Recent work on the relationship between rhetoric and magic has tended to pivot around the issue of magic’s perceived identification of signifier and signified and what that might mean for its relationship to larger theological, empirical, and rhetorical approaches to language. This article seeks to problematize the assumptions underlying this issue through an examination of the work of Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535), the author of what is commonly regarded as the European Renaissance’s most influential magical text, De occulta philosophia libri tres (1533). In investigating the rhetorical strategies contained in Agrippa’s famously ambiguous retraction of his occult works we may uncover an equally polysemic stance toward the ability of language to deal with both the everyday world and the realm of the sacred, a stance that uses textual instantiations of paradoxes of self-reference to forcefully undermine the apparently paradigmatic magical identification of signifier and signified.

Much recent investigation into the relationship between rhetoric and magic has been premised on the assumption that magic is, in one way or another, linguistically mistaken. So, for example, Kenneth Burke, in attempting to stake out the territory of rhetoric, concludes that magic, although apparently related to rhetoric in its use of language to try to effect change, fundamentally “gets the whole subject turned backwards” (Rhetoric of Motives 42) due to its “mistaken transference” of the rhetorical model to attempting to “induce motion in things” rather than in people. What Burke calls “word magic” (43, using Richards and Ogden’s phrase) is thus both “erroneous” and “derived” and its only real significance lies in the opportunity to examine the way in which magic was used as a socializing “primitive rhetoric.”
Similarly, Brian Vickers’s work on the different linguistic paradigms underlying the shift between the occult philosophy of the Renaissance and the scientific method of the Enlightenment revolves around an expansive investigation into the implications of magic’s supposed reliance on the “denotative fallacy,” a phrase popularized by S. J. Tambiah (although explicitly argued against in his own work). William Covino has used Vickers’s research to argue for the existence of an alternative, “progressive” rhetoric that mirrored the Renaissance magical linguistic paradigm. This rhetoric shared the assumption that words can have an effect on the real world, that, in some sense, there is an identity between signifier and signified. Covino characterizes this as “the pre-Enlightenment magical/rhetorical belief in a cosmology of possibilities for re-ordering discourse and reality, through writing that creates new phantasms, new magic rhetorics” (356). For Covino, what we have now come to take as rhetoric is actually only the victorious handmaiden of scientific empiricism—the suppressed, progressive rhetoric of “phantasms” having been occulted by the forces of logical positivism in much the same way that Renaissance magical philosophy was written out of the canon of knowledge by the Enlightenment. The chronology shared by Covino and Vickers is broadly supported by Michel Foucault in his influential *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Foucault notes the fundamental changes in European attitudes toward the relationship between language and the natural world across the sixteenth century, then the Classical period, and finally into “modernity.” In describing the intellectual transformations across this chronology, Foucault characterizes the epistemology of the sixteenth century as one obliged “to accept magic and erudition on the same level.” For, as he writes,

> The world is covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs, which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than forms of similitude. To know must therefore be to interpret: to find a way from the visible mark to that which is being said by it and which, without that mark, would lie like unspoken speech, dormant within things. (Foucault 32)

The Classical period that follows, however, is based on a fierce rejection of the trope of resemblance, “denouncing it as a confused mixture that must be analyzed in terms of identity, difference, measurement and order” (52). In contrast to both Covino and Vickers, Foucault displays little allegiance to either linguistic paradigm—for him, the sixteenth-century approach to language and the world is just as flawed as the Classical, classifying paradigm that overtakes it. However, for the purposes of the current article, what is
important is that Foucault also works from the familiar assumptions regarding the Renaissance equation of sign and reality, word and thing.

Most recently, Joshua Gunn has explored the rhetoric of the occult in a study that is, once again, founded upon the assumption that magical thinking is best typified by its “fixed” view of language “that presumes a meaningful mind-independent reality that language, however inaccurately, represents, a presumption that Derrida has famously dubbed ‘logocentrism’” (45). As Gunn notes, contemporary rhetoric, along with the majority of the humanities today, assumes language is fluid and “never corresponds to the material world in a direct or transparent way” (45). So things remain in much the same position as they were when Burke pointed out the errors of the magical paradigm in 1950. Despite Covino’s enthusiasm for the possibilities of a (re-)created magical rhetoric, and Gunn’s own multidimensional investigation into the generative paradoxes of occult discourse, the motifs of fixity and identity remain fundamental to the way in which rhetoric scholars have tended to approach the issue of magic. In this article, however, I wish to question the assumptions of this approach and investigate the possibility that magical paradigms of language might be far more complex and ambiguous than previous commentators have allowed.

If contemporary rhetorical approaches to magical language are grounded in biased assumptions, then what is at stake here is the possibility of a truly critical approach to a large matrix of discourses. The dismissal of magical language as “mistaken,” “backwards,” or “fallacious” leads to a dismissal of those discourses that use such language to talk about the world and truth. The labeling of a discourse as esoteric, hermetic, or occult thus carries with it implicit pre-judgments regarding its use of language (and therefore its rhetoric). Inevitably, such pre-judgments lead to an impoverished engagement with such discourses. Magical or occult language becomes a stereotyped caricature playing its part in a binary opposition that, as this article will show, is not supported by the primary literature. Even when contemporary rhetorical approaches to occult language appear to be presenting it in a more nuanced manner they end up repeating the established assumptions. Gunn’s study, for example, argues that many of the linguistic and rhetorical implications of magical and occult thinking revolve around the paradox of ineffability, wherein “the fundamental premise, that spiritual truth is ineffable (A), requires the seemingly contradictory act of speaking or writing (B)” (50). Gunn states that this contradiction is “illusory” or “erroneous” (50, 49) because, from the position of the modern rhetoric scholar, it is based on the belief that there is a (sacred), external truth signified by esoteric language, in stark contrast to the modern “rhetorical worldview” itself which
holds that “nothing means outside human modes of representation and that ‘truth’ is merely the product of sentences” (50). Gunn’s principal focus in his study is the mapping of the tropes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century occult discourse onto the ostensibly postmodern discourse of contemporary academia, yet the foundations that underlie this mapping need to be examined carefully for their own illusory assumptions. How correct is it to say, along with Burke, Vickers, Foucault, Gunn, and Covino, that the magical view of language is one based on fixity? Is magical/occult discourse fundamentally paradoxical? And if so, is that paradox inherently “erroneous,” or are there other possible interpretations of the relationship between ineffability and language that the rhetoric of magic might offer up?

