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Mastering Matters: Magical Sense and Apotropaic Figurine Worlds of Neo-Assyria

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Introduction: Magical Figures from the Past

When contemplating certain deposits unearthed during the excavations at Nimrud in the 1950s, Max Mallowan remarked, "this magical practice had an immensely long survival, as witness the nursery rhyme:

> Four corners to my bed,
> Four angels round my head,
> One to watch and one to pray,
> And two to bear my soul away." (1966:226)

Mallowan's commentary, rather typical of his time, concerned the discovery of numerous brick boxes encasing figurines made of sun-dried clay, found buried underneath the corners, thresholds, and central spaces of room floors, possibly where a bed once stood. Excavations during the late 1800s to mid 1900s located such deposits in residences, palaces, and temples at important political and religious capitals of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, including Nimrud, Assur, Nineveh, Khorsabad and at Ur in Babylonia under Assyrian rule; they first appeared during the reign of Shalmaneser III and generally persisted up through the reign of Sin-shar-ishkun (ca. 858–612 B.C.). One can imagine an excavator's

delight in finding such deposits, and there was apparently considerable competition and excitement surrounding their discovery and unveiling (Oates and Oates 2001:253–254). But, locating such boxes did not always promise the discovery of figurines. Numerous "empty" brick boxes contained nothing more than a thick layer of sandy material, possibly remnants of decomposed organic matter such as wood or food. Deposits from Ur contained offerings of animal bones, remnants of grain and a pottery sherd along with the clay figures (Woolley 1926:692). And at Assur, some of the buried boxes entombed miniature bronze weapons (Rittig 1977). But perhaps the most curious finds were the figurines of "warrior" men, mythological fish- and bird-*apkallū* sages, human-beast hybrids, horned snakes, and other fantastical beings (Figure 2.1). Generally, such deposits comprised one, two, or seven figurines standing "at attention" in boxes facing in toward the center of the room. These deposits, not simply buried but concealed and contained, amounted to the discovery within a discovery, the revelation of an ancient secret or desire that had remained hidden for thousands of years.

Other archaeological findings, however, had already anticipated these discoveries: ancient texts preserved instructions for an apotropaic[1] ritual involving the burial of clay and wood figurines under room floors quite in the manner described above (Gurney 1935; Smith 1926; Wiggermann 1992). The name of one text explicitly pronounced its purpose: *šēp lemutti ina bīt amēli parāsu*, "to block the entry of the enemy in someone's house" (Wiggermann 1992:1); and the first twenty lines named the "enemy" to be almost any evil imaginable, from spirits, gods, and ancestors to disease, misfortune, Fate, and Death. The text guided a priest-exorcist through a choreography of very specific and often protracted ceremonies involving various objects, gestures, substances, and locations, leading up to the final installation of the magically protective figures entombed underground. Notably, another related text fragment, KAR 298, specifically detailed the making, function, character, number, and placement of the figurines (Smith 1926). The archaeological evidence proved to be remarkably consistent with these texts in terms of form and details of surface treatment, and to some extent, position and grouping of the figures. So the Neo-Assyrians themselves revealed the secret of the figurine deposits: they were magically powerful deposits that protected the individual and his house from sickness and evil. The protective figures served to "watch," "pray," and "bear souls away," as it were.

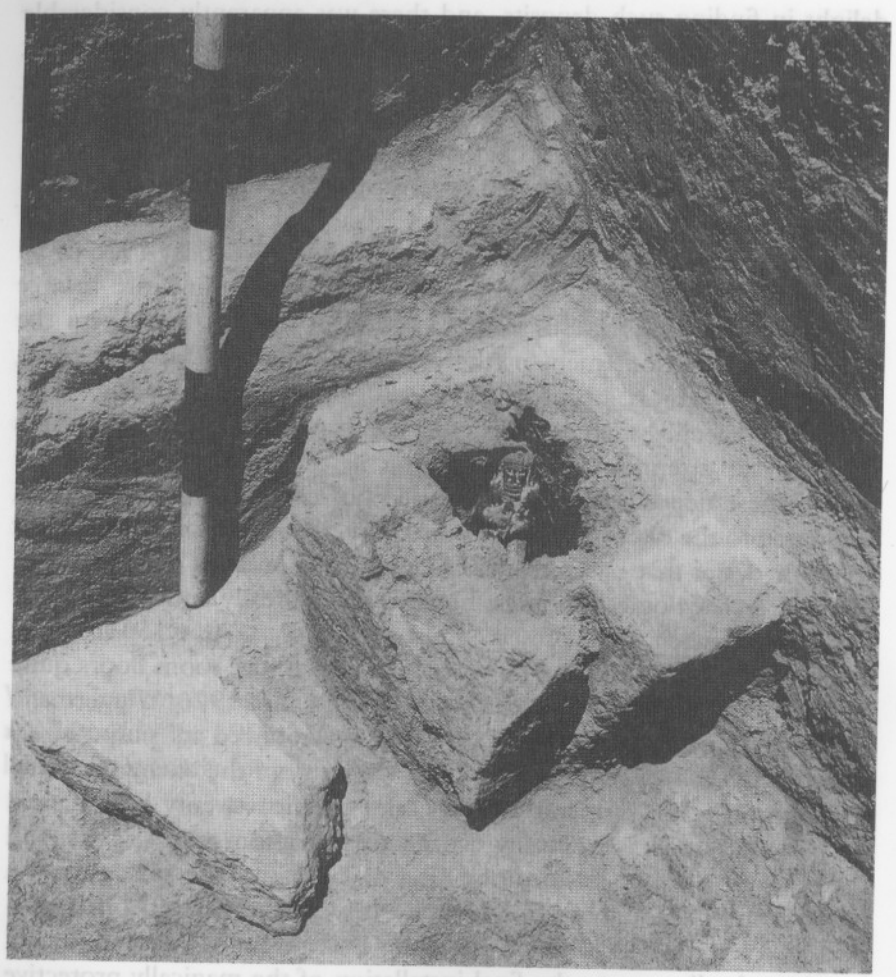

Figure 2.1 Apotropaic figurine deposit found in Room S57 of Fort Shalmaneser at Nimrud. Adapted from Curtis and Reade (1995:112)

