Roots, Shoots, Fruits: William Blake and J M Robertson: Two Key Influences on George Spencer-Brown's work and its relationship to Niklas Luhmann's work

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Leon Conrad

Outline

George Spencer-Brown (1923–2016) is the author (among other works) of the undeservedly little-known book, *Laws of Form* (1969/2011), which was a major inspiration for Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998). But what inspired George Spencer-Brown? This paper explores two key influences on George Spencer-Brown and his work: the English poet and artist, William Blake (1757–1827) and the Scottish rationalist, politician, and author, J M Robertson (1856–1933).

Blake is relatively well known, but who was J M Robertson? What's his connection with George Spencer-Brown? And how exactly did J M Robertson influence George Spencer-Brown?

These questions are explored from two perspectives: first, George Spencer-Brown's works and their debt to (a) Blake's work, from which he quotes in a number of instances, and to (b) J M Robertson's (in particular, the latter's *Letters on Reasoning* (1905) and *Rationalism* (1912)); second, Leon Conrad's personal connection to Spencer-Brown, who mentored him through *Laws of Form* and with whom he developed a personal friendship involving regular weekly telephone conversations for the greater part of the last four years of Spencer-Brown's life. He will share anecdotes and stories that connect George Spencer-Brown and J M Robertson that span George Spencer-Brown's lifetime – from his school days to his dying days.

Both Blake's and Robertson's influences are relevant to Spencer-Brown's view of morality. The paper looks at specific connections between Blake's work and J M Robertson's *Letters on Reasoning* and *Rationalism* on the one hand and George Spencer-Brown's *Laws of Form*, *A Lion's Teeth* (1995/2008), *Only Two Can Play This Game* (Keys, 1971) and the unpublished manuscript, *The Questions of Existence* (2003) on the other.

The paper points to a broken link between George Spencer-Brown's work and Niklas Luhmann's.

About Leon Conrad

Leon Conrad is a writer, poet, storyteller and educator. He is passionate about reviving the integrated approach to teaching the liberal arts, in particular the Trivium of logic, grammar and rhetoric. He has an undergraduate degree in Music, an MA in the History of Design & Material Culture of the Renaissance. He has run training courses in voice-centred communication skills for business for over 20 years.

As founder of The Traditional Tutor, Leon works with gifted and talented youngsters, and with professionals as a communication consultant through The Academy of Oratory. He encountered George Spencer-Brown's 'Laws of Form' in 2013, and was fortunate to have been mentored through the process of engaging with it with the author, with whom he developed a meaningful friendship. Leon has gone on to successfully apply Spencer-Brown's methodology to the practice of traditional (perennial) logic, and – most recently – to the analysis of story structures, looking at the close link between story structures and different types of problems.

https://independent.academia.edu/LeonConrad

Introduction

I am grateful for the chance to present here today.[1] My talk comes from the imagination, where stories reside. A storyteller first and foremost; an independent researcher secondarily, I feel most comfortable here, where both worlds co-exist.

As the person who almost certainly knows the least about Niklas Luhmann's work in this space, I have done my best to survey Luhmann's work for the occasion, and I am hopeful I have not made any major blunders in my interpretation of his work. As you know, not everything he wrote is available in English, and my German is hardly fluent. I hope listeners will kindly correct any errors I might have made. It's important to get things right.

I would not have considered submitting a paper to the conference had Lars Clausen not suggested I do so, knowing of my deep love of George Spencer-Brown's work which Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998) drew on for his own work. Spencer-Brown (1923–2016) was a complex and often misunderstood genius – a remarkably clear thinker, innovator, poet, author, mathematician, engineer, and chess half blue best known for his book, *Laws of Form*, the work Luhmann found particularly inspiring.[2]

I aim to compare and contrast these authors' views of autopoietic systems, indicating areas where differences might inform progress in thinking about such systems. In the process, I plan to draw heavily on stories – stories about people, about their lives, their motivations, their moral ponderings.

I intend to start at the beginning, though, with the act of autopoietic creation – at least as it appears in the imagination. To do so, I have to go back in time.

Where do we begin?

I come from a half Coptic background. While I was born in London, I grew up in Alexandria, Egypt in the seventies and early eighties, at the time when Luhmann was probably most prolific. It was a social melting pot – a far more inclusive and permissive society than it probably is now there. I had my formative experiences of storytelling from an oral tradition there as a schoolboy. I still remember the joy we felt collectively as a class when we learned that our maths teacher was off sick and his maths lessons were cancelled. Morally speaking, I'd like to say that I felt sorry for him or wished him well – I can't. All I can honestly say in my favour is that I didn't wish him ill. That's as good as it gets. The joy turned to shock, then derision, I'm ashamed to say, when a lady who worked as a cleaner entered the class to supervise us – 5G, the worst-behaved class of 30 children in the school – and try to impose order on us for 45 minutes of the school day. The muhajjaba swiftly restored order not by imposing it, but by engaging our imaginations. She asked a simple question:

"Would you like to hear a story?"