In order to investigate the implications of these issues of fixity and ineffability in magical language, I will be devoting a large part of this article to a consideration of the philosophy of language contained in the occult works of Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535). Next to the mythic composite Hermes Trismegistus, Agrippa is perhaps the most influential of all Western occult theoreticians. His work has always remained central to the European conception of ritual magic and continues to be used by those who self-identify as occultists and magicians today. Furthermore, Agrippa was both a sly practitioner and able theoretician of rhetoric and demonstrates a deep engagement with issues of language and the sacred across all of his texts. He is, correspondingly, a perfect candidate for an examination of the ways in which occult/magical discourse deals with language and the ineffable. I hope to demonstrate that Cornelius Agrippa, Western icon of magical discourse, can in no way be said to have possessed a simplistic view of language founded on the motifs of fixity and identity and that consequently the Western tradition of ritual magic that has been so influenced by his thought needs to be approached with a far more open rhetorical mind than has so far been the case. In my conclusion I will discuss the broader implications of this for rhetorical conceptions of magic and magical language.

Determining Agrippa

Cornelius Agrippa represents in many ways the epitome of the Renaissance occult scholar. His De occulta philosophia libri tres (circulated in manuscript from 1510 and then published formally in 1533) is built on a synthesis of the humanistic magic of Ficino and Pico, adaptations of Jewish Kabbalah, the rediscovered texts of the Hermetica (thought at the time to represent a system of the sacred actually older than Moses) and the works of the Neoplatonists. De occulta philosophia (DOP) stands, then, as “a grandiose
summary of the magical speculation of the Renaissance” (Borchardt 65), and
the work’s strong influence on later figures such as John Dee, Giordano
Bruno, and Thomas Vaughan explains Agrippa’s position as “a nodal figure
in the transmission of the Hermetic-Cabalist tradition of the Renaissance” (Keefer 614).

As its full title intimates, DOP is divided into three books each given over
to one of the three different types of magic, namely, natural, celestial, and
ceremonial (thus mirroring the threefold division of the universe into
elementary, celestial, and intellectual). The first book, as well as being
concerned with the details of natural magic, also provides the fundamental
premises on which all three forms of magic are built. In this way, Agrippa
explains the threefold nature of the four elements and how those elements
are to be found in all things, not only “inferiour bodies feculent and gross”
but also in the celestial and the “supercelestial” realms. In addition to the
elements are the virtues, which are of two sorts, the natural (which originate
from the elemental) and the occult (which issue from the stars). The latter
virtues “are called occult qualities, because their Causes lie hid, and mans
intellect cannot in any way reach, and find them out.” Agrippa proceeds
to explain in great detail how the occult virtues of all things in the natural
world are transmitted into their material forms through the medium of
the “Soul of the World,” which in turn receives the higher forms of the vir-
tues from the rays of the stars so that by this spirit “every occult property is
conveyed into Hearbs [herbs], Stones, Metals, and Animals, through the
Sun, Moon, Planets, and through Stars higher then the Planets” (I:14). Natu-
ral magic, in its most basic sense, is therefore the use of the knowledge of the
occult virtues in the natural world, just as the celestial magic of the second
book is founded on the knowledge and use of the occult virtues to be found
in numbers, signs, and images. The final book, on ceremonial magic, is
principally concerned with arguing that magic is intimately connected with
religion and that through a profound knowledge and pure use of the celestial
hierarchy and the names and sigils borne by the angels, demons, and spirits,
the magus may be elevated to the divine (that is to say, achieve union with
God).\footnote{See Lehrich (Language of Demons and Angels) for a comprehensive analysis of the three books.}

Language is a core concern in DOP. Agrippa devotes most of Books 2 and
3 to detailed discussions of the use of magical names, the links between num-
bers and letters and the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah. As Moshe Idel reminds
us, for Jewish mystics, the Hebrew language was “the main instrument of the
creation of the world” (43) and its letters were powerful “creative elements”


that could produce the ultimate sacred communion. Christian adaptations of Jewish Kabbalah formed a significant current in Renaissance occult philosophy, being central to the work of Johannes Reuchlin, Francesco Giorgi (Zorzi), Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Guillaume Postel among many others. It has been recently argued by Christopher I. Lehrich that, in fact, Agrippa’s adaptation, wherein the “basic principles of Kabbalistic thought have been reinterpreted in light of Christian doctrine” (Language of Demons and Angels, 159), results in a much more “coherent Christian interpretation” of the practice than those formulated by other Renaissance philosophers. Lehrich’s position is that DOP presents a radical departure from the so-called Christian Kabbalah of Reuchlin and Pico. Although in his youth Agrippa had been greatly influenced by Reuchlin’s De verbo mirifico and De arte cabalsitica (in which Hebrew is afforded the same sacred status as it is within Jewish Kabbalah?) and this influence had been reflected in the earlier draft of De occulta philosophia that had circulated from 1510, his 1533 published text of DOP significantly changes its interpretation of the place of the Hebrew language within a Christian Kabbalah. Using internal textual evidence and comparison between the early drafts and the 1533 publication, Lehrich argues that while the Juvenile Draft reflects the teachings of Reuchlin and Pico regarding the “inherent superiority” of Hebrew over all other languages, the 1533 text represents a fundamental change in Agrippa’s understanding of the status of not only Hebrew but of all language. For Lehrich, DOP argues for the position that “no human language can contain the ultimate truths, because no human language can be truly transparent” (199). As we shall see, a close reading of DOP uncovers a great deal of paradoxical and ambiguous play with language and rhetoric. This play, I will argue, is instructional in the sense that it marks language itself as untrustworthy and unreliable through a form of practical instantiation of that unreliability. The instructional message is, then, occulted in the text. It has to be uncovered through a careful attention to a multitude of authorial voices and contradictory statements.