Curiously, archaeological research has not fully exploited the evocative cooperation between text, iconography, material, and deposition in this apotropaic practice. Rather, it has been the art historical and Assyriological traditions that have provided the most thorough deliberations on the ritual. Iconographic analyses present detailed visual descriptions of the figurines (Klengel-Brandt 1968; Rittig 1977; Van Buren 1931), and trace out a visual typology of apotropaic images (Green 1993; Wiggermann

1993), while textual analysis investigates the symbolic logic of apotropaic prescription and the mythological identities of the figures (Wiggermann 1992). Two long-awaited volumes no doubt will provide further analyses of particular site assemblages (Green forthcoming) and the apotropaic figurines in general (Ellis forthcoming). Despite the richness of textual and archaeological data, an anthropological perspective is distinctly lacking; however, such research would considerably enrich our views of this remarkable ancient practice. Regrettably, studies of previously excavated materials have not exploited the diverse range of approaches afforded by modern social sciences. While previously excavated sites and materials admittedly do not often lend themselves to the analytical and interpretive techniques most favored by archaeologists, such data should not be omitted from modern reconsideration and inquiry simply because they present a special challenge for substantive interpretation (see Meskell 1999). There is, in fact, adequate data to perform detailed contextual and spatial analyses of the apotropaic practice at certain Neo-Assyrian sites.[2] Furthermore, I would argue that conventional interpretations in archaeology – still oriented toward explanation and meaning – fail to get at the most compelling aspects of ancient magic, exactly that which makes it *magical*. Magic surely presents something beyond the reach of representational or functional interpretations and thus demands a different perspective. What is required is an evocation of magic that aims directly at the caesura between meaning and matter and delves into the shadowy processes of materializing experience, belief, and value.

Perhaps it is not surprising that archaeology, with only material traces of human activity to work with, has left the critical study of magic to other disciplines. It is revealing that "magic" is generally invoked as an explanation for those slippery things, processes, and occurrences that our rational and linguistic varieties of logic can't quite master. From this vantage, magic has become something more suitable for explaining than for being explained. But as Mauss (1972) decisively observed in *A General Theory of Magic*, magic is as much a way of doing as a way of thinking. We should consider, then, not a logic but an *aesthetics* of magical practice, as a particular way of *making sense* (Gosden 2001). And this way of doing engages a radical materiality that not only enacts the mutual constitution of subjects and objects, but provides the condition for such discursive practices.

A consideration of materiality vis-à-vis magic, then, does not presume and continue the anthropological pursuit of finding *meaning in* matter,

the well-rehearsed terrain of discovering how various cultures construct and inscribe meaning in their artifacts. What is magical or forceful in certain artifacts evades such fixed and flattened analyses since processes of abstraction do not account for the "untranscended materiality" or "plastic power" of the object that derives from the thing's materialness itself (Pels 1998:101). Impoverished attempts to discover the meaning or social context of a magical artifact, as it were, fall short not only because of an opacity of things, but also because our habituated ways of apprehending and constructing meaning threaten a veritable non-recognition of the things themselves.[3] This purifying analytical gaze effectively eviscerates matter of its very materiality – its innate capacity to continuously engage and enter into new relations. But recovering a recognition of things simply requires embracing the *thingness* of matter, namely, that insistent sensuousness of things that compels a confrontation with humans. This move does not return us to problematic theories of materialism, but rather engages a notion of materiality as a dialectic and supplemental aesthetic of *relating to.*

Humans mime the animate in the inanimate, and the ideal in the real, to create and transform the world around them, only to be created and transformed right back. Such is the reality of matter: it "strikes back" (Pels 1998:91). Within this framework I suggest that apotropaic figurine magic encompasses a process that enacts both a distinct mode of perception and a material event that renders a protected reality. This discussion converges specifically on two aspects of magic: first, how magic capitalizes on a tension between the social construction of meaning and the radical autonomy of matter, and second, how magical perception, in the way of poetic action, masters the unknown by recovering and performing a "derangement of all the senses."[4] From such a viewpoint, Mesopotamian magic neither constitutes nor opposes a "rational" mode of knowing the world, but rather moves alongside in tandem, as counterpoint in a polyphonic[5] system of knowledge. From this perspective, magic engages a sensuous metaphysics and grounds the possibility of a distinct socio-religious worldview.

Magic Presents More Than It Represents[6]

The magical object is nothing less than confounding; like Marx's table, it is "an apparition of a strange creature: at the same time Life, Thing,

Beast, Object, Commodity, Automaton – in a word, specter" (Derrida 1994:152). Like that other odd Table-thing, the magical object presents:

> the contradiction of *automatic autonomy*, mechanical freedom, technical life. Like every thing, from the moment it comes onto the stage of a market, the table resembles a prosthesis of itself. Autonomy *and* automatism, *but* automatism of this wooden table that spontaneously puts itself into motion, to be sure, and seems thus to animate, animalize, spiritualize, *spiritize* itself, but while remaining an artifactual body, a sort of automaton, a puppet, a stiff and mechanical doll whose dance obeys the technical rigidity of a program. (Derrida 1994:153)

Derrida's lucid description of the commodity provides an uncanny account of the magical object and its tendency toward unintelligibility. This opacity or resistance to meaning seems to extend from some perverse quality of thingness that precedes and exceeds reason and defies any empirical or semantic basis. While a magical work gathers meaning from the specific context of its production, it also produces a material intervention in the world that asserts a new force – like ***mana*** – that "always and everywhere, . . . somewhat like algebraic symbols, occurs to represent an indeterminate value of signification, in itself devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all" (Levi-Strauss 1987:55). The condition of such opacity finds its origin not in a peculiar mental state as Levi-Strauss would have it, but in the promiscuous *materiality* of the work – the way in which it accommodates every relation it enters into, becoming spirit, idol, toy, or clay fabric G4 – such that it seems to defer and proliferate meaning. There is something unsettling in the way things simply *survive*, through and beyond meaningful human signification, by continual deferral and deference. This is the strange life of things, animated and constrained by invisible relations and yet defiantly autonomous in their discrete physicality. The allure of the thing lies in the way in which it can never be completed, never be fully or perfectly discovered; and it is always set in motion, propelled by human relations. In this way, the thing always exceeds its own narration.[7] And such authority in contingency, indeterminacy, and excess reveals an extra-semantic function of the magical object as the disclosure of powerful force in encounters of meaning and matter, life and death.