That got our attention. And she had ours.

And when she asked, "What would you like the story to be about?" hands went up around the class.

"A princess."

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[1] I would also like to express my thanks to Blake scholar, Susanne Sklar, for her invaluable help in guiding me through the life and work of William Blake.

[2] If you are not familiar with *Laws of Form*, or have tried to get to grips with it and have found it hard, I have a series of free videos offering a close reading of the work (Conrad, 2020). I would also recommend George Burdett-Stuart's website, *The Markable Mark at* http://www.markability.net.

“A dragon.”

“A djinnn.”

“Very well, then …” and she started … she started to spin a story from the oral storytelling tradition the Arabian Nights must have belonged to, and we were mesmerised.

Forty-five minutes later, she ended the story masterfully on a cliff-hanger just before the bell rang to signal the break.

I couldn’t tell you what the story was, but I remember the entrancement, the feeling of being bewitched, caught up in something exciting, joyous, that engaged every part of my being in a way I felt that everything and anything could potentially do. I remember, most of all, thinking, “I want to learn how to do that!”

A year or so later, a similar thing happened – the maths teacher was unwell – the headmaster, who happened to be unusually enlightened, and knew every member of his staff and their talents, once again asked the cleaner if she would oversee our class. When she came in, everyone was instantly silent.

“Aha!” she said, “I think I’ve told you a story before. Do you remember where we left off last time?”

Hands went up all over the class. Usually, it was a struggle for any of us to remember what we’d done in the previous lesson, but here, almost everyone knew exactly where she’d left us.

“Very well, let me tell you what happened …”

And for the next 45 minutes, she spun the thread and wove her magic. And 45 minutes later, just before the bell rang, there she left us, hanging on the edge of another cliff.

I’d read stories, but they’d never ever come to life in the way I experienced it with her on those days.

In those moments, that storyteller created a social structure, and it felt good.

It took me over 40 years to find a storytelling teacher who works in an unbroken oral storytelling tradition to study with – that woman is Shonaleigh, a storyteller who carries over 4,000 stories in her, that are interlinked or latticed, but that, as she would say, is another story for another time.[3]

A society emerges from the collective consciousness of its members – and one member, like Shonaleigh, can hold the whole social structure of a community – in her case, she embodies the voices of generations of Jewish women.

Just like the Egyptian storyteller’s stories, Shonaleigh’s stories have no beginning and no end – it just depends on where you first join the lattice. Perhaps it’s a good way to think of Althusius’ *Homo Simbioticus*.[4] For him, public and private merge; the symbiote is able to adapt to different functions in a social structure according to the demands of the situation (or environment, if you like) they’re in, in a multi-layered nested structure, like a Chinese box that folds in upon itself. Where does that begin or end but in the system?

[3] www.shonaleigh.uk.

[4] For an overview of Althusius’ work, see (Hueglin, 1979). On his concept of the *homo symbioticus*, see Ibid., p 22.

Creation Myths

It's a good way to think of the Universe. It's an approach elegantly described in Ancient Egyptian Creation Myths.

Were it not for Ancient Egyptian Creation myths, I may not have resonated as strongly as I did with Spencer-Brown's work when I first met it.

It's the Creation Myth which was transmitted at Heliopolis that is asking to be told here. In it, Atum comes into being in three ways – first, from his imagination, as a cosmic mound—signifying, as the name means, all and nothing—in the cosmic ocean, Nun; secondly, through the emanation of his heart which brings forth the ennead, which, like the muses, are born of and are of one mind with Mnemosyne in the Greek Creation Myth; and thirdly, through physical manifestation, first pleasuring himself and thus giving birth to himself through his own seed, after which he sneezes out Shu and spits out Tefnut, who, in turn become the ennead, referred to in another version of the story as 'the teeth and lips of Ptah'. In sharing these stories, they come to life in us, and we have much to learn from them. I am particularly grateful to a talented young philosophy student of mine, Jayden Jin, who drew my attention to something I wasn't aware of and I'm not aware that anyone else has noticed – the simple fact that sneezing is an involuntary act; spitting a voluntary one. His insightful comment made me think about the original act being a two-in-one impulse – both physical involuntary urge and voluntary decision to act on the impulse, to facilitate an instinctive creative act, through oscillation.

It is through oscillation that one realises, All is One, as the coffin which was inscribed to house the body of an Ancient Egyptian named Petamon declares:

> I am One that transforms into Two
> I am Two that transforms into Four
> I am Four that transforms into Eight
> After this I am One[5]

Who told the story when it was first transmitted? Or should that be 'what'?

