



50. THE RETURN OF HERMETISM

Until the 11th century, the only Hermetic text preserved in western Christianity since the Hellenistic era was the *Asclepius*, a Latin version of the Greek original attributed to Apuleius of Madaurus¹. The text deals mainly with the rituals that the ancient Egyptian priests carried out to charge the images of their gods with the powers of the corresponding stars. As long as the tradition of ancient Egypt had survived, there is nothing to complain about the validity of those rites, which resemble the ones used for the animation of icons (sanskrit. *prāṇa pratiṣṭhā*) still used in India today. One can legitimately wonder what the hermeticists of the early Middle Ages intended to animate, since the Egyptian tradition had already disappeared with all its Gods, overwhelmed by Christian monotheism. If the Alexandrian Gnostics had Greco-Roman simulacra on which to exercise their theurgy, certainly in the Middle Ages such superstitions of antiquity were exercised solely to charge some non-religious objects with subtle energies.



1. Alchemist's laboratory

Therefore, the main activity of the hermeticists of western Christianity was limited to the preparation of amulets and fetishes, with the use of sympathetic (or homeopathic) and antipathetic (or allopathic) magic. They collected, therefore, metals, stones, herbs and animals corresponding for certain analogies to planets, celestial asterisms and zodiac signs, drawing the elements from which the talismans were modelled. The malicious or benign use of these objects was then left to the discretion of those who were to use them. It is, therefore, understandable that hermetic magicians were frowned upon by ecclesiastical and imperial authorities and treated in the same way as healers, sorcerers and country wizards. However, the transformation in gold of base metals always moved the greed of the mighty who were often in debt. Therefore, it is no surprise that figures like Michael Scotus² attended the court of Emperor Frederick II and Roger Bacon lived under the protection of Pope Clement IV.

¹ Inspired by this late Roman version, the 12th century saw the production of several apocrypha attributed to Mercurius Triplex, such as the *Liber XXIV Philosophorum* and the *Liber de VI rerum principiis*, on judicial astrology, alchemy of *souffleurs*, on the manufacture of amulets and filters and other lesser magic. Moreover, love filters concerned the sphere of *magia sexualis*, that is sexual magic, which we will present later.

² Dante puts the alchemists in Hell, in the bolgia of falsifiers. Here we find Michael Scotus "That other there, his flanks extremely spare, was Michael Scot, a man who certainly knew how the game of magic fraud was played." (*Inferno*, XX.115-117). Roger Bacon, in addition to being an alchemist, was also a precursor of the profane science, which has been triumphant since the Renaissance.



From the end of the 12th century, following the translations made in the first Universities of the works of al-Kindi, Avicenna and Averroes, a number of texts of Arab alchemy began to be known in Spain, France and Italy¹. It is certainly no coincidence that those texts which, by means of magic preceded modern chemistry and the rationalistic mentality, arrived in Europe through the study of profane Arab philosophers. Those works were considered the product of the fertile pen of the alchemist Geber.



2. Arabic alchemy text

At the beginning of the 14th century, other Arab works² of Geber began to spread in Latin Christianity. Not without a certain degree of superficiality, the hermeticists later identified him with Jābir ibn Hayyān (721~815)³. It is, however, probable that one or more Spanish *moros* versed in laboratory alchemy were hidden behind that name. Curiously enough, the Arabic texts attributed to the Persian alchemist that mention the chain of masters who transmitted that cosmological knowledge (*silsilah*, sskrt. *paramparā*) trace its origin to Hermes Trismegistus⁴, continuing through Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato to the Neo-Platonists. Therefore, no mention is made of a more recent continuity through the *taṣawwuf*! What is certain

¹ Among those texts, the most important was *Picatrix*, the Latin translation of an Arabic treatise. Its original title was *Gāyat al-hakīm* (*The aim of the essay*), written by Abū Maslama Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn ‘Abd al-Da’im al-Majrīī of Cordoba (? ~ 1007). According to the Latin manuscripts, the work was translated from Arabic into Castilian in 1256 under the reign of Alfonso X “the Wise”. This text, whose content includes sympathetic magic, judicial astronomy and practical alchemy, was immediately recognized as a grimoire and condemned as such by Saint Albert the Great in his *Speculum astronomie*.