In this way, the magical object does not merely represent. It *presents.* This presentation, as not a reproducing or inventing but a *capturing*

(Deleuze 2003:48), conjures a force that exceeds the totality of the complex relations and ideas that produce it. Specifically, the magical event renders that which is not given over to meaning. Rather it vacillates between processes of signifier formation and the bare material potential of the world that is "superabundant beyond all understanding" (Menke 1998:69). In seeking the concrete, magic captures the intractable power of things that is forever inaccessible to human mastery: things in their capacity for such excess and autonomy present a possibility – if not a guarantee – of life in death since pure matter, as an energy unbounded and unqualified by organic life, asserts the force of an existence that can never be destroyed, only conserved. The obligation of death provides the very ground of life (Harrison 2003:70). And magic, as an event that disrupts the consensus (and what more final consensus can there be than death?), finds power in the bare possibility of presenting life as death, and meaning as matter. This is the power of a radical materialism that lies beyond rational or linguistic analysis and suspends an "irresolvable dialectic," a state of indeterminacy in the play between meaning and matter.[8] These human–thing transactions trace an economy of the present in the sense that they do not seek a reconciliation of opposites, but rather a preserving of disjunction (Spivak 1974:xlii). Within this ongoing movement, magic finds kinship with art and memory, unleashing a force as inscrutable to reason as it is captivating in our desire to control it.

The Sensuous Metaphysics of Magic: Mutual Constitution and Correspondence

> The representation of a wish is, eo ipso, the representation of its fulfillment. Magic, however, brings a wish to life; it manifests a wish.
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazier's Golden Bough* (Miles and Rhees 1971)

Implicit in Wittgenstein's aphorism that magic "manifests a wish" is the notion that magic requires concrete demonstration: the fulfillment of the wish made real. At first glance, magic as both the manifestation of a wish and its fulfillment seems to pose a contradiction in this act of

making real. But magic is an exchange that seeks synthesis, and such exchange, "as in any other form of communication, surmounts the contradiction inherent in it" (Levi-Strauss 1987:58). Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) surmised, "to *be* means to *communicate*" (287). And the movement of such exchange presumes a sensuous intimacy between the outside world and ourselves: "to be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another* or *with the eyes of another*" (Bakhtin 1984:287). This is the human orientation of being amidst the constant flux of the world that provokes our fear as much as desire, and discloses the condition for a way of knowing directly and sensuously.

Giambattista Vico (1999[1744]), a forward-thinking but marginalized philosopher of his time, implicated bodily sense in a critique of the Cartesian principle of *Cogito*; in response to the reductive logic of geometric certainty, he formulated the axiom: man can only know what he himself has made – "verum et factum convertuntur" – and to make is to transform oneself by becoming other (Vico 1999[1744]:160). The implication of this premise posits that human knowledge cannot be exhausted by rationality; it is also sensory and imaginative. Although Vico's project poses three progressive historical eras of man: the first ruled by the senses, the second by imagination, and the third by reflective reason, we now recognize that all three modalities of knowledge exist throughout human history albeit at different scales and intensities. From this perspective, magic, which embraces bodily imitation and play, is better viewed as a poetic reinterpretation of the concrete reality of human action rather than the discovery of an objective reality that presumes to regulate it (Böhm 1995:117).

Indeed it is our sensory faculties and not our rational faculties that better apprehend certain complexities of the magical realm: we know when we feel. In encounters with magic, we apprehend the apparent trickery of bodies, substances, and things. Our reaction to such events often betrays delight, horror, fear, disgust, attraction, and fascination simultaneously, and such disorientation is desired. Magic produces wonder, and in doing so returns us to a state of apprehending the world that short-circuits those automatic processes of intellection that discipline the senses. And wonder is central to a mode of understanding that is "capable of grasping what, in ourselves and in others precedes and exceeds reason" (Pettigrew 1999:66). Bodily sense is key here, since it

can *know* something more than words express.[9] The "trick" of magic, then, lies in attaining the unknown by disorganizing all the senses; in effect, it acts to deregulate relationships that are rigorously regulated by normative cultural forms. The aesthetic experience of magic seeks the recovery of correspondences between people, things, and places in their pre-differentiated unity, a unity that becomes obscured through "habitual modes of perception" (Harrison 1993:180).[10] In this way, magic aims at the perceptual movements that continually render meaning rather than at meaning itself. In this intercalary register of experience, magic presumes a certain direct engagement with the world; specifically, it recalls a pre-differentiated world as an open possibility of interrelations constantly in flux.

Merleau-Ponty's (1968) notion of *intertwining* or *chiasm* between interior and exterior experience might provide a helpful ontological frame here. This bare movement of perception posits the emergence of various social worlds from the sensuous interchange between interior and exterior phenomena, namely, nodes of self-organization (perception) and the "chaos" of indeterminacy (being). There exists a necessary separation *and* continuum between the former and the latter as the very condition for perception, such that perceptual faith becomes a "strange attractor in the circulation of sense, in the interweaving of perceptual and material systems" (Mazis 1999:233). And Merleau-Ponty (1968) conceives of the bare notion of *flesh* as providing the substrate or condition for this movement. *Flesh* posits a world of indeterminate being connected by an essential openness to becoming completed by the world, things, others, qualities and interrelations (Grosz 1999:151). Such transactions are never "completed" per se, but rather engage in continuous exchange, in an ongoing process of becoming. This unity, therefore, conditions perception as "a communication or communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention or, . . . the complete expression outside ourselves of our perceptual powers and coition, so to speak, of our body with things" (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