For me, it is 'The Unknown Storyteller' – or should that be 'The Unknown and Unknowable Storyteller'? The distinction is important. This storyteller is not unknown, but potentially knowable. This storyteller is known to be unknowable.

How can the tale know itself except through its own telling?

How can the tailing know itself except through its own heading?

[5] This and the preceding stories appear in (Lamy, 1981/1997, pp. 8–10 and ff).

Ouroboros drawing from a late medieval Byzantine Greek alchemical manuscript.[6]

The same story, by the Unknown and Unknowable Storyteller reveals itself in Ancient China:

> The dao that can be spoken of is not the eternal dao;
> the name that can be named is not the eternal name.
> The nameless is the origin of heaven and earth[7]

Unsurprisingly, George Spencer-Brown prefaces his book, Laws of Form, with the third line of the above quotation from the Dao De Jing in Chinese calligraphic form.

The Unknown Storyteller is clearly not unknown in China, where we find:

> Dao begets One (nothingness; or reason of being), One begets Two (yin and yang), Two begets Three (Heaven, Earth and Man; or yin, yang and breath qi), Three begets all things. All things carry the female and embrace the male. And by breathing together, they live in harmony...[8]

In *Only Two Can Play This Game*—which he saw as the feminine counterpart to the masculine *Laws of Form*—Spencer-Brown writes:

> [The word] *Husband* [comes] from *hus* = house, *bond* (for *buandi*) = a person dwelling. The latter root is the same as for bond, band, something that holds together, a boundary.
>
> [The word] *wife* [comes] [f]rom *vibrare* = vibrate. So literally a man's wife is his *vibrator*! She is the *life* that completes his *form*.[9]

Those familiar with *Laws of Form* will recognise the allusions here. They equate to the masculine and feminine energies of *yin* and *yang*; the voluntary and involuntary forces that give rise to Shu and Tefnut; the female energy of the Chinese creator goddess, *Fu Xi*, and the male energy of her partner, *Nu Wa*. She carries a compass, the tool used to create a matrix; he carries a straight-edge, the tool used to create a pattern which depends on the underlying matrix.

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[6] Source: Wikimedia: By anonymous medieval illuminator; uploader Carlos adanero - Fol. 279 of Codex Parisinus graecus 2327, a copy (made by Theodoros Pelecanos (Pelekanos) of Corfu in Khandak, Iraklio, Crete in 1478) of a lost manuscript of an early medieval tract which was attributed to Synosius (Synesius) of Cyrene (d. 412).The text of the tract is attributed to Stephanus of Alexandria (7th century).cf. scan of entire page here: https://www.flickr.com/photos/ouroboran/2288405597/in/photostream/, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2856329

[7] Source: http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Daoists/daodejing.html.

[8] Ibid.

[9] (Keys, 1971, p. 138).

Systems and Laws of (Autopoietic) Form

The poet William Blake wrote in his epic poem, *Jerusalem*, which he considered—rightly, in my opinion—to be 'the Grandest Poem that this World Contains':[10]

> I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man[']s.
> I will not Reason and Compare: my business is to Create.[11]

It is worth reflecting on the fact that there are two main ways to create a system. You either create it yourself, or you allow it to be created through you. 'I may praise [this Grand Poem],' writes Blake, 'since I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary: the Authors are in Eternity.'[12] The relationship that binds these two approaches together – doing and allowing – neatly sums up the entire history not just of human culture and society, but arguably of the cosmos.

In conversations Spencer-Brown and I had, he mentioned a number of times that '*Laws of Form* wrote itself'. And in one conversation, he said,

> '"I remember trying to sit down and write a sonnet about love. It was absolutely dreadful. … Suddenly my pencil got bored of all this and decided to show me how it was done."'[13]

Great works write themselves and great sayings appear time and time again – when they want to – unbidden, uninvited, unasked. They vibrate within us, and demand to be en-formed. It's only when they're complete that we can look back at the appearance of what only existed potentially, unimagined, unrealised, and judge their merits – for better or worse.

> "You can't sit down and decide, 'Today, I'm going to write a masterpiece.' It simply isn't done that way," Spencer-Brown said,[14] and he's right.