² Only four texts by this pseudo-Geber are known: *Summa perfectionis magisterii*; *Liber fornacum*; *De investigatione perfectionis*; *De inventione veritatis*. Given the great difference in perspective between them, it is highly unlikely that they can all be attributed to the same hand.

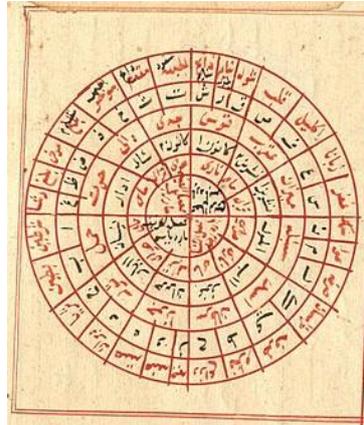
³ Little is known even on this figure, mostly through stories of unreliable historical foundation. It appears implausible that more than three hundred treatises can be attributed to a single author. The legend wants him in connection with the famous Sufi Ja’far aṣ-Ṣādiq and for this reason, was one-sidedly considered a Shi’ite. Particularly, this is the opinion of Henry Corbin who identified Islamic esotericism with *Shi’a*; or rather, he argued that the initiatic sciences were of pre-Islamic origin, thus emptying the Sunni Sufism of any content of original wisdom (*L’Alchimie comme art hiératique*, Paris, Cahiers de l’Herne, 1986). This work, received with satisfaction in every academic environment, did not explain the reason why Shi’ite *turuq* should exist. However, this was in line with both the heretical tendencies of the *Shaykhiyya* school to which Corbin referred and his anti-traditional and rigidly Calvinist mentality. It is curious to note that Corbin affirmed - similarly to what Schuon had claimed for Catholicism - that *Shi’a* is an ‘initiatic’ religious form, and that all its faithful are, therefore, ‘initiates’.

⁴ According to the Arabs, there have been three Hermeses: Enoch (Idrīs), Noah (sometimes replaced by a Babylonian Hermes) and Hermes the Egyptian (Hirmis al-Miṣrī). Herein lies his triplicity. Each of them represents a function: the prophet-magician, the priest-philosopher and the king-legislator. Therefore, the functional triad in modern occultism appears to be of Hermetic origin. Every human being is potentially a Hermes thanks to his triple composition of *spiritus*, *anima et corpus*. On this basis, the hermeticists of Humanism believed that even the magician can be a creator, hence bringing the divine creation to demiurgic fulfilment. Thus, if the Qabbalist magician aimed at creating the *golem*, the Renaissance alchemist-magician aimed at creating the *homunculus*.





is that in Islam, Alexandrian Hermetism did not come into conflict with religion. It was considered as a philosophy, the residue of a previous revelation abrogated by Islam and, as such, considered as *isra'iliyat*¹.



3. Rotating letter mechanism by al-Buni

However, the use of a peculiar form of expression and the conspicuous display of cosmological symbols and notions could have been deemed suitable for the purpose of expressing certain truths revealed by the Koran and of relaying deductions drawn from nature, both at the esoteric and exoteric levels. In this way, 'Ali Ibn Abī Tālib, Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq, Dhul Nūn al-Miṣrī, the same Muhiddin Ibn' Arabi and other well-known Sufis, sometimes assumed a hermetic form of expression. Nevertheless, their initiatic transmission remained the regular Muḥammadic one. And, on that account, Islamic philosophers and alchemists without Sufi *ba'yat* (sskrt. *dīkṣā*) continued to be profane: the former theoretical hermeticists, and the latter *souffleurs* in search of gold making². At this point, Western esotericists should ask themselves the following questions: could Christian hermeticists have received Sufi initiation with the relative transmission of hermetic symbolism and language without converting to Islam? Or could they have received the hermetic doctrine and the corresponding alchemical method from theoretical hermeticists and Muslim *souffleurs*? Or finally, is it possible that they received an improbable Sufi-hermetic transmission simply by reading texts of Arab alchemy? The three questions can only receive a negative answer. Because an autonomous hermetic initiation was evidently non-existent.

