: Quicksilver currently belongs to the Second Circle, for example, and Pallas the First.

The Imperishables – a Kardashev Type IV post-human society, with the ability to manipulate the nature of reality and transcend time. Virtually immortal, their abode is the EMPYREAN, and the chief amongst them is designated the PRIMUM MOBILE. In spite (or because) of their power, The Imperishables are not permitted to intervene directly in the affairs of lesser intelligent races. At least, that is how their propaganda tells it; in reality, for millions of years their secret operatives have been waging the Counter-Entropic Crusade against the forces of Chaos. They often cunningly exploit loopholes to bypass their self-imposed Non-Intervention Directive. Over the past few thousand years, their interventions on Earth have become progressively less intrusive, as humans have become more sophisticated and more wary; nowadays they resort to guile, secret conspiracies and subterfuge to manipulate mortal society. QUICKSILVER is their expert in this department.

The Unwearying – Those mortals whom the Imperishables deem worthy, having distinguished themselves through acts of heroism, piety or devotion to duty, may undergo a transfiguration, via a process called Apotheosis, to a state almost equal in rank to that of the Imperishables themselves. These heroes are called the Unwearying, an allusion to the Ancient Egyptian term for the stars that pass below the horizon into the *Duat* (*ikhmu-wardj*). They are thus eternal – undergoing the cycles of life, death and rebirth; love, loss and renewal; innocence, sin and redemption, an infinite number of times – without partaking in the unchanging, ceaseless realm of the true immortality in which the Imperishables subsist. This realm is sometimes the only haven for lost souls who have wandered out of timelines that Interventions have rendered obsolete.

Quicksilver – A member of the Second Circle of the Imperishables, he acts as their special agent, a chronicler, an expert in the shifts and twists of history. He has visited Earth on many occasions, adopting various guises and pseudonyms (Thoth, Hermes – later combined into Hermes the Thrice-Great; Loki), but always in the role of a STARRY MESSENGER. As his name suggests, Quicksilver is ambivalent and volatile. His wit, his cunning, his persuasive charm, are the source of both his fame amongst the other Imperishables, and their antipathy and mistrust toward him. To ordinary humans, he is, by turns, charming and arrogant, displaying a certain barbed sense of humour. He can move swifter than the eye can see or the mind comprehend. Sometimes you catch sight of him out of the corner of your eye, but he has fled before you can turn your head. He is the guardian of secret wisdom, and a master of guile and disguise.



In appearance, Quicksilver is dandyish, usually wearing a brimmed hat, a shimmering cape and twirling a cane. An early portrait of him (in a rather compromising state of undress, though the essentials of his sartorial style are all there) exists in the form of the statue depicted on the left. In human mythology, the hat and cane metamorphosed, over the centuries, into the quintessential wizard's garb.



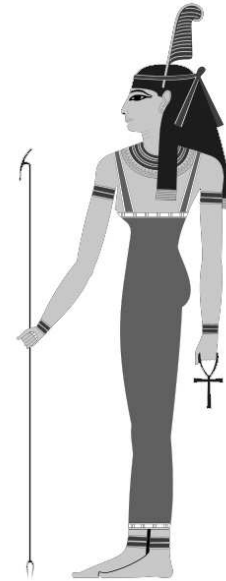
As Thoth, his symbol is a baboon (above right), a creature whose impertinence and playfulness embodies his propensity to trickery. As Hermes, a quill pen and a book (the Grand Book, no less). As Loki, he is sometimes associated with fire, with its flickering ambivalence and treacherous destructiveness.

Quicksilver was originally one of the most trusted of the Imperishables. His cunning and his powers of persuasion were often relied upon to extricate his colleagues from dangerous situations. However, in time, he began to look on his peers with disdain, thinking their methods antiquated and moribund, particularly regarding intervention in the affairs of lesser races, and he developed certain sympathies with the rival faction known as "Chaos". He turned his trickery against The Imperishables, playing a prominent role in the rebellion against them. However, it transpired that the trickster had himself been tricked. The rebellion had been instigated as part of a plot to root out and control dissenters. Quicksilver was made to betray his Chaotic allies to save his own skin, thus forcing him into a new alliance with the Imperishables, a role he begrudged even while recognising the leniency of his punishment. In time, he gradually regained the trust and influence he had formerly held.