But J M Robertson's cautionary words from *Letters on Reasoning* are worth pointing out:

> You will never, I hope, go about saying like Fichte that the All is speaking through you in particular; but you may fitly say to yourselves that [when you have weighed bias in the scales of utility and of reciprocity, and have rationally explained to yourself in terms of error or interest the divergence of other men from what you are convinced is the right course,] whatever force for good there may be in the cosmos is as truly incarnate in you as it can ever

[10] Letter to Thomas Butts, 6 July 1803. 'I hope that all our three years' trouble Ends in Good Luck at last & shall be forgot by my affections & only remember'd by my Understanding; to be a Memento in time to come, & to speak to future generations by a Sublime Allegory, which is now perfectly completed into a Grand Poem. I may praise it, since I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary; the Authors are in Eternity. I consider it as the Greatest Poem that his World Contains. Allegory address'd to the Intellectual powers, while it is altogther hidden from the Corporeal Understanding, is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry; it is also somewhat in the same manner defin'd by Plato. This poem shall, by Divine Assistance, be progressively Printed & Ornamented with Prints & given to the Public. But of this work I take care to say little to M^{r} H., since he is much averse to my poetry as he is to a Chapter in the Bible. He knows that I have writ it, for I have shewn it to him, & he has read Part by his own desire & has looked with sufficient contempt to inhance my opinon of it. But I do not wish to irritate by seeming too obstinate in Poetic pursuits. But if all the World should set their faces against This, I have Orders to set my face like a flint (Ezekiel iiiC, 9v) against their faces, & my forehead against their foreheads.' (Blake, 1969, pp. 824–825). The poem was his prophetic book, *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*.

[11] *Jerusalem* Chapter 1, Plate 10, Lines 20–21 (Blake, 1969, p. 629); (Blake, 2000, p. 307).

[12] Letter to Thomas Butts, 25 April 1803. (Blake, 1969, p. 823).

[13] Conversation between GSB and LC, 12 April, 2014.

[14] Repeated on several occasions. Author's recollection.

> be subjectively known to be [then the measure of your character, of your spirituality, of your moral stature, is just your persistence in your doctrine].[15]

I'll come back to Robertson's work later on. For now, I owe another insight to Jayden Jin, who pointed out something else I'd never noticed regarding Creation Myths: neither the Ancient Egyptian nor the Daoist approaches explicitly mentions anything about anything being good. The principle of goodness is implicit in the principles of *Ma'a* in Ancient Egypt, personified as *Ma'at*. In China, it is implicit in the principle of *de*. Implicit, but not explicit. Things are rather different in the Book of Genesis, which states that

> In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
> And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
> And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.
> And God saw the light, that it was good[16]

———

Laws of Form tells a story of zero, one and *x*. It starts with a distinction – a circle suspended in some kind of space, for example. That allows us to point to the inside, the outside, or the border. Without the circle, which creates a distinction, we have nothing to point to: No zero. No nil. No nothing. Draw a mark of distinction again – a circle, if you like – and you have a single mark. Think of that as all there is, ever was, and ever will be. But how? And why? As Spencer-Brown puts it:

> how or why the world conceives a desire, and discovers an ability, to see itself, and appears to suffer the process … is sometimes called the original mystery.[17]

With that mark, you have everything and nothing. Good and evil. Society and … ?

But if everything wants to see itself … what on earth … what in heaven … can it do? It's already split itself in two.

Is the two-in-one form binary or unary? Is it one? Is it the other? Is it both? Or is it neither?

Perhaps it's a unified un-unity, a duplicitous one-and-the-sameness, and at the same time, a triplicity – a triplicity, as Spencer-Brown would have it, of 'reality, appearance, awareness' which he elaborates on in terms of 'possibility, imaginability, actuality': three necessary elements he found matched in the phenomenon of 'conditioned co-production' described by the Bodhisattva known as the Buddha Sākyamuni.[18] The same structure of 'possibility, imaginability, actuality', incidentally, is found in story structure. There is a story structure I have identified using Spencer-Brown's Calculus of Indications which I call the **Revelation Structure**. You will already be familiar with it as the dynamic process that powers the saying attributed to Julius Caesar: *veni, vidi, vici*: 'I came, I saw, I conquered'. I came because there was a rumour – a possibility that something might be or might not be. As a result I was able to see the state of things with my own eyes. Perception is linked to

[15] (Robertson, 1905, p. 216). This is the culmination of an impressive argument against the notion of free will expounded in Letters VIII and IX which boils down to will being involuntary but acts of will being within our control (pp. 115–169). See also Ibid., p 202.
[16] King James Version. Genesis I:1–4.
[17] (Spencer-Brown, Laws of Form, 1969/2011, p. 85).
[18] (Conze, 1984, pp. 14, 146–147, 386, 413–414) and p 146, n 13, referenced in (Spencer-Brown, Laws of Form, 1994, p. viii). On Sākyamuni, see (Conze, 1984, pp. 22–23).

conception here. And the formation of the concept eventually (often in a split second of warped space-time) allows action to be taken. States change. It is a dynamic process, and one that can be traced under many linear story structures – including the narrative structure of a mathematical proof. A thesis needs to be verified because its truth value is doubted; evidence is assembled and evaluated; finally, a conclusion is reached that advances our knowledge. It is a process with a clear beginning, middle, and end, a process that can start, anywhere in the larger story which is universal consciousness. We have the choice to situate ourselves at the beginning of *our* story, *a* story, or *the* story of creation. The difference often lies in whether we are telling the story or whether the story is telling itself through us.

