

CHAPTER ONE



ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL SOURCES OF MODERN ESOTERIC CURRENTS

I) ESOTERIC CURRENTS IN THE FIRST ELEVEN CENTURIES

A) Alexandrian Hermetism

The heterogeneous corpus called the *Hermetica* is composed of a few scattered works—lost for the most part—written in the Greek of the Alexandria region at the dawn of our era, and edited and revised over several centuries. It treats astrology, alchemy, *Naturphilosophie*, theosophy, and theurgy. One collection, compiled at a late date, stands out: the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which brings together texts drafted in the second and third centuries A.D. They are fifteen in number, to which were added the *Asclepius* and the *Fragments of Stobaeus*. Their author or legendary inspiration is Hermes Trismegistus, the “Thrice Great,” whom numerous and contradictory genealogies associate with the Egyptian god Thoth, called “Hermes” by the Greeks. He is alleged to have lived in the time of Moses. The Egyptians, one believed, owed their laws and knowledge to him. The Middle Ages did not know the *Corpus Hermeticum*, rediscovered in the Renaissance, only the *Asclepius*. Despite the speculative nature of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, we should not look for a unified doctrine there. As we move from one text to the next, we find contradictions because it is the work of many authors. The most celebrated treatise is the *Poimandres*, the theosophic discourse that opens the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which develops a cosmology and an anthropogony in a mode of illumination and revelation. Among the themes emerging from this discourse, we find that of the Fall and reintegration, and that of memory in its relations with the active imagination.

If the *Corpus Hermeticum* itself does not take up alchemy, almost everything we know about Western alchemy is found assembled in the writing

belonging to this group. It would appear to have been unknown in Pharaonic Egypt and to have developed as a prolongation of Hermetic astrology based in the notion of a sympathy linking each planet to its corresponding metal. Until the second century B.C. alchemy remained a technique associated with the praxis of goldsmithing. With Bolos of Mendes in the second century B.C. it takes a philosophic turn and presents itself more and more often as a revealed science. Zosimos of Panopolis (third century or beginning of the fourth) whose twenty-eight books have been preserved, developed visionary alchemy; he is followed in this by Synesius (fourth century), Olympiodorus (sixth century) and Stephanos of Alexandria (seventh century), all of whom consider alchemy a spiritual exercise.

B) Esotericism in Other Non-Christian Traditions

Four other non-Christian currents are important in the genesis of modern esotericism. First, the Neopythagoreanism of the first two centuries A.D. will continue to reappear as various forms of arithmosophy. Second, Stoicism, which extends over nearly two centuries and includes esoteric elements, as is apparent from its emphasis on knowledge of the concrete universe and on an organic totality guaranteeing harmony between things terrestrial and celestial. Third, Neoplatonism from Plotinus (205–270) to Damascius (480 ff.) taught methods for accessing a suprasensible reality and for constructing or describing that reality in its structure and articulations. Porphyry (273–305), Iamblichus (*The Mysteries of Egypt*, ca. 300), and Proclus (412–485) figure among the most visible Neoplatonists in later esoteric literature. Finally, the Jewish Kabbalah, a theosophy. In the fifth or sixth century a cosmosophic text of some pages is drawn up: the *Sepher Yetzirah* (*Book of Creation*), which prefigures what will become the Kabbalah properly speaking. Along with all that comes intense Arabic intellectual activity linked to the rapid expansion of Islam. The Arab *Epistles* of the Sincere Brethren (ninth century) are filled with cosmogonic esoteric speculations. From the ninth century onwards, Neoplatonic and Hermetic texts are translated into Arabic and inspire original works: *Theology of Aristotle*, ninth century; *Picatrix*, a tenth-century encyclopedia of magic, partly of Greek origin; *Assembly of Pythagoras* (*Turba Philosophorum*), a compilation of statements on alchemy; *De causis*, ca. A.D. 825 where we find the first version of the famous text called the *Emerald Tablet*.