Quicksilver's great skill is his cunning and trickery which he uses to effect the Imperishables' plans, acting in accordance with their unexpressed desire to intervene in history but against the laws that they claim to uphold. Should their schemes fail, he

would be held solely accountable, as a scapegoat. He is of course too clever for that; he always finds ways of concealing his actions (for example, seeding cryptic clues for mortals to unravel – the invariably ambiguous interpretation of which leaves space for plausible deniability. It is said that the majority of human conspiracy theories originate with Quicksilver, but only 0.1% of them are true).

Athena Pallas – One of the First Circle of IMPERISHABLES, Pallas is fiercely loyal to their Inner Circles, overseeing the execution of their plans, maintaining law and order, and keeping a particularly close eye on those field agents whose loyalty is not always above suspicion – QUICKSILVER particularly. She is also responsible for maintaining the system of Circles within the Imperishable hierarchy, and judging whether mortals are worthy of admittance to the ranks of THE UNWEARYING. As a member of the 1st Circle, she has access to powers such as Possession³, a privilege she is notorious for having made liberal use of in ages past. Has been known on Earth as Ma'at (distinguished by an ostrich feather and a red dress) and Athene, amongst other designations. As Quicksilver is fleet and treacherous, Pallas is just and unyielding.



Pallas as Ma'at

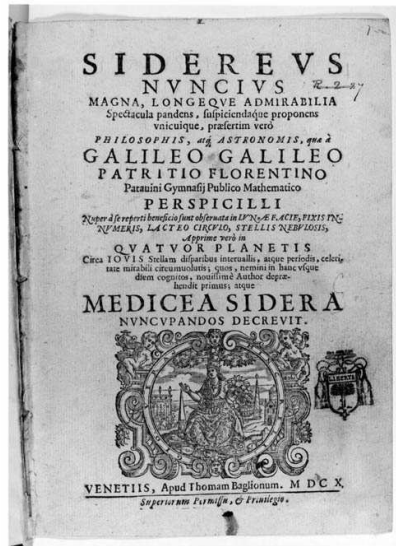
The Prime Mover (*Primum Mobile*) – in Aristotelian cosmology, the Uncaused Cause, the Unmoved Mover, etc. Dante places the Prime Mover in the highest Sphere of heaven; in actuality, the *Primum Mobile* is the foremost of the Imperishables, utterly mysterious even to most of them, but identified in their mythography with the Celestial Pole (c.f. the god *Ptah* in the theology of Ancient Memphis, who created the world through his speech⁴) – thus with their Innermost Circle. The *Primum Mobile* is also often represented by the mathematical construct that describes the Theory of Everything – itself circular in design (see E8 GROUP).

The Empyrean – straddling the cracks between dimensions, the dwelling of the IMPERISHABLES. It is organised into a hierarchy of Circles, with only the highest

³ the tongue-in-cheek name for the process by which an Imperishable can share the consciousness of a mortal human. The period of mental cohabitation can last from a few seconds to a lifetime, and may take on any form benevolent symbiosis and malignant parasitism. While the Imperishable partner shares all the sensations, thoughts and feelings of their host, only the most perceptive human partners are capable of tapping into the sealed-off consciousness of their Imperishable symbiont. In extreme cases, the host's Will can be dominated; this is usually attributed, by the human, to a flash of inspiration, a flush of emotion or a moment of madness.

⁴ If Quicksilver/Thoth represents the *written* word, The Prime Mover/Ptah represents the *spoken* word, bringing information (text, formula, cipher, computer code) into actuality.

ranking Imperishables permitted into the inner regions. At its core lies the Central Fire (whence derives the Empyrean's name; and c.f. the mysterious superfluous body added to the solar system in the cosmology of the Pythagoreans – very likely developed under Imperishable influence), the abode of PRIMUM MOBILE.



The Starry Messenger – (1) English translation of the title of Galileo Galilei's first astronomical treatise, *Sidereus Nuncius* (left), in which the mountains of the moon, the satellites of Jupiter and stars in the Milky Way were first reported. (2) sobriquet of QUICKSILVER (aka *The Cosmic Courier* or *The Heavenly Herald*) (3) a film screenplay and associated novel by the writer Arepo Satori – who subsequently went insane – created in response to having glimpsed the Grand Book. This event was instigated, in part, by Quicksilver, in order that Apotheosized Celeste have some sort of memorial in the new timeline that her actions brought about.