Rationalist Roots

There are many beginnings to the story of *Laws of Form*. They converge, like the beginnings of all stories do, at the beginning of the universal story – once upon a time. It's a cold winter's day in the North of England. There's a nip of chill in the air that cuts through the air of the Victorian school building where George Spencer-Brown studies. He's walking down a corridor with a small group of friends – all members of the J M Robertson fan club that's been formed in the school. And they're chanting, verbatim, two of the dictums from his book, *Letters on Reasoning*:

> *There can be no rational ascription of single mode to the totality of things.*
>
> *Terms of relative mode cannot rationally be used of an endless series absolutely considered.*[19]

In doing this, they feel the racy thrill, for in Britain in the 30s, being a Rationalist, as J M Robertson was, was a statement of non-conformism. The label applied to J M Robertson more than most, as he authored several works on the theory that Christianity was based on myth. He also wrote on the Shakespeare authorship question, on humanism, liberalism, comparative religion, education, ethics, history, the theory and practice of literary criticism, sociology, politics, economics (including the evolution of states), angling, and, of course, rationalism. As if that wasn't enough, he was also MP for Tyneside from 1906–1918.

Spencer-Brown continued to refer to Robertson's 'dictums' as he called them, throughout his life. Towards the end of his life, despite his failing eyesight, *Letters on Reasoning* was the last book he wanted to read. When I printed out a copy from the on-line digitised PDF file on A3 paper in large print and sent it to him through the post, the joy he expressed was palpable. We would quote the dictums and a few other key phrases to each other: 'if you try to put any proposition of infinite mode in terms of sense perception … you will never consent to describe the infinite as blue, loud, thin, soft, hot, or sweet'.[20] 'Isn't it wonderful?' he would exclaim … and it was.

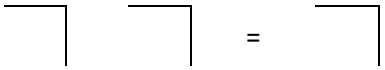
It's worth thinking about the 'dictums' in terms of *Laws of Form* – for they put the ineffable at the heart of the operation. 'You can't have a blue universe,' I can hear him say. Of course you can't. If you're proposing a blue universe, then you're also, by definition, expressing the contradictory of a 'non-blue universe' at the same time. Since there can only be one universe, the whole idea is preposterous.

[19] (Robertson, 1905, pp. 119, 146). The passages are italicised in the original. The book had a wide influence in Rationalist circles, as evidenced both by Spencer-Brown's work, and the marginalia in the digital scan on archive.org (Call Ref: 1048314517), probably by the influential Rationalist Charles Ogden, whose bookplate appears on the inside front cover.

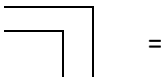
[20] (Robertson, 1905, p. 120).

I think there was also an 'inside joke' that Spencer-Brown was making by referring to Robertson's quotes as 'dictums' – for there are two meanings of the word 'dictum' in the Oxford English Dictionary: The main definitions are that of a sense of a pronouncement that is unquestionably true, but the word also refers in short to the legal phrase *obiter dictum* – a pronouncement of an opinion or incidental 'remark' by a judge that is not seen as legally binding and that sets no legal precedent. It is and it isn't. It just depends on whether you link the dictum to opinion or fact.

It's a key difference that applies to logic – with Boole committing a logical fallacy by indicating 'the universe', as 1 and nothing as 0, as Boole does, when introducing his binary approach to algebraic logic. 1 and 0 are both marks on the page, but he does not acknowledge the space in which they stand. In Boole's thought – and, I would argue, in Luhmann's, 1 and 0 are both marks. They're contradictory terms, but the underlying unity isn't acknowledged. Both Luhmann and Boole mark the unmarked state. Thus, in Boole's work, and in Luhmann's, it appears as a mere sign: Mark, mark = mark:



Spencer-Brown never makes this error. He symbolises it the unmarked state by making it equivalent to the piece of paper it is written on:



Spencer-Brown's symbols both point to the thing they symbolise – a form, vivid, vibrant, triplicitous, that evokes, as an act of metaphysical acupuncture, its own presence. Through the symbol, the thing symbolised is paradoxically enabled to come, to see, and to conquer … its own absence:

Single vision blinds us to contradictories. Duplicity sets up a confusion between them.[21] Triplicity balances and transcends them. Transcendent unity, uniting body, heart, mind and grounding it in the ineffable in all its glory, unites and contains all of the above. Once again, I draw on Spencer-Brown's work:

> to experience the world clearly, we must abandon existence to truth, truth to indication, indication to form, and form to void.[22]

That quote comes from *Laws of Form*. In his unpublished 1-page essay, *The Questions of Existence*, Spencer-Brown distinguishes between a distinction—which allows one or other side of the distinction to be indicated, leaving one side always unmarked—and the assertions that one side is marked, or the other marked. While the states are qualitatively different, the assertions we make about them are qualitatively the same.