Ironically, Agrippa is quite open about the fact that there are hidden aspects to DOP. In one of the sections added in the 1533 edition, he exhorts the “sons of wisdom and learning” to

> search diligently in this book, gathering together our dispersed intentions, which in divers places we have propounded, and what is hid in one place, we make manifest in another, that it may appear to you wise men. (Agrippa, DOP, III: 65)

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See Zika for an overview of Reuchlin’s influence on Agrippa.
The text itself invites the reader’s attempts at interpretation of currents beneath the surface of its discourse. What lies beneath the surface, however, is ambiguity and self-referential paradox that mutually support each other in divesting language of its claims to truth and identity. In order to display the intricacies of these strategies of ambiguity and paradox, I will now move on to a close examination of the core issues of language and the sacred in DOP, as well as a consideration of some of the inter-textual relationships embedded in its chapters.

The Uncertainty of Language

The philosophy of language advanced in DOP is unavoidably framed by Agrippa’s apparent recantation of the entire work. In order to understand how this recantation functions as a vital component of his theory of the relationship between language, the sacred, and reality we need to look closely at the way in which the text uses a number of rhetorical devices to support and gloss the significance of the “unsaying” in the recantation. In order to do this I will first provide a brief history of the reception of the recantation and then move on to a detailed reading of Agrippa’s own rhetorical positioning of the recantation in the Ad Lectorem address of DOP. From this point, my analysis will then spiral out to a consideration of other key passages in the text that compound Agrippa’s slyly occulted theory of language.

Agrippa’s retraction of his own occult scholarship was initiated in another of his works, De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum atque atrium (Of the Vanity and Uncertainty of Arts and Sciences, written in 1526 and published in 1530). This book is a scathing rejection of the vast majority of the arts and sciences and includes a forceful repudiation of the utility and morality of occult knowledge and a clear expression of authorial regret at ever having wasted time on such practices. The status of this retraction has been a flashpoint for scholars of Renaissance occultism and has resulted in a large number of theories explaining its motivation, truth value, and correct interpretation. As Michael Keefer points out, it is not the fact that Agrippa apparently has a severe change of heart regarding the value and status of occult philosophy that is so deeply confounding to scholars, but rather the fact that after publishing the retraction, Agrippa goes on to publish an expanded version of his occult encyclopedia. The chronological sequence of the texts, then, is a principal contributor to the paradoxical nature of Agrippa’s retraction. However, in addition to the issue of sequence is the fact that De vanitate itself is distinctly paradoxical “since the work, although demolishing human knowledge, is a veritable encyclopedia” (Hattaway 511)
and consequently has had its own long history of conflicting interpretations. Contributing further ambiguity to the issues of the two texts is the fact that the chapters in *De vanitate* dealing with Agrippa’s retraction of his draft manuscript version of *De occulta philosophia* were then included as the final section of the published *DOP* of 1533, bookending the text along with an address from the author to the reader at the opening of the work, which also deals with the recantation issue. The inter- and intra-textual tension contributes greatly to the ambiguity and contradiction of the retraction. It is worthwhile noting that such confusion is not restricted to only these two works of Agrippa. Barbara Newman, for example has noted the “shifting tonal registers and teasingly contradictory arguments” (225) contained in *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* (On the Nobility and Superiority of the Female Sex, delivered as a speech in 1509 and printed in 1529)—elements that have allowed the text to be consistently championed by both misogynists and feminists. In recent critical interpretations, the recantation has continued to be a source of division. Perhaps one of the most influential readings of *De vanitate* from the twentieth century is Frances Yates’s assertion that it serves simply as a useful “safety-device” (147) with which Agrippa could demonstrate his innocence in the event of any “theological disapproval.” Yates’s view is certainly problematized by the “viciously anticlerical” (Lehrich, *Language of Demons and Angels* 41) content of the text itself, yet it has served as an influential interpretation of Agrippa’s motivation among readers perhaps less familiar with the substance of the work. Alternatively, Charles G. Nauert, Jr., argues that *De vanitate* should be seen as evidence of an evolution in Agrippa’s thought, away from youthful occult belief and toward an attempt at a systematic skepticism. More modern interpretations, such as those advanced in Marc Van der Poel’s 1997 work on Agrippa’s declamations and Christopher I. Lehrich’s 2003 book-length study of *DOP*, have tended to see *De vanitate* as highly selective in its censuring of magic, “leaving room for a legitimate and non-demonic magic, as in Marsilio Ficino or Pico, as opposed to the wicked vanity condemned in *De vanitate*” (Lehrich, *Language of Demons and Angels* 41). Most of these interpretations tend to pass over the idea that *De vanitate* and the recantation in general might have a primarily rhetorical intent. One modern study, Korkwoski’s 1976 article on “Agrippa as Ironist,” does directly address this issue and I will be examining its claims in greater depth once the textual detail of the recantation as it affects *DOP*’s philosophy of language has been presented to the reader.

As is to be expected in a text of the time, *DOP* sallies forth with a large flotilla of letters, addresses, and dedications. Agrippa’s own address to the
reader precedes them all, however, and as such brackets the content of the whole work and is an attempt to explicitly direct the reader’s interpretation of certain aspects of DOP. This framing is not unambiguous, however, and during the short Ad Lectorem section there is a quite distinct oscillation between a number of different authorial voices as well as the addressing of a variety of different readers. Indeed, the Ad Lectorem is an essay on interpretation, on reading, itself. Through his discussion of various forms of prejudiced readers, Agrippa introduces the idea that words themselves are at the mercy of human interpretation and that for different audiences they signify different things. Agrippa begins the address in the following way:

I do not doubt but the Title of our book of Occult Philosophy, or of Magick, may by the rarity of it allure many to read it, amongst which, some of a crasie [languid, feeble] judgement, and some that are perverse will come to hear what I can say, who, by their rash ignorance may take the name of Magick in the worse sense, and though scarce having seen the title, cry out that I teach forbidden Arts, sow the seed of Heresies, offend pious ears, and scandalize excellent wits; that I am a sorcerer, and superstitious and divellish [devilish], who indeed am a Magician: to whom I answer, that a Magician doth not amongst learned men signifie a sorcerer, or one that is superstitious or divellish; but a wise man, a priest, a prophet; and that the Sybils were Magicianesses, & therefore prophecied most cleerly of Christ; and that Magicians, as wise men, by the wonderful secrets of the world, knew Christ, the author of the world, to be born, and came first of all to worship him; and that the name of Magicke was received by Phylosophers [philosophers], commended by Divines, and not unacceptable to the Gospel. (Agrippa, DOP, Ad Lectorem)