C) Esoteric Aspects in Christian Thought of the First Eleven Centuries

Whether or not there existed a primitive Christian esotericism and whether or not it was essentially Jewish are topics still debated today. Clement of Alexandria (160–215), whose Hellenist Christianity is colored with Jewish esotericism, emphasizes in his *Stromata* (“Miscellanies”) the importance of

gnosis, i.e., a knowledge that upholds faith and transcends it. Origen (185–254) recommends a constant effort to interpret the Scriptures on several levels in order to pass from faith to gnosis. On the periphery of more or less “official” Christianity, which both represent, Gnosticism is a theosophy with varying forms having a common theme: deliverance from evil through the destruction of our universe and the election of our soul above and beyond it. Unlike Basilides and Valentinus, other gnostics of the second century like Marcion teach a dualist conception of Man and the world that is found again in the Manichean current issuing from Mani in the third century. (Evil is ontologically equal to Good.) Metaphysical pessimism marks the theosophy, albeit very rich and filled with inspiring images, of the Gnosticism that stems from Bulgarian Bogomilism in the tenth century, and, hence Catharism. In the following period three great names stand out. First, Pseudo-Dionysius who, inspired by Proclus, wrote in Greek in the sixth century (*Mystical Theology, Divine Names, Celestial Hierarchy*) and drew from the Scriptures a theosophy of mediation “imagining” a triple triad of angelic entities. Around a century later, Maximos the Confessor wrote commentaries on Pseudo-Dionysius. Finally in the ninth century, John Scottus Eriugena, an Irish monk, wrote *Periphiseon* (“Divisions of Nature”), one of the most important intellectual monuments of the Middle Ages.

II) ESOTERICISM IN MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

A) *A Theology of Esoteric Cast*

The twelfth century discovered Nature illuminated by analogy. Arabic science, which had recently become accessible to the West, favored such integration in the world. In the School of Chartres, especially Bernard Silvester (*De mundi universitate*, 1147) and William of Conches (ca. 1080–1145) there is no hiatus yet between metaphysical and cosmological principles. But that is not the only such group. The era sees also the masterwork of Alain of Lille’s (1128–1203) *De planctu naturae*, the brilliantly illustrated, mystico-theosophic texts of Hildegard of Bingen (1099–1180), notably her *Scivias*. Appearing also are Honorius Augustodunensis’s *Clavis Phisicae* and *Elucidarium* as well as many other similar creations. If this Roman period favors esotericism because of the importance of correspondences, imagination, mediations, Nature, and pathways of spiritual transformation, the Franciscan spirit in the thirteenth century reinforces this tendency through its love of Nature. The Oxford School contributed much as well: Robert Grosseteste’s theosophy of light, Roger Bacon’s alchemy and astrology, etc. By the time that the infiltration of Arabic texts into Latinity is nearly completed, around 1300, we witness in Christian theology the triumph of Latin Averroism (i.e., the Arab Averroes, 1026–1098, interpreter of Aristotle) to the detriment of the influence of Avicenna, a Persian (980–1037). In the West, Averroism supplants

Avicennism, thereby ushering into theology, a near total eclipse of the *mundus imaginalis* and its intermediaries, sacrificing as well the active imagination to a rationalism that in the end will become the distinct property of the Western spirit. On the other hand, the Christian and Islamic twelfth century will develop increasingly a theology of “second causes” (especially cosmology), which will problematize the articulation between metaphysical principles and cosmology. This disappearance and this problematization will favor the emergence of esotericism as it is usually understood.