The notion of an original unity seems to inhabit a Mesopotamian worldview in which dreams, visions, abnormal events, internal organs, and entrails provided an "empirical" basis for reality. In this reality, interior events and natural and social phenomena were intimately and specifically related. One could argue that this worldview maintained a certain interpenetration or continuity between the interiority of the mind and the exteriority of the world. This notion is supported in the polysemic

and polyphonic character of the Mesopotamian writing systems.[11] According to Asher-Grève and Asher (1998:39), the Sumerian language and vocabulary offers no evidence for the radical bifurcation of mind and body that is so fundamental to Western intellectual thought. They find support for this notion in the Sumerian word, *šà*, a holistic term that denotes the mind, body, and heart; the body and heart are the seat of the will, "it thinks, feels, has power over the limbs and is open to the influence of the deities" (1998:39). Moreover, they see the body as providing a fundamental point of reference in early Mesopotamia; Sumerians see the body as the total being, confirmed by the absence of a distinct Sumerian word for brain/mind (1998:40). In later times, ancient scribes and scholars exploited the flexibility of the Akkadian language evidenced in plays and puns on words (see Alster 2002). It is notable that the formation and development of the cuneiform script (created by Mesopotamians for Sumerian and adapted also to Akkadian), always allowed for a number of permutations and ambiguities to intervene, on the level of things indicated as well as on the level of signifying words (Bottéro 1992:94). This capacity for linguistic signs and phonemes to hold multiple and freely interchangeable values reveals an indeterminacy built into what Bottéro calls the concrete and polysemic character of a "script of things" (Bottéro 1992:100). In other words, linguistic thought also supports a material logic of correspondence.

Although Mesopotamians certainly made distinctions between various concrete and intangible phenomena – the supernatural and natural worlds were connected through a notion of divinity, but were not seen as the same – perhaps it was the potential for their connection or conflation that was significant in the context of magic. The reorientation of classical mind–matter, subject–object divisions within a relation of continuity and mutual implication sets up an ontological frame that might better approach an ancient Neo-Assyrian worldview (following Meskell 1999; 2002; 2004). Such a frame not only situates magic in a pre-discursive world of relations, but also grounds it in an aesthetics that discloses a powerful process of enacting correspondence. It should come as no surprise, then, to find mimetic work as a principle technique of magic, since the recovery of the world in its pre-differentiated unity provides the condition for the mimetic process of getting into the skin of an other (cf. Taussig 1993), that way of making which is the occasion of magic. If this unity becomes obscured by the habitual, purifying movements of social process, then magic seeks its recovery in secrecy, through the concrete work of mimesis.

Bodily Sense: Magic's Perception and Performance

Mimesis asserts a gesture of expression that "retrieves the world and remakes it" (Merleau-Ponty 1973:78), and I am interested in how the Neo-Assyrian figurine deposits, as such gestures, retrieve and remake a protected world. Figurines, as miniature bodily forms petrified in clay or stone, are distinct works of wonder; in the way of poetic disclosure, they project an idealized past and more desirable future. Figurines fascinate as they confront our gaze with something familiar in the unfamiliar, real in the counterfeit. It is not only the object's form or physicality that we identify and relate to, but something of the mimetic gesture: the faculty to create and explore ourselves, to encounter and become other (Taussig 1993:xiii). Anterior to the organized knowledge of reflection, there is mimesis: this age-old and rather profound faculty that stands somewhere at the beginning of play, the beginning of language, and the beginning of self-making (Benjamin 1979). With mimesis, we already have a sense that reality, at some level, is simply a matter of relations. Walter Benjamin conceived of the mimetic faculty as producing "magical correspondences" between persons and things, objects and essences: "a child not only plays at being a grocer or a teacher, but also at being a windmill or a train" (1979:65). Relations forged through miming reveal remarkable correspondences between the material and immaterial; the copy assumes the power of the original, and a wish is "made real" in the material fabric of the world (Frazer 1957:55; Taussig 1993:47). The elegance of the mimetic process lies in the way in which it always renders an imperfect copy, and it is this very intervention of imperfection that locates and captures creative force.

If Neo-Assyrian apotropaic magic reenacts a circulation of sense – a reorientation of perceptual and material systems – to disclose the protection of space and being in time, how might we consider a notion of protection constituted in the material gesture of placing numerous figurine deposits under Neo-Assyrian room floors? Furthermore, what can we make of acts of burial, concealment, and containment in this context? Here, texts and archaeological materials considered together portray a remarkably detailed practice in the choreography of various mimetic acts.

Turning to the texts, we find they recount the exemplary life of these objects from creation to deposition. The ritual production of apotropaic

figurines involved certain meaningful places, materials and gestures: one text instructs a practitioner, a high-ranking state *āšipu* (priest-exorcist) to go to the woods at sunrise to consecrate a *cornel* tree, recite the incantation "Evil [spirit] in the broad steppe" and then return to the city to make the figurines from the consecrated wood (see Text 1, 28–44 in Wiggermann 1992).[12] The crafting of clay figurines begins similarly, but what is notable here is the portrayal of the ritual scene that evokes a distinct sensory landscape in the enactment of certain requisite and standardized actions:

> when you make the statues, creatures of Apsû,
> in the morning at sunrise you shall go to the clay pit and consecrate the clay pit; with censer, torch and holy water you shall [purify] the clay pit, seven grains of silver, seven grains of gold, carnelian, *hulā*[*lu*-stone] you shall throw into the clay pit, then prepare the setting for Šamaš, set up a censer with juniper wood, pour out first class beer, kn[eel down,] stand up, and recite the incantation Clay pit, clay pit.
>
> Incantation: Clay pit, clay pit, you are the clay pit of Anu and Enlil, the clay pit of Ea, lord of the deep, the clay pit of the great gods; you have made the lord for lordship, you have made the king for kingship, you have made the prince for future days; your pieces of silver are given to you, you have received them; your gift you have received, and so, in the morning before Šamaš, I pinch off
> the clay NN son of NN; may it be profitable, may what I do prosper.
> (Text I, lines 144–57, Wiggermann 1992)

The appeal to the senses during this ceremony is striking.[13] The scent of the censer, heat of the torch, luster of the metals, flavor of the beer, and sound of spoken words together invite and gather the human, natural, and divine worlds to a feast of sensory correspondence. This demonstration accomplishes a sort of dazzling synthesis that deregulates the faculties – of imagination, outer sense, inner sense, reason, and understanding (Deleuze 1998:33) – and seeks communion through the apprehension of the world. The result effectively gathers and binds spirit with matter to forge a unity of being as divergence or noncoincidence. It is a matter of "capturing and befriending" insensible forces by embracing the strife in which the perceptible and imperceptible, sensuous and non-sensuous belong to each other. Through this performance, the clay pit as divine

material is reenacted in a demonstrative process of making sense, and the sensual or aesthetic enactment of a certain understanding of the world discloses power in the *process* of re-forming meaning: "in the process of mimetic reenactment, we reach behind the already formed figurines of meaning, back to the dynamics, force and energy of their formation" (Menke 1998:97–98).