The signifying of a word is presented here as a function of communities of readers, and although it is clear that Agrippa means for there to be a “learned” interpretation and a “crasie” one, it is telling that he begins his work with a demonstration of the vagaries of interpretation and signification. These opening sentences are also an excellent place to begin to get a sense for the multiplicity of authorial tones employed by Agrippa. The address starts with a confident attempt to pre-empt criticism of the subject matter of DOP. By recognising that there are sections of his potential readership who will inevitably misunderstand the subject under discussion because they approach it with prejudice, Agrippa both anticipates the attack and prepares the defense. As can be seen from the end of the earlier extract, the substance of Agrippa’s argument against those who might accuse him of heresy is that in fact magic is “not unacceptable” to Christian teaching and if one remembers the story of the Magi one is made aware of the link between magic and the birth of Christ. Agrippa then becomes even
bolder, striking out in violent and arresting imagery against those who would censure DOP:

I believe that the supercilious censors will object against the Sybils, holy Magicians and the Gospel it self sooner then receive the name of Magick into favor; so conscientious are they, that neither Apollo, nor all the Muses, nor an Angel from Heaven can redeem me from their curse. Whom therefore I advise, that they read not our Writings, nor understand them, nor remember them. For they are pernicious, and full of poison; the gate of Acheron is in this book; it speaks stones, let them take heed that it beat not out their brains. (Agrippa, DOP, Ad Lectorem)

These are hardly the words of someone trying to do his utmost to avoid persecution. Rather they are the words of someone who knows he has enemies and knows that they are wrong and is not afraid to say so. The alliteration of the final phrase in the English translation here is an attempt to preserve the alliteration in the original. Its presence surely indicates a degree of considered, almost joyful, public expression of ill-will toward those who would censor, and censure, the work. In addition, Agrippa is further hardening the binary division of his audience into those who should and those who should not read the book. Those who are without prejudice and concerned primarily with the pursuit of knowledge are encouraged to read on while those who have already made up their minds regarding the motivations of magic are advised (perhaps one might even say threatened) to leave well alone. Agrippa’s tone here is confrontational and unapologetic, yet in the next breath all this disappears and we are faced with the persona of an old, crotchety author more concerned with editorial completeness and accuracy than with defending the pursuit of magical knowledge. He asks the reader to pardon his youth if they should find any error or incompleteness in the text:

for I wrote this being scarce a yong [young] man, that I may excuse my self, and say, “whilst I was a child, I spake as a childe, and I understood as a child, but being become a man, I retracted those things which I did being a boy, and in my book of the vanity and uncertainty of Sciences I did for the most part retract this book.

Significant here is the adoption of the framing device of reported speech to present Agrippa’s words in this last sentence. As we saw earlier, Agrippa, when addressing the “supercilious censors,” for example, does not present his own words in such a way. Why here? One part of the reason might be

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3"... lapides loquitor, caveant ne cerebrum illis excutiat.” J.F.’s use of the alliterated “b”s in his English translation is perhaps more effective in its Anglo-Saxon brutality.

4Note that the quotation marks are not in the original Latin but added by J.F. for the English translation of 1651.
that it signs the sentiment as an official utterance from the author—as if to say, “this is my official response.” This reading is made even more attractive when we consider the way in which Agrippa has couched the utterance within a clear adaptation of I Corinthians 13:11, “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” The apology then is encapsulated within a resolutely Christian reference and delivered in the marked voice of the author. Although, of course, the qualification that Agrippa adds, “I did for the most part retract this book” (emphasis mine), is not an exact echoing of Paul’s sentiment and rather clouds the standing of the retraction. This pattern is repeated in the following section as Agrippa this time uses reported speech to frame the words of the reader (or a particular type of reader):

But here haply you may blame me again, saying, “Behold thou being a youth didst write, and now being old hast retracted it; what therefore hast thou set forth?” I confess whilst I was very yong, I set upon the writing of these books, but, hoping that I should set them forth with corrections and enlargements, and for that cause I gave them to Tritemius [Trithemius] a Neapolitian Abbot, formerly a Spanhemensian, a man very industrious after secret things. But it happened afterwards, that the work being intercepted, before I finished it, it was carryed about imperfect, and impolished, and did fly abroad in Italy, in France, in Germany through many mens hands, and some men, whether more impatiently, or imprudently, I know not, would have put it thus imperfect to the press, with which mischeif, I being affected, determined to set it forth my self, thinking that there might be less danger if these books came out of my hands with some amendments, thwn to come forth torn, and in fragments out of other mens hands.

The textual embodiment of the reader’s question\(^5\) carries the power of all rhetorical questions in that it pre-empts the reader, robs him or her of the opportunity to use his or her own words and instead lets the rhetor present any possible questioning in a way that she or he is most comfortable with. The question, furthermore, is one that the “supercilious censor” might well officially ask Agrippa. The philosopher’s answer is, once more, not the one that we might expect in the context of a retraction and adds very little weight to the depiction of the contents of DOP as “childish,” portraying instead an author’s attempt to present the most complete and accurate edition to the public that he or she is able to. Agrippa’s publishing of the work therefore

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\(^5\)Again, the quotation marks are an addition of J.F.’s English translation and are not in the Latin original.
appears to be primarily concerned with alleviating the “dangers” of having “imperfect” editions at large.