*

* *

In 1438, Georgius Gemistus Pletho (1355 ~ 1450)³, along with his follower Cardinal Bessarion (1403-1472), accompanied the *basileus* John VIII Palaiologos to participate in the Council of Ferrara and Florence in an attempt to unify the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. In Florence, Plethon captivated the

¹ This term indicates the survival (lat. *superstitiones*) of dead traditions preceding the advent of Islam, which, even if ineffective, can be used to express some doctrinal aspects of the new religion. By the same token, one should not forget how Aristotelianism was used by the Scholastics.

² Among these we can mention Aḥmed al-Buni (?~1225) who, despite boasting improbable *silsilat*, devoted himself to the most dangerous occult sciences. His conception of a mechanism for universal interpretation closely resembles the *ars lulliana* and Abulafia's 'rotating letters'. It would be interesting to inquire into a possible acquaintance of al-Buni with Qabbalistic circles of the Maghreb.

³ Considered a Neoplatonic philosopher, Plethon was a syncretistic thinker inspired by the most disparate currents of Alexandrian Gnosticism. He conceived the utopian vision of a universal religion, promoting what today would be called "dialogue among religions". According to him, Hermes Trismegistus came after Zoroaster, who he arbitrarily considered as the first prophet of this universal religion, a sort of parody of the primordial Tradition. Plethon attributed the *Chaldean Oracles* to





attention of Cosimo “the Elder” de’ Medici with his idea of restoring the Hellenistic thought. It was this suggestion that prompted Cosimo to later found the Medici’s Neo-Platonic Academy¹, the first nucleus of Humanism.



4. Neo-Platonic Academy: Ficino, Landino, Poliziano and Becchi

Humanism refers to a cultural movement which, inspired by Classical and Hellenistic writings and works of art, imitated their styles with the aim of restoring this civilization and setting it as a model for a new world view. This endeavour, devoid of any traditional continuity from the original, consisted in the reproduction and reinterpretation of the exterior forms of antiquity, in a purely aesthetic sense. On the contrary, the content of the recovery of ancient forms could only be the reflection of an unreservedly anti-traditional mentality. The centrality of the Divinity and of man as His image, characteristic of the medieval tradition, was replaced with the world considered from a naturalistic and, before long, mechanistic point of view. This plan manifested itself clearly during the Renaissance with the development of Humanism, which entailed the replacement of religion with science and magic, and the imperial order with rampant armed merchants and loan sharks. Thus originated the modern world².



5. Marsilio Ficino and Cosimo “the Elder” de’ Medici

Zoroaster, which in fact are apocryphal works spread by the Alexandrian Jewish circles to discredit the rival newly born Christian Church. In this spirit, he participated in the Council. This demonstrates that it is precisely ecumenism and relativism that reflect a Gnostic mentality. Due to his equidistance between religions, or rather due to his indifference towards Christianity, he was recognized as an atheist by the Patriarch of Constantinople and his work destroyed. His hostility towards Aristotelianism started the rebellion against Scholasticism, anticipating the urge for reform, so emblematic of the Renaissance.

¹ Other members of the Academy were Pico della Mirandola, Poliziano, Nicholas of Cusa, Leon Battista Alberti, Cristoforo Landino, Gentile de’ Becchi and Giuliano and Lorenzo de’ Medici, that is, the first founders of the humanistic movement.

² Contemporary diabolical preachers of a ‘new Humanism’ actually encourage the completion of the same plan in the direction of ‘transhumanism’.