After this "enlivening," the *āšipu* then molds this clay into various figures of power and protection, in effect reenacting the divine creation of humans from the clay of the *apsû*, the primordial underground freshwater ocean.[14] And this mimetic act doubles back, for at the end of the incantation the *āšipu* invokes the creative utterance of Enki (Ea) and incants himself into the picture;[15] here he blurs his position as both mime and mimed other: "in this way, as both chanter and person chanted about, as demonstrator and demonstrated, he creates the bridge between the original and copy that brings a new force, the third force of magical power, to intervene in the human world" (Taussig 1993:106). And it is the *āšipu*'s body that provides the ligature of this bond:

> O Ea, King of the Deep, to see . . .
> I, the magician am thy slave.
> March thou on my right hand,
> Be present on my left;
> Add thy pure spell unto mine,
> ***Add thy pure voice unto mine,***
> ***Vouchsafe (to me) pure words,***
> ***Make fortunate the utterance of my mouth,***
> Ordain that my decisions be happy,
> Let me be blessed wherever I tread,
> Let the man whom I (now) touch be blessed.
> (Utukki Limnuti, III/VII:260ff.
> Thompson 1903–04:27–29, added emphasis)

It is bodily sense – initiated by the *āšipu*'s voice, movement, and touch – that forges a correspondence between the natural and the divine. Through the mimetic faculty, magical craft and performance invites a direct and sensuous relation with the open world capable of recuperating a pre-organized state of sensation and perception. This visceral presentation of the self-becoming-other and spirit-becoming-substance, reproduces the original fold of being that encompasses divine, human, and natural worlds. The Mesopotamian world was indeed enchanted, and

humans, always already engaged in such a world, needed only to feel or sense in order to retrieve such unity.

I have dwelled upon the bodily aspects of practice – namely, those gestures of relating and transforming through incantation, touch, and movement – to underscore magic as a technique, as a knowing and producing that choreographs a dis/re-organization of worldly relations. Magical performance amounts to a mimetic demonstration of vital correspondences between ideas, essences, and things in the processual enactment of an ideal made real. The affective force of such bodily techniques arises from the kinetic communication and experience of the performance; but how are we to make sense of the power or force of ideal protection *made real* through the burial of miniature figurine deposits? Most commonly, scholarship has approached this ritual practice and material assemblage by considering certain symbolic and conceptual linkages to Neo-Assyrian ritual, religion, and culture, for instance, the common terrain shared by myth and iconography (see Green 1983; 1993; Wiggermann 1992; 1993). While such critical analyses get at important aspects and processes of ancient intellection, they ultimately fail to consider the devastatingly material logic of magic that often subverts (only to reinforce) such discursive productions of meaning. To redress this imbalance, I presently examine this concrete logic and how it discloses apotropaic power.

Mastering Matters

In the material register, Neo-Assyrian figurine assemblages present a physical gesture of miniaturization, hybrid form, and concealment. I have intimated that such material gestures disclose a magic technology as a symbolic and sensual logic that conspires with and against conventional value-producing forms. The question now becomes one of how this material reality *presents* protection. I would suggest that in the context of apotropaic performance, a material economy that produces a miniature, hybrid, and hidden reality anchors and accomplishes an experience of human mastery. Furthermore, this suite of gestures skillfully sustains the belief in divine power and order through a cunning reversal. The collision of Neo-Assyrian socioreligious beliefs with this material making engenders a force that cannot be contained or mastered by narrative closure. This resistance to such mastery, in effect, secures magic's

very power. Magic does not seek the restoration of balance or the resolution of contradiction (Taussig 1993:126), rather it renders such contradiction immaterial, and in doing so, masters the system which defines the conditions of its disclosure. The slippage between meaning and matter, belief and practice, enshrouds magic in secrecy that is at once opaque and transparent. As both contingent and autonomous, the magical object secretes indeterminacy into the structure that conceives it, holds it at a distance and thereby masters it.

Artifacts congeal processes of making – the simultaneous forging of objects, selves, relations, cultures, and worlds – in a gesture of becoming. To make is to transform, and such transformation derives from the human enactment of both the self and the world. If we accept Bakhtin's idea that to be means to communicate, then figurines are self-creating works that specifically address communications among various beings, human, animal, divine, and supernatural. They provide the material site for the human action of creation which moves back on the human creators themselves (Scarry 1985:310), and this reverse process acts in complicit as much as disruptive, subversive, and obfuscating ways. Notably then, the process of material creation discloses a certain "mimetic excess" (cf. Taussig 1993) whereby reproduction amounts to metamorphosis, self-amplification to self-effacement, and divergence to unity.

The Neo-Assyrians crafted protective figurines as clay or stone copies of various mythological and supernatural beings. Their form as miniature, portable, durable, free-standing, three-dimensional objects confronts humans within a distinct relationship; namely, this material choreography reproduces powerful beings in a reality that assumes an anthropocentric universe for its absolute sense of scale (following Stewart 1984:56). The materiality of the figurine thereby discloses the authority of humans over the copy, and hence over the original. Here, the production and reception of the copy itself becomes a "dramatic form of (social) experience" (Jenson 2001:23), namely, that of human mastery. Whether deity, double, ancestor, spirit, or animal, the "original" comes to inhabit a material reality of human design. As petrified and choreographed "life," the figurine recreates the human as master in this relation, a relation whereby humans, as all-powerful giants, assert and play out their desires within the diminutive tableau of the figurine. The specific "bundling" of material properties of the figurine provides an enduring frame and anchor for the various ways in which other subjects relate to it thereafter. As a thing, the petrified miniature object will always encounter and constitute subjects

as vigorous, gigantic masters with the capacity to possess, manipulate, command, and destroy.