The short Ad Lectorem address in DOP is a complex and bewildering matrix of authorial tones and implied (or invoked) readers that are presented in cross-conversation with each other. Is it any wonder that the issue of Agrippa’s retraction, of which the Ad Lectorem of DOP only represents a small textual part, has never been adequately settled? Even at a most conservative estimate an analysis of this text reveals at least six separate “tonal registers” (to use Newman’s term). First we encounter the didactic graciousness of an author who is willing to explain to the “crasie,” “languid,” and “perverse” section of the audience what exactly magic is and why it is in keeping with scripture. Then we may identify the impatient dismissal of an author who sees no profit in explaining anything to the “supercilious censors” and who instead directs them, in violent terms, to turn away from a reading of the book. Following on from this the register shifts to the more neutral, conciliatory tone of the author addressing the section of the audience who “come without prejudice” and who warns them to read well and in context. Next comes a declamatory, rather official expression of youthful errors, echoing I Corinthians, and describing DOP as something borne of childish things and boyish pursuits and for the most part, retracted. In addition, the Ad Lectorem includes the authorial voice of De vanitate, indicated as existing off-page in another text, but clearly exerting some force on the current authorial voice(s), and finally, closing the whole address is the business-like, slightly wheedling tone of the elderly editorializing author, simply interested in publishing a complete, corrected version of his work at long last.

Along with this variety of authorial tonal registers we can also identify a multitude of invoked readers (or reading communities). So, we hear of the “crasie,” “languid,” or “perverse” readers, the supercilious censors, those readers who “come without prejudice” and then finally those readers who ask, with their voices made manifest in reported speech, “what therefore hast thou set forth?” This confusion of voices is then further combined with the clear inadequacy of Agrippa’s final answer as to why he is publishing this work—that although he has mostly retracted it, nevertheless it is better to see the production of one’s youth available in a corrected and complete form than in a tattered and patched one. Indeed, Agrippa’s final sentences addressed to the reader in this section add a further tone of nostalgic indulgence to the already crowded argumentative stage:

Moreover, I thought it no crime if I should not suffer the testimony of my youth to perish. Also we have added some Chapters, and we inserted
many things, which did seem unfit to pass by, which the curious Reader
shall be able to understand by the inequality of the very phrase; for we
were unwilling to begin the work anew, and to unravell all that we had
done, but to correct it, and put some flourish upon it.

The textile analogy here perhaps works toward reducing the perceived dan-
ger of the core of the work by comparing it to an old piece of clothing from
someone’s youth now mended and adorned with a few ribbons. The contrast
with the earlier railing against the “supercilious censors” could not be great-
er. Perhaps more importantly, the aforementioned passage reminds the
reader of the shifting, palimpsestic nature of discourse. The text is not a
monumental, unified block of truth—rather it is a patchwork of voices,
some included for emotional, nostalgic reasons whereas others might be
more the product of aesthetic motivation. The Ad Lectorem rhetorically
serves as a beacon to warn the reader of the polyphonic, multivalent nature
of the discourse they are about to engage with. The DOP is not a text from
(a) God, nor even a text delivered by Angels—it is a text produced by a man
and consequently cannot help but be a palimpsest of shifting significations.

The Embedded Liar

In addition to the Ad Lectorem section the text of DOP published in 1533
contained a further significant reference to the retraction of De vanitate in
the form of large extracts from its text printed right at the end of the third
book. In other words, the entire DOP is bracketed by references to its retrac-
tion. The De vanitate extracts included at the end of DOP cover the subjects
of magic in general, natural magic, mathematical magic, enchanting magic,
necromancy, theurgy, cabala, and juggling (!) and constitute, apart from the
absent section on astrology, all that Agrippa has to say regarding the occult
arts in the 1530 book. Although the extracts are clearly presented as constit-
tuting a recantation and retraction, they cannot be said to offer a clear and
unequivocal rejection of magic. Rather, Agrippa uses the dangers, inaccura-
cies, and fallacies of certain aspects of these practices in order to warn the
reader not to waste time and money (as he did) trying to find real truth
in these things. Agrippa’s fundamental caution is summarized in the last
lines of DOP:

But of Magick I wrote whilst I was very yong [young] three large books,
which I called Of Occult Philosophy, in which what was then through the
curiosity of my youth erroneous, I now being more advised, am willing to
have retracted, by this recantation; I formerly spent much time and costs
in these vanities. At last I grew so wise as to be able to dissuade others
from this destruction; For whosoever do not in the truth, nor in the
time of God, but in the deceits of devils [devils], according to the oper-
ation of wicked spirits presume to divine and prophesy, and practising
through Magickal vanities, exorcismss, incantations and other demoniacall
works and deceits of Idolatry, boasting of delusions, and phantasmes
presently ceasing, brag that they can do miracles, I say all these shall with
Jannes, and Jambres, and Simon Magus, be destined to the torments of
eternall Fire. (Agrippa, DOP, III: Censure)

These closing words to the first published edition of DOP carry a distinct
ambiguity, for while recanting the work they are themselves contained
within, they also serve as a gloss for the proper interpretation and use of
the material Agrippa has discussed throughout the three books. All of the
knowledge is worthless (fatal to the soul, even) if not performed “in the
power of God.”

There is a final and, for the current analysis, more important ambiguity to
the recantation not hitherto discussed in the literature. By being included
within the physical boundaries of the published DOP, the recantation, which
is careful in both its opening and closing brackets to identify its target by
name, inevitably recants itself. In other words, the recantation points back
to itself, instantiating a form of self-referential paradox. The use of such
paradoxes in Agrippa’s work has been previously noted in an important arti-
cle by Eugene Korkowski who focuses on the De vanitate and its status as an
example of the tradition of mock-epideictic and brings ample evidence to
demonstrate that De Vanitate is a “masterpiece of ironic, spoofing, satirical
wit” (594). During his detailed examination of De Vanitate’s rhetoric of
mock-epideictic, Korkowski notes in passing the self-referential problem of
the recantation of DOP made in the “censure” section of De Vanitate’s dis-
cussion of magical arts (already quoted herein). Korkowski points out that
Agrippa cleverly “recants his retraction along with his books” (598). This
recantation of the retraction is not evident in the John French translation
of De vanitate extracts in his English version of DOP (quoted earlier).
Korkowski uses the James Sanford translation of De vanitate published in
1569, which follows the Latin in the phrase concerned more closely. Agrip-
napa’s Latin runs “nunc cautior hac palinodia recantatum volo” and Sanders
renders this as, “being more advised I will that it be recanted with this retraction.” The recantation of the retraction that Korkowski notes operating in
De vanitate is embedded within the 1533 DOP where its reference to the
three books of occult philosophy that Agrippa published in his youth further
injects a level of denial in that the 1533 DOP is therefore not the De occulta
philosophia that is being referred to in the recantation, even though the
recantation is included in the 1533 *DOP* and labeled as a recantation. The cunning paradox of self-reference that Agrippa places in *De vanitate* is made, therefore, more destabilizing when it is itself included in *DOP*, the book to which it refers. All points of reference begin to be questionable, all claims and counter claims begin to connect into each other generating a shifting matrix of unreliability.