The False Paradise – The False Paradise – the alternate reality that Celeste creates by ripping up the Grand Book – is reminiscent of the “Lotus Eaters” episode from Homer’s *Odyssey*:

*“In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined
On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind
Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands”* (Tennyson)

It is experienced as blissful by those within who embrace illusion and deny reality. Instead of Homer’s Lotus, its denizens – called Gibbers because they have lost the will to communicate and only “speak in tongues” – gorge on the apple-like fruit called *Soma*. This is a powerful narcotic, blinding them to the poverty of their situation and robbing them of any power to escape it, should they ever summon the will to do so. Since it is an inverted Eden, eating the forbidden fruit guarantees entry instead of expulsion.

History is shaped by many factors, some infinitesimal and apparently inconsequential at first. Thus there are many possible futures, and it is impossible (for us, at any rate) to predict counterfactuals with any reasonable veracity. A “world without scientists” need not actually be so bad... certainly, had Galileo not lived, it is reasonable to suppose that others would have accomplished the same achievements, in time. But Quicksilver carefully engineered things in order to show Celeste the *worst of all possible worlds* in outcome to her ripping of the book. Her discovery, you see, would turn out to be the

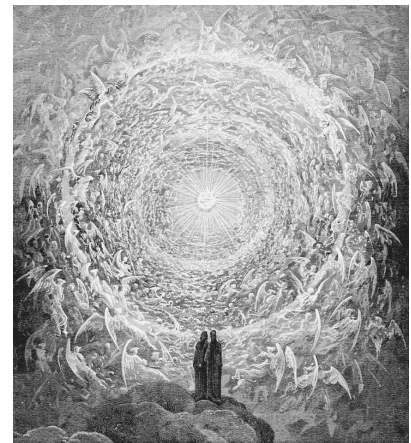
most crucial of all, and the most time-critical of all.... Had she not made it when she did, the world would have descended into a new Dark Age in which fundamental science would be considered decadent, elitist and irrelevant, and by the turn of the 22nd Century would have been all but forgotten. In such a world, the Imperishables could not arise.

Some Literary Allusions

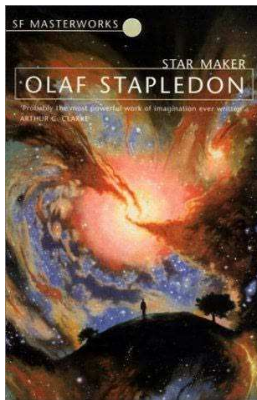
Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* – another “morality tale” ; in particular, the scene in which Celeste visits her younger self is a deliberate allusion to Dickens:

“ ‘The school is not quite deserted,’ said the Ghost. ‘A solitary child, neglected by his friends, is left there still.’ Scrooge said he knew it. And he sobbed.”

Dante, *The Divine Comedy* – although less explicit than the 1st draft, now that the second, dystopian alternate reality has been removed (with its nods to *Inferno*), some important Dantesque features remain, notably the Imperishables’ Aristotelian hierarchy – their Circles of Influence within the Empyrean, surrounding the Primum Mobile in the Central Fire. Celeste begins her story, like Dante, “lost in a dark wood” (metaphorically speaking) ; she finishes in “the highest heaven” (right). Like Dante, she is accompanied by a “spirit guide” familiar from Classical literature...



Gustav Doré's illustration of *Paradiso* Canto 31: Dante & Beatrice gaze on the Highest Heaven



Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker* – itself a somewhat Dantesque parable, a journey of apotheosis from a lonely hilltop to the Creator of the Universe... (left) Celeste’s “transfiguration” is partly inspired by this.

Lewis Carol, *Alice in Wonderland* – The allusions are mostly ironic (though the 1st draft was more explicit, with a Mad Hatter’s Tea Party of sorts as well as a wicked Queen of Hearts...). The character of Karl Lutwidge derives his name from Carol (aka Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) by way of Peter Dodgson, the lead character from *Onogoro*...

L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* – Yet again, mostly ironic allusions, though the device of recalling real-world characters in the alternate reality could be applied perhaps (?)

Homer, *The Odyssey* – Again, not so much now, though the “Gibbers” are based directly on Homer’s Lotus Eaters. Many aspects of the Imperishables are Homeric – their squabbling-amongst-themselves, their pettiness and amorality, their habit of interfering with mortals via avatars (Pallas is of course a version of Athena, though a more uppity one than Homer’s).

Jorge Luis Borges – The Book of Books is partly inspired by Borges’ short story *The Book of Sand* (or was it the other way around?); Libraries as Labyrinths, Libraries/Books as the Universe – all these are major symbols in Borges’ work.