Through this production of figurines, Neo-Assyrian apotropaic rituals trace out complex, and even disorienting, relations between humans, deities, and various supernatural beings in space and time. Throughout the ritual, the *āšipu* priest creates protective beings in a perpetual mode of dedication to important deities who are the "creators" of humankind. I have previously argued that these acts of dedication constitute a giving that takes back (Nakamura 2004); here, dedication is a demand for protection, a dialectic of giving that gives back more in return. Protection then arises from the "mimetic slippage" that exacts a brash assertion of human mastery over divine power, masked through a posed reality of servitude. Apotropaic rituals enact a radical synthesis of material work and belief that configures a force capable of surmounting contradiction. The durable material gestures of miniaturized scale, hybrid form, and concealment inscribe the subterranean landscape, effectively preserving a desired past for the future. In this way, an idiom of protection arises in the material enactment of memory.

The miniature

The creation of powerful supernatural beings in diminutive clay form mimes the divine creation of being from primordial clay. But this figurine work enacts an idealized relation between the human and divine such that the mimetic act establishes a double appropriation. Through mimesis, the *āšipu* appropriates the divine power of creation by making copies of protective beings that assume the powers of the original. In addition, his material relation to the figurine manifested in relative size also embodies a divine relation to humans. The diminutive size of the figurine renders humans giant in comparison. The *āšipu*, as creator and master of the figurines, becomes creator and marshal of the divine power of protection, who then fashions, commands and deploys a small army of protective spirits. This cunning reversal amounts to a self-realizing request for protection made possible by the exposure of a secret: that humans make up the gods who make them.[16] But this exposure finds certain cover in the opacity of the figurine object, which presents itself to the world as a small, doll-like object made of clay, as a king in beggar's clothes, as it were.

This "auto-affection" enacted through the creation of objects galvanizes power in mimesis as idealized repetition; in Derrida's words, "[it] gains

in power and in its mastery of the other to the extent that its power of repetition *idealizes itself*" (1974:166). And repetition does not produce the same; rather it magnifies difference masked by the similarity it bears to the original. The miniature figurine then provides a locus for the human enactment of a variety of desires and actions that animate the being it represents; in the Neo-Assyrian case, humans control, protect, contain, and command powerful deities and spirits in this spatial and material production of simulacra. The scale of the miniature invites activities of play and fantasy. According to Roger Caillois, play, as "pure form, activity that is an end in itself, rules that are respected for their own sake, constitutes an area of "limited and provisional perfection," in which one is the master of destiny" (2001:157). In the realm of play, humans are free to "master" any relation, being, reality, or power, immune to any apprehension or consequence regarding their actions; this is especially true when such play is circumscribed by human–object relations. The tableau of the miniature solicits a relation of human mastery through an idiom of play that thrives on transgressive maneuvers of inversion and appropriation.

The hybrid

The magical power of the *āšipu* also allows him to identify certain mythological and supernatural beings appropriate for the task of protection; these are ancient sages (*apkallū*), warrior deities and monsters, associated with civilized knowledge and the formidable forces of life, death, peace, and destruction of divine will and rule (Green 1993; Wiggermann 1993). These figures take on different protective attributes depending on the nature of the represented being; the *apkallū* act as purifiers and exorcists to expel and ward off evil forces, while monsters, gods, and dogs tend to the defense of the house from demonic intruders (Wiggermann 1992:96–97). All of these figures find some association either with the underworld or the freshwater ocean under the earth (*apsû*) which was the domain of Enki, the god associated with wisdom, magic, incantation, and the arts and crafts of civilization (Black and Green 1992:75), and notably, all but the *laḫmu* portray composite human–animal physiognomies (Figure 2.2).

Such forms manifest a communion of things generally held to be opposed to each other. The blending of humans and animals in this context might capitalize on the tension between Mesopotamian conceptions