The obvious paradoxical model that Agrippa seems to be taking advantage of here is the Liar, sometimes known as the Epimenides, which takes the usual form of the following sentence:

“All Cretans are Liars,” said Epimenides the Cretan.

This paradox has a long and distinguished pedigree. First invoked by the pre-Aristotelian Megarian philosopher, Eubulides, it is enshrined in Paul’s epistle to Titus (Titus 1:12–13) and became a favorite knot for medieval logicians who classified it under the rubric *insolubilia*. Medieval logicians delighted in finding different ways to formulate the Liar’s essential contradiction (and this tradition continues down to our own day). We can find such a re-formulation at one point in *De vanitate* when Agrippa declares that “God alone is true, and every man a liar” (DV, f 179) which, as Korkowski notes, is “a statement that is ‘certain’ only if we overlook the paradox that Agrippa, a man, made it” (605). Agrippa’s recantation of *DOP* through the inclusion of the *De vanitate* extracts serves to construct a typical Epimenidian self-referential loop of infinite flip-flopping (everything in this book is recanted, which means that this recantation is recanted, which means that everything in the book is not recanted... *ad infinitum*). Strikingly, the permanent state of ambiguity that the paradoxical retraction places the whole of *DOP* within is mirrored by the critical reception that the recantation has had down the centuries with scholars and occultists equally unable to make up their minds regarding its veracity.

The embedding of a version of the Liar into the 1533 edition of *DOP* is also accompanied, as we have seen, by a concerted attempt to make the author’s attitude toward the text (and the recantation) as ambiguous and uncertain as possible. This whole framework, it should be remembered, is an addition to the earlier, manuscript versions of *DOP*, which had already been highly influential and widely read. If one agrees with Korkowski that *De vanitate* is a highly caustic form of mock-epideictic that was never meant

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6See Kneale and Kneale (228–231) for a discussion of the Liar’s context in medieval logic.

7See Sainsbury (114–132), Simmons (2–7), and Hofstadter for accessible re-formulations from the nineteenth century onward.
to serve seriously as any form of recantation, what purpose can the inclusion in *DOP* of the extracts recanting Agrippa’s work on magic have? By the time of the 1533 publication, *De vanitate* had already been condemned by Church academicians at the Sorbonne and Louvain, so those people to whom the inclusion of a recantation in *DOP* might be thought to have some form of assuaging power could hardly have seen it as such. Instead, it might be of profit to examine the possibility that the recantation embedded in *DOP* was designed by Agrippa to play a particular part in his argument regarding magic and language contained in that work.

The recantation, both in its instantiation of the Liar and in the accompanying cultivated ambiguity of the Ad Lectorem, works to generate a deep sense of semantic instability in *DOP*. Keith Simmons summarizes the significance of the Liar paradox by noting that it prompts us to re-examine our ideas of truth and falsity and build a more “satisfactory account of the relation between language and the world” (2). I would suggest that when looking at *DOP*, the truth and falsity that we should be focused on is not the particular case of whether Agrippa meant to retract the work or not but rather the idea that he might be using a plethora of rhetorical devices, including an instantiation of the Liar paradox, in order to call into question, as Simmons puts it, “the relation between language and the world.” From this perspective, Agrippa’s formulation of the Liar paradox is designed to foster exactly the kind of mistrust in any human language’s ability to convey truth that Lehrich notes as being fundamental to the message of the 1533 text itself. Clearly this would imply that both the recantation material included in *DOP* and the contradictory matrix of authorial “tonal registers” presented in the Ad Lectorem should be “read” in an “occult” manner in that their real meaning is divulged only through extended investigation and contemplation.