With the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Orthodox monks fleeing the fallen Byzantine Empire introduced parts of the rich archives of their monasteries and imperial libraries to the Balkan peninsula. Western Christians, instead of worrying about the tragic fate of the Greeks, devoted to the recovery of those treasures of ancient wisdom. Cosimo “the Elder” sent messengers to the Balkans with orders to acquire ancient manuscripts from Byzantine refugees at low prices. Some of Plato's works that first arrived in Florence were translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). In 1460 the Franciscan friar Leonardo da Pistoia returned from his mission to Macedonia, and handed over to Cosimo de’ Medici the manuscript of the *Corpus Hermeticum*¹, hitherto unknown in the West.



6. The Ficino’s *Pimander*

The Florentine magnate, always attracted to the occult sciences², interrupted Ficino’s translations by ordering him to give priority to the translation of the hermetic texts. Ficino translated the collection in one breath and published it under the name of *Pimander*³. From that moment on, he was an enthusiastic supporter of hermetic philosophy, influencing the entire circle of the Academy with his passion.



7. Grimoire

Ficino worked also on the translation of the *Asclepius*. However, this text attributed to Hermes resembled more to a grimoire, filled with magic bordering on necromancy and the evocation of demons.

¹ However, this manuscript was missing the last chapter, the fifteenth.

² It is quite wrong to use the terms occultism and occultists only to define the circle of Papus (Dr. Gérard Encausse) and of his successors. Already in the 15th century, Italian humanists rejoiced in defining in such way their ideas and the circles they frequented. This term, however, officially appeared for the first time in the title of the volume *De occulta philosophia* by Agrippa (1486-1535).

³ In truth, Ficino named his Latin translation of the entire *Corpus Hermeticum* after the title of the first book dedicated to Pimander, the ‘Shepherd of men’, where the active Intellect, the Divine Mind was defined.



Until then, magic, whether it was hermetic or otherwise, was kept outside the domain of religion, if not actually fought as a diabolical art. Thus, it became Ficino's commitment to make hermetic magic accepted as Catholic¹. He carefully avoided facing the clear condemnation uttered by Saint Augustine against Hermetism, hence preferring to quote Lactantius and as of Alexandria instead². The reader should be reminded that Lactantius interpreted the expression 'son of God', announced by Pimander, as a prophecy of the coming of Christ. In reality, on closer inspection, it is clear that with 'son of God' the *Corpus Hermeticum* meant the Demiurge of gnostic conception. Ficino always professed his loyalty to the prevailing Catholicism, fearing that the magic he was propagating was condemned by the Church as witchcraft. He earnestly endeavoured to argue a distinction between 'white' and 'black' magic; namely, that activated by the intervention of angels from that inspired by devils. In this way, Hermes Trismegistus and his immediate successors, while being *prisci magi* (ancient magicians) were also *prisci theologi* (ancient knowers of God). From another point of view, he also claimed that hermetic magic should be considered as natural. In other words, he wanted to disguise magic as another natural science, therefore, not contrary to religion, but somehow neutral.



8. Love filter

Note that the same approach was adopted by other exponents of the Renaissance to make empirical science accepted and appear compatible with faith. Once accepted in these terms, it was rather easy to accept science as true knowledge and faith as personal belief³. Furthermore, from a practical point of view, Ficino produced amulets on which he evoked the descent of celestial influences, with magical procedures not very dissimilar from what humanist intellectuals condemned as country witchcraft⁴. However, despite his precautions, his magical operations went far beyond:

¹ The popes of the Medici circle and those belonging to that family kept the Inquisition from investigating the magicians of Humanism. Only too late was there a reaction, as in the case of Giordano Bruno, when the objectives of the reform of Christianity had already been achieved. It would be very interesting to study in depth the reasons why the Medici popes have always been considered enlightened, while the Borgias were and still are object of every slander and contempt by the general public.

² See our previous article no. 49. *The origin of Hermetism*. In truth, Clement of Alexandria had only indicated the existence of Hermes Trismegistus as a pagan prophet without ascribing him any praise or infamy.