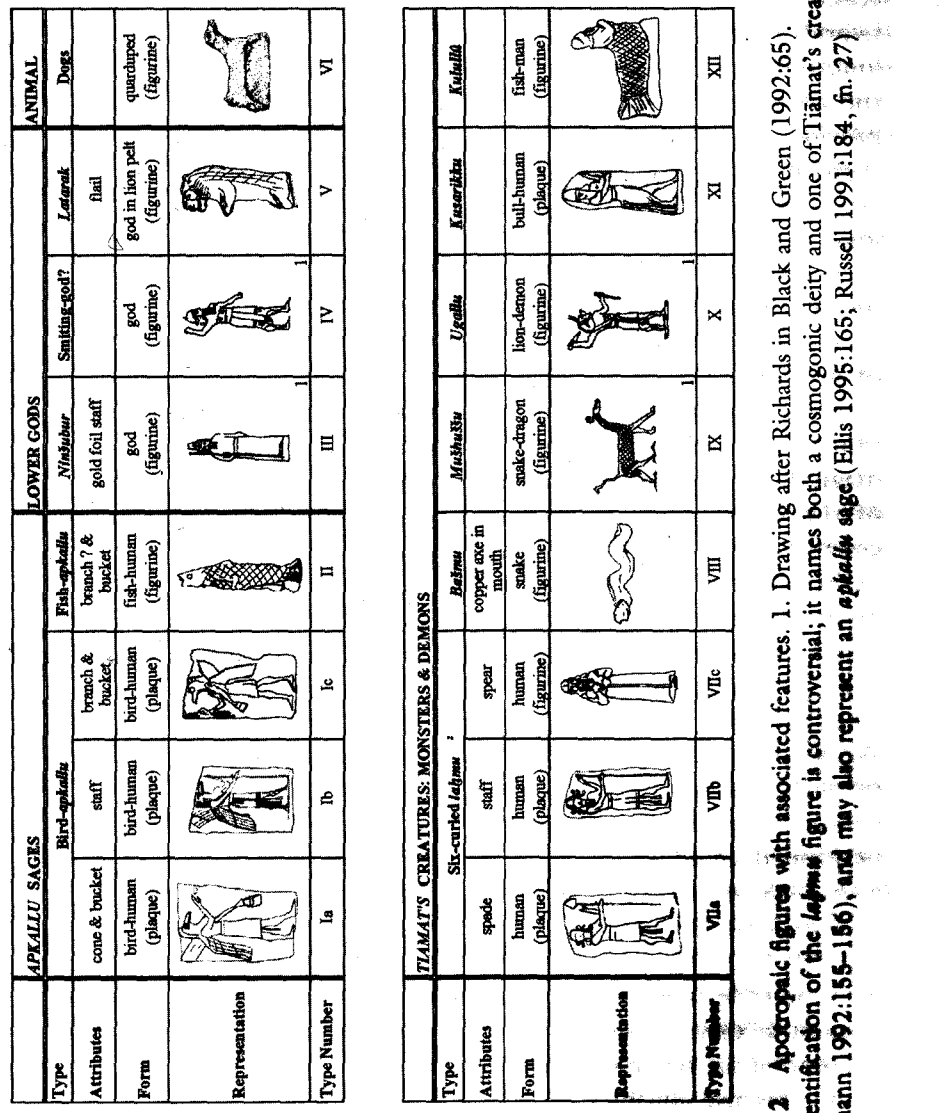

Figure 2.2 Apotropaic figures with associated features. 1. Drawing after Richards in Black and Green (1992:65). 2. The identification of the *laḫmu* figure is controversial; it names both a cosmogonic deity and one of Tiāmat's creatures (Wiggermann 1992:155–156), and may also represent an *apkallu* sage (Ellis 1995:165; Russell 1991:184, fn. 27)

of a structured, civilized human world and a chaotic, untamed natural world (Bottéro 1992). Hybrids materialize a unity of self and other, human and animal as a strange being that is at once knowable and controllable and unknowable and incontrollable. As beings in-between, hybrids embody potential, transition, and similarity in difference. Such liminality is often associated with dangerous power, a power that obeys the apotropaic economy of the supplement, since it terrifies and yet provides the surest protection against that terror (Derrida 1974:154).

By miming such beings in clay figurines, the *āšipu* brings forth their active life and force in petrified form. Capitalizing on the apotropaic logic of defense, this gesture captures self-defeating force and suspends it in space, material, and time. Many of the figurine types are depicted in movement with hands gesturing and a foot forward to suggest forward movement. Following Susan Stewart (1984:54), I submit that the force of animated life does not diminish when arrested in the fixity and exteriority of the figurine, but rather, is captured as a moment of hesitation always on the verge of forceful action. The apotropaic figurine is a magical object – what Michael Taussig calls a "time–space compaction of the mimetic process" – doubled over since its form and matter, creation and presentation capture certain inherent energies that humans desire to control. The magical object, which encounters the unknown by presenting its form and image "releases a force capable of vanquishing it, or even befriending it" (Deleuze 2003:52). But as ritual texts and archaeological deposits confirm, it was not just the images themselves that rendered power, but something in the process of their creation. While such apotropaic figures appear in grand scale and idealized form on wall reliefs flanking entrances of kingly palaces purifying all who passed through the gates, the figures standing guard in floor deposits performed an additional task.[17]

The buried and enclosed

The multiple layers of concealment in this Neo-Assyrian figurine ritual suggest a play on the hiding and receiving powers of the earth. In Mesopotamia, burial constituted a pervasive and important ritual idiom; people buried valuables, sacrifices, foundation offerings, caches of various materials, and their dead. Such diverse practices surely supported an equally diverse range of meanings. But in a basic sense, burial can mean to store, preserve, and put the past on hold (Harrison 2003:xi). This

concept of burial holds purchase in the way in which protection relates to memory. By burying figurines of powerful beings, the *āšipu* preserves an expressed belief in a present reality of supernatural power, mythological origin and divine order. Burial keeps things hidden and protected such that preservation binds memory to a specific locality, from which it can be retrieved in the future as a given past. And this preservation of the future configures protection as survival. It is interesting to mention here a temporal particularity in the Akkadian language that designates the "past" as lying before and the "future" as lying behind (Maul 1997:109), a stark reversal of our modern notions. Mythology also seems to corroborate the notion that Mesopotamians "proceeded with their backs to the future," as it were. Berossos' *Babyloniaka* presents the primordial sage Oannes as having taught humans all the arts of domestic and cultural life. Other myths regard this knowledge of the civilized arts as a gift from the god Enki (Ea). What is striking in both of these accounts is that the Mesopotamians believed that all cultural achievements – be they architecture, writing, healing, metalwork, carpentry, etcetera – were endowed to humans at the *beginning of time*, and this notion locates the ideal image of society in a primordial and mythological past rather than in a hopeful future (Maul 1997:109).

Furthermore, the figurines were not only buried, but also placed appropriately *under* the earth, in the space of the Netherworld and the *apsû*, the primordial freshwater ocean.[18] Numerous sources locate the underworld in the ground, beneath the surface of the earth (Black and Green 1992:180; Bottéro 1992:273–275).[19] This idea follows from a traditional Mesopotamian conception of a vertical and bipolar universe where the earth, inhabited by living humans, separated the Heavens (*šamû*) from the Netherworld (*erṣetu*) (Bottéro 1992:273). And the borders of these domains were permeable, as entry to the Netherworld could be gained by way of a stairway leading down to the gate, while spirits could access the human world through a cracks and holes in earth's surface. But importantly, the prevailing worldview of this time held that every being occupied a proper space in the world, with the lower hemisphere, symmetrical to the upper heavens, providing a discrete space and residence for the dead and other supernatural beings. In this context, the burial of figurines of creatures from the underworld and *apsû* might constitute a mimetic gesture of placing or commanding such beings to their proper place in the world. This ritual practice not only reflects but reenacts the notion of an underworld located

underground. Furthermore, the strategic placement of the figurine deposits under certain architectural and household features may act to channel and focus the protective power of the beings, since they dwell in their "proper" realm. The fact that the figurines were encased in boxes is also evocative of the important gesture of providing a "house" for the deities, and there could be no greater service rendered to a divine being than the building of his or her house (Frankfort 1978:267).

Additionally, the "immateriality" of a buried geography as an invisible, powerful presence is itself provocative. The figurines, so installed, become effectively removed from the sensuous sphere of human–object relations. In this register of experience, they are "completed," no longer engaging in processes of mutual constitution and becoming. But the materiality of the figurine deposit endures and is powerful in this capacity to survive, virtually unmolested, performing its original duty;[20] cut off from human relations, mute, blind, and restrained, they no longer strike back at human subjects, but can only direct their force to fighting off evil spirits in the Netherworld, as instructed by the *āšipu*. There is a sense here of Derrida's (1994) autonomous automaton, the animate puppet with a will of its own that yet obeys some predetermined program. By containing, concealing, and hiding these magical figures, the priest has made his mastery of their power complete.