**Occult Fluidity**

Before moving on to examine some passages in *DOP* that expressly address the status of language in relationship to the sacred, it will help to contextualize their significance by returning to, and expanding on, the claims made by recent scholarship regarding the relationship between language and magic in the Renaissance. Brain Vickers, in differentiating occult philosophy from the paradigms of early science, has characterized all expressions of Medieval and Renaissance occultism as being based on the assumption that “words not only expressed but embodied the nature of things, somehow containing their very essence” (105). He notes that this is an assumption drawn from a
number of sources, most particularly Neoplatonic readings of the middle section of Plato’s *Cratylus*, interpretations of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (particularly the *Asclepius*) and the influence of Jewish Kabbalah. Vickers goes on to argue that the separation between early science and the occult can best be understood by an examination of the very different treatment they each afford to the rhetorical figure of analogy. Looking back to Aristotle’s coverage of metaphor, Vickers observes that early scientific thinkers recognized that metaphor and simile exist at a level “subordinate” (115) to that of normal, nonmetaphorical discourse. This separation between normal and metaphorical discourse levels mirrors, as Vickers points out, the clear difference between signer and signified that typifies the scientific view of language. Renaissance occult philosophy, however, is accused of working from a very different perspective. Vickers claims that it demonstrated a “consistent desire to break” with the Aristotelian understanding of metaphor and that through its obscuring of the difference between tenor and vehicle, the occult tradition “moves from analogy to identity” (118). This itself evolves into a “progressive reification of the immaterial.” As I have shown in the introduction to this article, Vickers’s portrayal of the cleavage between an occult (or magical, or just simply, Renaissance) approach to language and a later “scientific” or empirical understanding of the relationship between words and things is echoed in the work of a number of other scholars of rhetoric or the philosophy of language. Although Foucault, Covino, Burke, and Gunn construct quite radically different argumentative superstructures they share common assumptions regarding the differences between magical and scientific (or occult and modern) paradigms of language. Indeed, it is quite understandable to see why this binary opposition has become foundational. When we look at Agrippa’s thought in *DOP* we immediately encounter certain features that are very much in accordance with Vickers’s portrait of the “occult use of language.” Indeed, the influence both of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (particularly the *Asclepius*) and Kabbalah upon much of the content of *DOP* guarantees this. As Steven Katz explains, Kabbalah is a “theory of language” that addresses rhetorical concerns regarding language, reality, and thought but “in a way not treated in any other classical rhetoric” (110). The rhetorical tradition contained in the Kabbalah held that “essence is embodied in the material substance of language itself, in the shapes and sounds of Hebrew letters.” Language thus becomes the basis of reality. Regarding the linguistic paradigm contained in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Lehrich has demonstrated in his analysis of the *Asclepius* (one of the key texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and a narrative prophesying the fall of Egypt presented in the voice of
Hermes) that there are effectively two Egypts—one, which Lehrich denotes with the name “Aegypt,” is the Egypt present to Hermes before the withdrawal of the gods from earthly life, the other is the Egypt of the prophesied future, after the abandonment of that place by the gods. Lehrich summarizes Hermes’s view of human language by noting that in Aegypt, “speech and writing were part of reverent action” whereas in the fallen Egypt, “speech becomes action without reverence” and writing “becomes reverence without action” (Occult Mind 7). In that much occult philosophy founded on the Hermetica is thus concerned at some level with the problematic attempt to return to or remake the golden age, illud tempus, of Aegypt, so the view of language that it is premised on is influenced by the desire to return to a state in which there was “no need for a strong disparity of value with respect to linguistic forms, because the presence inhabiting them was divine and immanent” (Occult Mind 8).

In terms of the basic traditions influencing the magic of DOP, we may recognize that the identity of language with reality and the confusion of tenor and vehicle might well be central to Agrippa’s linguistic paradigm. Furthermore, throughout the compendious second and third books of DOP, Agrippa provides the reader with vast numbers of carefully explicated sacred names—names of angels, demons and, indeed, the 72 names of God (as provided by the Kabbalistic tradition). By these names great miracles are to be performed and great power conferred. All of this looks very much as though Agrippa’s understanding of language fits neatly into Vickers’s reading of the occult tradition. However, things are not quite what they seem (again). In chapter 11 of Book III, while giving a general introduction to the power and use of the Divine names, Agrippa makes the following simple statement:

Therefore sacred words have not their power in Magi cal operations, from themselves, as they are words, but from the occult Divine powers working by them in the minds of those who by faith adhere to them; by which words the secret power of God as if were through Conduite pipes, is transmitted into them, who have ears purged by faith, and by most pure conversation and invocation of the divine names are made the habitation of God, and capable of these divine influences; whosoever therefore useth rightly these words or names of God with that purity of mind, in that manner and order, as they were delivered, shall both obtain and do many wonderfull things . . . (Agrippa, DOP, III:11)

This statement does not describe the simple identity of language and reality that Vickers accuses the occult tradition of maintaining. Instead, this passage offers a remarkably “modern” gloss on the use of sacred language, placing
the magical power not in the words themselves but rather in the faith and purity of intention of the magician. In other words, Agrippa is saying that if the magician believes in these words, then they will have efficacy. However, this remarkable statement is itself buried within a long passage listing the Divine names, the abracadabra diminishing spell, and presenting, in all its esoteric glory (and Hebrew lettering), the sacred seal of Rabbi Hama against all diseases. So, a passage that stands as proof of Agrippa’s belief in the arbitrariness of the sign is occulted away from the eyes of the careless (or prejudiced) reader, covered over with just the sort of compendious listing that one might expect from the mind of someone eager to confuse the signifier and signified.

There are many further passages in DOP that underline Agrippa’s approach to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. When discussing his theory of the occult virtues in Book I, for example, he directly addresses the importance that words play in the expression and transmission of virtue:

Words therefore are the fittest medium betwixt the speaker and the hearer, carrying with them not only the conception of the mind, but also the vertue of the speaker with a certain efficacy unto the hearers, and this oftentimes with so great a power, that oftentimes they change not only the hearers, but also other bodies, and things that have no life. Now those words are of greater efficacy then others, which represent greater things, as intellectuall, Celestiall, and supernaturall, as more expressly, so more mysteriously. Also those that come from a more worthy tongue, or from any of a more holy order; for these, as it were certain Signs, and representations, receive a power of Celestiall, and supercelestiall things, as from the vertue of things explained, of which they are the vehicula, so from a power put into them by the vertue of the speaker. (Agrippa, DOP, I:69)

We can clearly see here that for Agrippa, words are containers of virtue. They have no inherent virtue as words but are instead dependent on the virtue placed into them by the speaker (and the speaker can be human or otherwise, of course). A “tongue” is considered more “worthy” not because it is itself more valuable as a language but because it has been used by a community that is considered more valuable. Language is always a tool for Agrippa, accruing power and value through the use that beings make of it rather than through any inherent connection it might possess to material reality. A little further on, Agrippa again underlines this when he declares that the “use of words, and speech, is to express the inwards of the mind, and from thence to draw forth the secrets of the thoughts, and to declare the will of the speaker” (DOP, I:73). When speaking of language directly, then, Agrippa asserts a position that bears no resemblance to the fundamental
assumptions of the “occult” theory of language that Vickers, Burke, Foucault, Covino, and Gunn variously portray. There is no hint of the denotative fallacy here.