> that there are things and that there is no thing are … equivalent assertions.[23]

[21] On the link between duality and badness in Indo-European languages, see (Huxley, 1947, p. 17).
[22] (Spencer-Brown, Laws of Form, 1969/2011, p. 82).
[23] (Spencer-Brown, The Questions of Existence, 2003).

In writing the stories he published in *A Lion's Teeth* (1995/2008), Spencer-Brown's motive was to write stories that were amoral. Not immoral; amoral. It was his way of embracing and transcending duality. Paradoxically, he clearly did so because he thought—rightly or wrongly—that it was a good thing to do.

J M Robertson's book, *Letters on Reasoning*, points to the way of achieving a similar end through balancing emotion and reason. He acknowledges emotional bias, and sees, as a condition of being a thinking, feeling human being, the necessity of correcting fallacy, examining argument, acknowledging truth. And if you want to write an amoral book, which isn't an easy thing to do, this might be one way to do it. The energy that is required is phenomenal.

Despite J M Robertson's *Letters on Reasoning* being at the top of the list of Spencer-Brown's life-long favourite books, he didn't include it in the list of 'windows' or books that offer perspectives onto the ineffable that he recommended people look through in *Only Two Can Play This Game*.[24] Perhaps this omission was because, in this book, among the score (another possible play on words here) of books Spencer-Brown suggests readers look through, towards the end, in the 'hard' section, just before the entry relating to his own book, *Laws of Form*, we find him recommending people read *The Divine Names* by Dionysius the Areopagite (referred to sometimes as Pseudo-Dionysius) in C E Rolt's translation. In this work, we find the following passage:

> Now if the Good is above all things (as indeed It is) Its Formless Nature produces all-form; and in It alone Not-Being is an excess of Being … and Lifelessness an excess of Life and Its Mindless state is an excess of Wisdom, and all the Attributes of the Good we express in a transcendent manner by negative images. And if it is reverent so to say, even that which *is not* desires the all-transcendent Good and struggles itself, by its denial of all things, to find its rest in the Good which verily transcends all being.[25]

Spencer-Brown is very clear about the reason he recommends readers look through it – he singles out Rolt's introduction as 'spectacular' (probably another play on words), continuing, 'Much of what is in this book [by Dionysius the Areopagite] is confirmed … in [*Laws of Form*]'.[26]

A Broken Link

I have searched for a similar viewpoint in Luhmann's work, but haven't yet found it. What I've found so far is a dualistic, often paradoxical and deliberately contradictory observance of duality – a key example being that of the system and the environment – one is clearly not the other; both are distinct. Rather than seeing the system as a mark within an ineffable environment, Luhmann sees the outside and inside of a distinction in Boolean terms. The piece of paper on which the mark of distinction is made is taken for granted. It's a binary system in which both sides of the distinction are marked.

Citing Spencer-Brown's work, Luhmann states, in *Theory of Society*, that a system 'puts itself in a state of oscillation between positive and negative operations and between self-reference and other-reference.'[27] But Luhmann is clear that he is 'departing from' Spencer-Brown's work. In his notes, he

[24] Written by Spencer-Brown under the pseudonym of James Keys.
[25] (Dionysius the Arepoagite, 1920, pp. 89–90).
[26] (Keys, 1971, p. 108).
[27] (Luhmann, 2012, pp. Vol I, p 19).

states that for ‘reasons that lie in systems theory, [he goes] beyond Spencer-Brown with this distinction’.[28] And by going beyond Spencer-Brown’s work, his link with it is broken.

It’s a far cry from Blake’s inspired:

> Awake! awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! expand!
> I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine:
> Fibres of love from man to man[29]

In Luhmann’s work, one can sense the influence of Spencer-Brown’s work, and yet, one wonders what could be done if that broken link could be restored; what could be done if a unary understanding of Spencer-Brown’s calculus were to be applied to Luhmann’s systems-based theory of how society emerges and functions as an autopoietic whole, nested within the universal autopoietic system; one wonders what could be done in a more holistic and dynamic sense, by seeing the two sides of a distinction in a unary form in which one side reflects and is reflected within the other, where contraries comingle with each other, rather than repel each other; one wonders what could be done if one understood systems as existing in an environment which is ineffable.