Conclusion

> An obscure memory of cosmic perturbations in the distant past and the dim thought of future catastrophes form the very basis of human thought, speech and images.
>
> M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

This obscure memory and dim thought of humankind vividly inhabited Neo-Assyrian mythologies, religious values, and social practices. In Mesopotamian thought, dichotomies did not provide a fundamental way of organizing experience. Rational thought was neither dominant nor lacking in their system of knowledge; the medical use of plants, social ordinances and laws, city planning, and other cultural forms certainly exhibited strains of deductive reasoning. But Mesopotamian thought also embraced the various shadows, symmetries, torsions, syncopations,

ruptures, and reversals that punctuate the rich texture of human experience.[21] Magic traces a mode of thinking that is layered, reticular, and corporeal, rather than linear and abstract, and this mode provided the ground for Mesopotamian social and religious life in both its logical and sensory depth. Magic, then and now, enchants us not with the truth, but with the possible made real.

Neo-Assyrian magical figurine work conjures and materializes a primordial secret: if apotropaic magic names that which wards off and turns away evil, then evil is nothing other than the insidious reality that humans themselves create their own creators and make their own world. But the exposure of this secret, which would seem to threaten the very dissolution of the religious belief and tradition at the core of Assyrian social life, instead serves to *preserve* these beliefs and traditions (cf. Taussig 1999). In this way, the apotropaic device recalls that perverse disposition of the supplement: "a terrifying menace, the supplement is also the first and surest protection against that very menace" (Derrida 1974:153). Figurine deposits secure the protection of the present by giving a future to the mythological past, a past in which the gods and spirits ground the condition for human social life. This mimetic production does not reproduce the same, but discloses a new life through the figures of repetition, transfiguration, and burial; as such, it constitutes the processual enactment of a memorial gesture whereby a particular Neo-Assyrian mythohistory preserves its future in the material memory of itself. The gods and spirits, like the dead, become our guardians, "we give them a future so that they may give us a past. We help them live on so they may help us go forward" (Harrison 2003:158). As an art of doing, magic capitalizes on this strife between meaning and matter, life and death, past and future, and in it, grounds the authority of a desired social order.

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Notes

1 "Apotropaic" means that which wards off evil.
2 My dissertation undertakes such research (Nakamura In prep).
3 Merleau-Ponty (1968:162) identifies and critiques this non-recognition of things as the condition of Western positivism arrived at by the refusal of entering "into the interrogative and involving nature of experience" (Mazis 1999:238).
4 Arthur Rimbaud (1967) frames poetry as "reaching the unknown by the derangement of all the senses" (302). Also see Deleuze (1993).
5 Polyphony here is meant to evoke Bakhtin's (1984) sense: "*a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (6, original emphasis).
6 This idea takes from Deleuze's (2003) discussion of the image as that which "presents more than it represents."
7 Clark Lunberry (2004:648–650) poses the city in these terms, but I take these qualities as arising from the city's materiality: the city is perhaps "*too much* of a thing for it to be finally fixed, to be fully said" (650).
8 Notably, Lunberry (2001:641, n. 20) points out that Robert Hobbs (1981), when speaking of Robert Smithson's art as engaging an "unresolvable dialectics," remarks that Smithson "strives to achieve a state of indeterminacy in which meanings are produced as much as cancelled out" (23). Something extra is captured in this "non-dialectical" movement such that contradiction vanishes or becomes the force behind magical logic.
9 In the formulation of an anthropology of the body, Blacking (1977) states, "My knowledge is both generated and restricted by the perceptions and cognitive processes of my society, but through my body I can sometimes understand more than I know through my own or another's society because I have more experience than society labels" (5–6). His concern for the body rests on the conviction that feeling as bodily knowledge forms the basis for mental life (4).
10 See also Levi-Strauss (1987); in his critique of Mauss' conception of *mana*, he claims that, "all magical operations rest on the restoring of a unity; not a lost unity (for nothing is ever lost) but an unconscious one, or one which is less completely conscious than those operations themselves" (59).
11 See Glassner (2003) for a thorough discussion of the development of the cuneiform script and Sumerian language.
12 No examples of such wooden figurines have been published (but see Oates and Oates 2001:148).
13 Notably, this ceremony recalls certain aspects of the *pīt pî* ("washing of the mouth") ritual that "enlivened" statues and images such that they could smell, drink, and eat like the deities that came to indwell in them.
14 Similar narratives of the creation of humankind reiterate a trope of the divine formation of being from clay. In the *Atrahasis* epic (Tablet I, lines 210–213) humankind is born from the mixing of primordial clay and the blood of a slain god, and in *Enki and Ninmah* (lines 24–26) humankind is made from this clay only.
15 One creation myth (of many) also poses Enki (Ea) as taking on the organization of the entire universe and accomplishes this feat solely in the creative power of his word (Black and Green 1992:54).
16 See Michael Taussig's discussion of the "public secret" in *Defacement* (1999). Especially compelling here is his deliberation on the economy of revelation and concealment that preserves the secret: the secret is revealed so as to conserve it (51, 93).
17 Wall reliefs were found at Nimrud (Mallowan 1966), Nineveh (Botta and Flandin 1849–50) and Khorsabad (Loud et al. 1936).
18 The Netherworld became more or less confused with the *apsû*, also located underneath the earth (Bottero 1992:274).
19 Although most sources locate the underworld below the earth, some references associate the underworld with the desert, the far West, and the mountains, essentially inaccessible regions of the earth (Black and Green 1992:180). These ambiguities may be symptomatic of merging cosmologies in late Mesopotamia; by the Neo-Assyrian period, rulers in the north were known to have made active attempts to appropriate Babylonian mythologies into their own (Black and Green 1992:38).
20 However, at Nimrud it is interesting that some figurines were apparently reused for the same purpose (see Green 1983:89; Oates 1961), and also found smashed and discarded in a long-barrack room (SE 5) of Fort Shalmaneser at Nimrud (Green 1983:89; Oates and Oates 2001:256).
21 This characterization draws upon Barton's (2001:14–17) similar description of and approach to Roman experience.

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