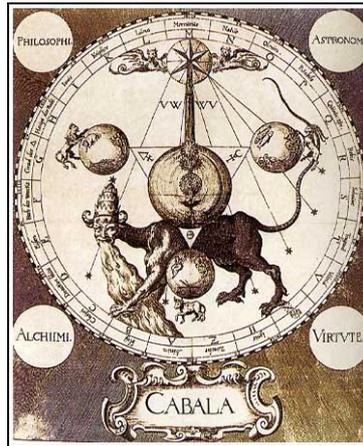
³ Galileo was the shady figure who consciously endeavoured to achieve the public acceptance of scientism as an indisputable truth, a mission that moderns, still to date, champion with satisfaction. Naturally, this was possible thanks to the connivance of the Medici and a Catholic Church already in a state of confusion. We will consider these aspects of the modern world later.

⁴ Giovanni Pico, who almost became subject to scrutiny by the Inquisition for his Christian interpretation of *Qabbalah*, displayed prudence, asserting that his magic could not be accused of being diabolically inspired because based on the Jewish tradition of the Old Testament. While fully in agreement with his associate Ficino, he maintained that the qabbalistic magic had to be superimposed on the hermetic one due to its evident spiritual superiority. In his opinion, the Egyptian origin of Hermetism could in fact suggest a latent presence of Sethian influences, as if this presence were non-existent in the Semitic religions! However, he could not be entirely unaware of an underground sexual magic in the messianic and apocalyptic *Qabbalah*, which



“

“This human tree must be watered with young human liquid, in order for it to regain strength. So choose a healthy, shapely and pleasant young woman of fair complexion, and greedily suck her milk when the moon is crescent [...]. It is a common and ancient opinion that certain old “saghe”, which are commonly called witches, suck the blood of infants to rejuvenate in strength. Why can’t even our old men, deprived of any other remedy, suck the blood of a young man? Of a consenting young man, I say, healthy, pleasant, of fair complexion, who has excellent and perhaps too abundant blood. Hence, like leeches, suck one or two ounces from a vein in the left arm that has just been opened [...]”¹.



9. The science of the Renaissance

To this practice of vampirism, Ficino adds love magic:

“But why is love called magician? Because all the power of magic consists in love; the work of magic is a certain adhesion of one thing to another by similitude of nature. The parts of this world, like the limbs of an animal, all depend on one Author and connect together by communion of nature. Therefore, as in us the brain, lung, heart, liver and other body parts adhere to one the other for something, and mutually help each other, and when one is sick the other is also sick, so the limbs of this great animal, that is, all the bodies of the world linked together, adhere to each other and share their nature. Thanks to this common relationship, common love is born; from this love mutual attraction is born, and this is true magic.”²

For this reason, “spiritual alchemy” is nothing but a euphemism used in the hermetic jargon to indicate the practice of *magia sexualis* still in vogue today among the alleged heirs of Renaissance Hermetism³.

will publicly emerge in all its shamelessness and perversion with Šabbetai Šewi and Jacob Frank (Moshe Idel, *Eros and Qabbalah*, Milan, Adelphi, 2007, pp. 305-307).

¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Sulla vita (De vita cœlitus comparanda)*, Alessandra Tarabochia Canavero (a cura di), Milano, Rusconi, 1995, II.11, pp. 156-157.

² Marsilio Ficino, *El Libro dell’Amore*, Sandra Niccoli (edited by), Firenze, Olschki, 1987, pp. 144-145. It is certainly no coincidence that Ficino always translated the sins of *incontinentia* with *incostantia* and *concupiscentia* with *luxuria*. F. A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno y la Tradición Hermética*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1983, pp. 48-49.