Yet there is an undeniable tension in Agrippa’s work. On the one hand, DOP is exhaustive in its detailed presentation of sacred names, words, seals, and signatures and the explication of their power and provenance. On the other hand, there are passages that clearly argue for the arbitrariness of the sacred sign, downgrade (and deny) the magical power of language (including Hebrew), and, as I have been arguing regarding the ambiguity of the retraction and the instantiation of the Liar, call into question the very ability of language to effectively convey truth or reality. How might this tension be reconciled in a coherent, Agrippan theory of occult language? In other words, borrowing a term from Gunn, what is Agrippa’s “occult poetics?” Gunn himself advances a theory of occult language that is centered on a “generative paradox” that he claims exists in a large variety of “occultic” discourses (which include not just the traditional occult but also, for example, neologism-heavy exclusionary academic discourse). This paradox is the result of occultists and mystics holding the apparently contradictory position that, on the one hand “spiritual truths are ineffable” but, on the other, “there is much to say about ineffability” (37). This paradox, for Gunn, is the reason that “occultic” discourse generates so much “difficult or strange language.” I would argue that what we have in Agrippa’s complex inter- and intra-textual matrix of ambiguities is not a “generative paradox” premised on ineffability, but rather an instructional paradox pointing toward the arbitrariness of language. The initial (or perhaps it is better to say superficial) premise of DOP is that language is indeed able to effect transformation in the world and in the magus through the innate power it receives from God. However, within the text this premise is contradicted in a number of different ways, one of which, the instantiation of the Liar, serves to entirely sabotage not just the recantation but, far more importantly, the viability of language in effecting the union of magician and God. The Liar interpretation of Agrippa’s retraction that this article has advanced thus dovetails with Lehrich’s argument that DOP is concerned with leading the magician toward breaking out of “the vicious circle of language, Hebrew or otherwise” and transcending “to perfect transparency by supra-linguistic communication with God” (Language of Demons and Angels 208). As such, ineffability is the end point of the antinomy rather than its beginning. The significance of this distinction for rhetoric is, I would argue, important.
Rhetoric and the Occult(ed) Other

Kenneth Burke, beginning to outline his journey through the rhetoric of the ineffable, writes: “Whether or not there is a realm of the ‘supernatural’, there are *words* for it. And in this state of linguistic affairs there is a paradox” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 7).

The paradox that Burke is talking about is not the simplistic one that there are words for the ineffable but rather that those words we do use for the ineffable (what he calls the fourth realm or order) are in fact “necessarily borrowed by analogy from our words for the other three orders: the natural, the socio-political and the verbal” (15) and in turn, we might sometimes find that the words of the fourth realm have been borrowed back into the secular realms. For Burke, an examination of this “double process” leads us to “a truer understanding of language” (10). So it is with Agrippa. The entire *DOP* is concerned with examining the nature of language’s relationship to the sacred (and therefore reality). The ostensible assumption that Agrippa starts with, which he inherits from the *Hermetica* and Kabbalah, is that words do have a connection with reality, at all levels; ineffability is a concept that gets no attention at the core of *DOP* because the sacred is assumed to be reachable through words. Strange words, foreign words, words that perhaps still hold a little of that remembrance of the *illud tempus* of Aegypt, but nevertheless words. However, this is, as I hope I have shown, not the real message of *DOP*. For Agrippa, words cannot reach the truly sacred, nor even simple reality, for there is no connection between the signifier and the signified. His rejection of the Hebrew language as the language of sacred truth is indicative of a larger rejection of language as a tool to find any truth. Faced with the inevitable paradox of trying to communicate the abandonment of language via the use of language, Agrippa adopts a rhetorical strategy that is based on the logical scuppering of discourse through loops of self-reference. Language, then, can be used to talk about the ineffability of the sacred, if it is language made self-evidently fluid by being riddled with paradox.

It is, then, quite misleading to talk simplistically of magical paradigms of language or to contrast a “primitive,” magical understanding of the relationship between the signifier and the signified with a more sophisticated “scientific” or “postmodern” appreciation of the fluidity of language. Agrippa is the most influential of all Renaissance magicians, and yet his understanding of magic and its relationship to language (and rhetorical practice) cannot be characterized in the terms we met at the beginning of this article, terms used by scholars of rhetoric and language to construct an “Other” with which to
define their own discipline or by historians to neatly delineate the terms for epochal (re)evolution. And if Agrippa’s understanding cannot be characterized in such a way, why should the understanding of those who follow him or build on him? At the very least, Agrippa’s implementation of a meta-rhetoric of linguistic self-destruction should make us pause when considering definitions of magical language and occult rhetoric based on rigid preconceptions regarding the nature of “word magic” and the exclusivity of the denotative fallacy in magical paradigms. The strict dichotomy between occult and scientific philosophies of language that has become the accepted axis of orientation on which to base a whole compass of rhetorical and epistemological theory is shown in Agrippa’s work to be illusory. Both Vickers and Foucault pit the Renaissance and the Enlightenment against each other based on an insufficient reading of the complexity and ambiguity of Renaissance theories of language. The arbitrary nature of the signifier, the importance of communities of use and interpretation, and the multiple paradoxes of self-referentiality inherent in talking about language are all concepts that Agrippa engages with in his work. Accordingly, we need to re-examine Agrippa’s legacy, as well as the epistemologies and theories of language that are embedded in the work of later “occult” authors such as John Dee and Athanasius Kircher, in order to produce a more nuanced appreciation of the evolutionary (or, perhaps, cyclic) form of Western approaches to the relationship between language, the sacred and reality. Furthermore, it is a source of great interest that in his engagement with the limits of language’s ability to signify the sacred, Agrippa generates a discourse that pre-figures so many of the assumptions of our contemporary conception of language as a shifting, unstable matrix of forever-temporary alliances inextricably bound up with paradox. There is perhaps far less dissimilarity between secular, postmodern conceptions of language and certain Renaissance solutions for dealing with the sacred through language than we have been led to believe.

In closing, I would like to recall that Burke’s third realm is the verbal, words about words, and it is this stratum that Agrippa has mined for his linguistic approach to the ineffable, although not quite in the way that Burke had in mind when he noted the use of the “verbal principle” in the religious language of St. Anselm, Martin Buber, and the whole Christian tradition of Logos. Rather, Agrippa uses paradoxes of language (and the confused polyphony emanating from a single authorial voice) to allegorically demonstrate how Godhead cannot be approached through language. The DOP thus works against the verbal principle through an instantiation of the verbal principle.
In recognizing this we might also finally recognize the possibility that magical paradigms of language are not the erroneous Others of modern rhetoric.

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