How so?

One approach is outlined in an interview with Spencer-Brown entitled *On Clarity*:

> We create whatever world we choose by imagining one state is more “valuable” than another. When we have done it, we see that we have created with it a “problem”. The problem is, if we find we don’t like it, we seem to have forgotten how to undo it. The problem is especially intractable in a species whose beliefs in the value of its concepts are bonded, that is, whose members are forbidden to think independently.[30]

The key, here, is to leave the ineffable as ineffable and feel it simply resonate … universally.

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[28] Ibid., p 364. The confusion of treating confirmation as condensation and vice versa is clear, to cite one example, from note 190 on page 377 of Volume 1: ‘Spencer-Brown expresses the same double meaning [of repetition ‘creating and condensing identity’ resulting in recognition, which allows for memory and knowledge, and of repetition taking place ‘in a *somewhat different* context (*at least* later in time’ (italics LC)] in elegant fashion in distinguishing between “condensation” and “confirmation.” The repetition of an expression brings nothing new but merely condenses it (→). Read backward (→), the same equation can be understood as the unfolding of a tautology. Spencer-Brown speaks of “confirmation” … What I would like to stress more strongly is the *diversity* [italics NL] of the repetition situations that arise from the recursively connected operations that are the differentiated systems.’ While the confusion in the printed account may be due to poor translation or editing, rather than misunderstanding on the part of the author (the arrows should be barbs, pointing in opposite directions, for one thing), Luhmann’s treatment accentuates difference, and therefore complexity, rather than the simple beauty of the fact that a mark can be an idea in the mind. Any idea creates a distinction but ideas are by no means automatically tautologous in terms of content, although in terms of form, Luhmann is absolutely spot on. However, it’s not at all clear that this is what he means. No one has expressed this as simply or as elegantly as Spencer-Brown. Luhmann then ‘introduces’ difference, by contrast to Spencer-Brown’s ‘tautology’, and stresses diversity 'more strongly', implying that his treatment is similar to Spencer-Brown’s. However, one is focusing on form, the other on content. As for what Luhmann means by 'recursively connected', which implies, by definition, ‘non-recursively connected’, or even ‘recursively or non-recursively non-connected’, I have no idea.

[29] *Jerusalem* Book 1, Plate 4, Lines 6–7 (Blake, 1969, p. 622); (Blake, 2000, p. 301).

[30] (Emlein & Spencer-Brown, 6 August 1995, pp. 4–5).

The key, here, is

> To see a World in a Grain of Sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an hour.[31]

Not even the Rationalist says, "There is no *x*." 'Every theist,' writes J M Robertson, in his book, *Rationalism*,

> has negated a million Gods save one: the rationalist does but negate the millionth. And in doing this, he is not committing the verbal nullity of saying, There is no God—a formula never fathered by a considerate atheist. God, undefined, = *x*; and we do not say, There is no *x*. Of the defined God-idea, whichsoever, we demonstrate the untenableness; but in giving the theist an inconceivable universe we surely meet his appetite for the transcendent.[32]

Restoratives

There is so much more than either/or. And where you do encounter it, the oscillatory experience often leads to joy and laughter. Word play is one example. 'Gruntity pig' is another.

> "Where does the saying 'Gruntity pig' come from?" I asked Spencer-Brown during one of our conversations.
>
> "Oh, Gruntity pig! My brother invented it. It's a very good way of finishing a conversation. My brother was four and a half years younger than me, and I was testing him on 'What does a cow say?' 'Moo.' Not a rabbit, because very few people know what sound a rabbit makes. 'What does a pig say?' and he came out with, 'Gruntity, gruntity pig, pig, pig; gruntity, gruntity pig, pig, pig …' and we roared with laughter. Gruntity pig was the funniest, but I have no idea why it was special."
>
> "Did you ever ask him?"
>
> "No. He died before I thought about it. You don't think about it. You always say you'll do that tomorrow, or the next day. Your times with other people are very short compared to your life span."[33]

We laugh. We cry. Laughter and tears are part of us. They're embodied responses – unquestionable parts of our system.

Gruntity pig!

I'm not aware of an explanation for either in Luhmann's work. He speaks of the '"shedding of tears in the office" when those at whom laws are directed reflect on the impossibility of their fulfilment',[34] and I have found no references for tears or crying in Luhmann's *Love as Passion*.