³ In the West, the discovery of Indian left-hand Tantrism has been used as an opportunity to dignify the pseudo-hermetic sexual magic (see Hargrave Jennings, *Indian Religions, or Results of the Mysterious Buddhism* (1858); *The Rosicrucians, Their Rites and Mysteries* (1870); *Phallism: A Description of the Worship of Lingam-Yoni* (1889). In turn, the main source about India was the book by the pornographer Edward Sellon, *Annotations upon the Secret Writings of the Hindus*, (1865)). However, the difference is truly remarkable. First of all, Tantrism *vāmācāra* is an initiatic path, whereas, as is evident from what we have described here, Renaissance Hermetism is an artificial reconstruction from the texts, devoid of any real transmission. Secondly, the practices used in India are not aimed at pleasure, as demonstrated by the semen retention technique. On the contrary, in the



Magic and science, mysteriosophical occultism and naturalism, the admiration for paganism and the rejection of the medieval Christian tradition, the attraction for Gnostic arcana and the repulsion for Aristotelian-scholastic intellectual rigor, the fascination for complicated impenetrable symbolisms and the rejection of any inner aspiration, the preference for an enjoyable life and easy welfare and the intolerance for monastic asceticism and feudal austerity, the predilection for allegory and the aversion to the logic corpus, the exoticism of other religions and the neglect of faith, the interest in form rather than in content, the anxiety for a modernization of the Church and the repudiation of ancient doctrines and rituals, all this led to an urge for a radical change also in the arts. Sandro Botticelli, Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo, Leonardo da Vinci, Pietro Perugino and Luca Signorelli attended the Academy and became the founders of the Renaissance new style. In only a few decades, the novel mentality that originated in Italy spread all over continent, embraced above all by the new emerging classes of wealthy bourgeois.



10. The Renaissance “fat people”. Bankers, loan sharks, merchants

These now considered themselves as peers of those who had been the dominant classes since time immemorial, refusing to continue being divided into guilds and arts¹. This new wealthy middleclass disdained the traditional craft organizations² in the same way a farmer’s son, once he becomes an industrialist, despises and is ashamed of his father’s humble condition. Under the cloak of aesthetic perfection³, of charming illusory effects and of a beauty never seen before, the poison that still afflicts the West today

West, it is the very uncontrolled release of pleasure, even in the forms most contrary to nature, that guarantees the magical result. Finally, the inner sublimation, which occurs with the ascent of the *cakra* along the *sūsumṇā* produces an inner rebirth, is very different from the obnoxious manipulation of body fluids that the alleged alchemists operate in order to give birth to the *homunculus*. Needless to say, the results of these operations appear only by way of suggestion, since even in this case there has been no transmission by a real magician. It is, therefore, only ceremonial magic, devoid of any real effect.

¹ It was precisely by the will of the popes bound up with the Medicean party that the construction of churches was no longer entrusted to the stone-cutter guilds. It was preferred instead the project of an architect who not necessarily belonged to a traditional art. In short, the guilds were neglected and branded as relics of a past that they wanted to forget. This is historically proved by the abandonment of the orientation of Renaissance churches. The guilds suffered the competition of workshops of ‘great artists’ and ‘universal geniuses’. Long before Michelangelo, Brunelleschi too had refused to join the guilds. In this way, the Renaissance style supplanted the Gothic. In 1539, with a decree, Francis I, king of France, abrogated guilds as social categories. Nevertheless, the guilds survived, thanks also to their ancient initiatic structure. But from a practical point of view they had to settle for the construction of minor works, like houses, bridges and mills; that is, on buildings considered not ‘artistic’, thus starting a secular decline.

² To be precise, the guilds did not fully coincide with the corresponding initiatic organizations, even if the latter always flourished within the former. In the case of the builders, the corporation also included hard workers, often not free men (rough masons), for whom it served as a ‘trade union’, performing administrative functions. The initiatic lodge or *hütte* was inside the guild and was reserved for free masons, keepers and transmitters of the secrets of the craft.

³ However, this aesthetic of beauty, based on such degenerate theories, fatally carried the seeds of contemporary art, the ugliest, most vulgar, blasphemous and corrupt form of expression never conceived and produced by human thought.



www.vedavyasamandala.com

Gian Giuseppe Filippi
50. The return of Hermetism

spread in all directions. And thanks to the great geographical discoveries of that time, with the explorations and conquests, it has contaminated the whole world. Italy bears serious responsibility for generating this cosmic imbalance. And yet we still glory in it!

Gian Giuseppe Filippi