Laughter and tears are both grounded in categorical thinking. They are both involuntary responses. We laugh when we experience a category mistake; we cry when we experience a category

[31] William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, lines 1–4. (Blake, 1969, p. 431).
[32] (Robertson, Rationalism, 1912)
[33] Conversation between GSB and LC, 16 August, 2014.
[34] Quoted in (King & Thornhill, 2003, p. 106).

correction.[35] By 'categories', I refer to Aristotle's *Categories*: ten embodied categories of Being through which we make sense of being: substance, quality, quantity, relationship, where, when, being-in-a-position, having, active, and passive. When we come across an unexpected state, presented in the non-threatening form of a simile, laughter generally ensues. Laughter is associated with surprise; tears with suspense. When we have to admit one of two things: (1) that something isn't as it should be, or (2) something that shouldn't be, is, either in the present moment, or in how our present moment relates to a moment or period in the past (like the tears of joy we experience when we are in love, which make us realise that we are experiencing something that is transcendental – something that simultaneously should be a perpetual state of being, but isn't; and that in our mundane environment, if our everyday experience is to be trusted, we shouldn't be experiencing this transcendent state, but we are experiencing it), we cry – whether tears of joy or tears of sorrow, or both, the acceptance is cathartic – and we end up in floods of tears. Why would this happen unless we had an embodied sense of the rightness of the universals and their role in maintaining cosmic balance and order?

In their 275-page long analysis of metaphor, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in *Metaphors We Live By*, conclude that there are two grounding metaphors we use which boil down to the containment metaphor (I'm falling *in* love – love is a container) and the continuum metaphor (Are you *following* my argument? – we're taking a journey, a process that takes place over time). Is this any different, at a grounding level, from Spencer-Brown's first distinction? – an autopoietic act which creates, at one and the same time, a fixed bounded space: a distinction, and a dynamic act of indication?

The first distinction is the ultimate source of life; the ultimate source of story. Life lifes; story stories; the imagination appears, to imagine … its self, or its other. It just depends on which part of the form one identifies with – but remember, your imagination might well have the last laugh.

Let's not *just* focus on what we may differ on rationally … but focus also on something else:

Why on earth …? Why in heaven's name … do we imagine, if not to unite emotion and reason, heaven and earth, in the unnameable Dao, Blake's divine body, the divine imagination?[36]

I'd like to end with a couple of quotes: one by the best poet the English language has ever known (and no, I'm not speaking of Shakespeare), a poet still not as highly appreciated as he really should be: the visionary poet William Blake, who knew all about the imagination,[37] and one by a poet known to a few people, but whose work deserves far wider recognition – the English Neo-Platonist poet, Floyer Sydenham.

George Spencer-Brown clearly knew Blake's work. He quotes him with admiration and I'd like to share a passage with you from Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. It's a diatribe against the work of Swedenborg. It's a poem that seems particularly fitting here:

> Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

[35] The truth of this was revealed to me via this statement in *Laws of Form*: 'When wrong is done we sometimes laugh, but when right is done we cry.' (Spencer-Brown, Laws of Form, 1969/2011, p. 115).
[36] *A vision of the Last Judgment, From the Note-Book, pp 68–70* (Blake, 1969, pp. 604–605).
[37] 'The Eternal Body or Man is The Imagination, that is, God himself The Divine Body … It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision).'; 'Good and Evil are Riches & Poverty, a Tree of Misery, propagating Generation & Death.' *The Laocoön* (Blake, 1969, p. 776); (Blake, 2000, p. 403).

> From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.
> Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.
>
> The voice of the Devil
>
> … Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
> Energy is Eternal Delight.[38]

I offer this up in the spirit in which Floyer Sydenham, in his *Onomasticon Theologicum* of 1784, writes:

> The Interchange of Thoughts will frequently produce an amicable Collision of their Ideas, their Judgements and their Reasonings: and from this Collision, new Sparks of Celestial Fire will be, as it were, stricken out between them; Ideas hitherto latent in the Mind of Each singly, will start up at once in the Minds of Both conjointly: and if while they are conversing thus together, they consult, Each of them, the Divine Fountain of Truth within them, - concerning what they say themselves, as well as what they hear from Each Other, - their former Judgements and Reasonings, if right, will be confirmed, if wrong, corrected; - and profound Truths, new to them Both, will spring up from the secret and deep Center of their Souls. These truths they will, Both of them, equally enjoy; in embracing these Truths, they will embrace Each Other; till at length they become so intimately united, that only one Mind will be in Two Souls.[39]

What might happen if this vision were to inspire further development of Niklas Luhmann's work? Just imagine what could be possible!

Gruntity pig!

[38] Plates 3, 4 (Blake, 1969, p. 149); (Blake, 2000, p. 109). Here, Blake's Devil is 'the devil you love to hate' despite yourself – as he is in Milton. Blake's Devil is totally different to the 'state Satan', which one can easily get into.

[39] (Baker, 2020, pp. 57–58). I am grateful to Andrew Baker for drawing my attention to this quote. His work on Floyer Sydenham and the 18th Century English Neo-Platonists is an inspiration.

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