B) *Summae and Universal Syntheses.*

Numerous *summae* are compendia of prodigies or primarily records of the powers at work in the four realms. They foreshadow the *Philosophia occulta* of the Renaissance. This is the case for example of Vincent de Beauvais' *Speculum naturale* (1245) or Bartholomew of England's *De proprietatibus rerum* (ca. 1230). But there are also “*summae*” which are systems of thought, grand philosophical syntheses. (Not all are under the sway of esotericism, that of St. Thomas is far from it!) The Calabrian abbot Joachim da Fiore (ca. 1135–1202), who distinguishes three great periods of Universal History (the reign of the Father, that of the Son, and—still to come—that of the Holy Spirit) was to have a considerable vogue in modern times, but less because of theosophical speculations about the “Third Age” or the future spiritual guides of humanity, than because of its usefulness to philosophers of history. Let us cite also the *Ars Magna* of Raymond Lull (1235–1316), a combining “art” with universal pretensions, marked by medieval Neoplatonism as transmitted by John Scottus Eriugena, i.e., a dynamic Platonism, close to the Jewish Kabbalah then flourishing in Spain. At the very end of the Middle Ages, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), who perhaps cannot be labeled an esotericist, foretold Renaissance Hermetism by his idea of the fundamental unity of religions (*De pace fidei*, 1453), and proposed a world system, a theory of “opposites” wherein the infinitely large coincides with the infinitely small—a “total” science encompassing astrology as well.

C) *Hermetism, Astrology, and Alchemy*

Numerous works on magic have an esoteric character like the *Picatrix* (of Arabic origin, as we have seen, known now through Latin translations and adaptations) or those coming under *ars notoria*, art of calling angels. The *Corpus Hermeticum* was lost until the Renaissance, but the *Asclepius* in Latin was available, and other hermetist texts circulated. (*Liber XXI philosophorum*, one of the best known, dates from the twelfth century.) The names of Roger of Hereford and John of Spain stand out in twelfth-century astrology, but this science is not essential in a world still traversed by the Divine. Dante places

two famous astrologers of the thirteenth century in hell: Michael Scotus and Guido Bonatti. At the beginning of the fourteenth century Lull makes a large place for astrology in his *Ars Magna*, as does Pietro of Abano in his *Conciliator*. Cecco d'Ascoli (1269–1327), another astrologer with flair, died at the stake in Florence. As for alchemy, it is hardly known in Europe before the twelfth century. Islam introduced it through Spain. Circulating at the end of the thirteenth century are two Latin alchemical texts that proved influential: *Turba Philosophorum* (cf. *supra* for its Arabic origin), which gave dialogues of bygone alchemists; the *Summa*, a compilation of writings attributed to Geber, an Arab. *Aurora consurgens* is attributed by legend to St. Thomas Aquinas. Let us mention also works attributed to the Catalan Arnald of Villanova (ca. 1235–1311), notably the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, and, starting with the fourteenth century (when alchemical literature can be truly said to soar, staying plentiful up to the end of the eighteenth century), authors like John Dastin, Petrus Bonus (*Pretiosa margarita novella*, ca. 1330), Nicholas Flamel (1330–1417), with whom lovely legends are connected, which still cause much ink to flow, George Ripley (*The Compound of Alchemy*, 1470, and *Medulla alchimiae*, 1476), and Bernard of Treves (1406–1490). Just as in the late Hellenist period, medieval alchemy tended to be deployed on two planes, operative and spiritual.

III. INITIATORY QUESTS AND ESOTERIC ARTS

A) *The Jewish Kabbalah*

Clearly the Kabbalah represents the essential of Jewish esotericism. Its influence in Latinity is considerable, especially from the Renaissance onwards. Following the *Sepher Yetsirah* (cf. *supra*), a compilation of Kabbalistic materials carried out in Provence in the twelfth century makes up the first exposé of the Kabbalah properly so-called. This is the *Bahir*, which orients the Kabbalah in the double direction of a gnosis of Eastern origin and a Neoplatonism. Numbers and letters of the Old Testament are the object of a hermeneutics effecting a knowledge of relationships between God and the world, thanks to a knowledge of intermediary chains and according to an interpretive method seeing in each word and letter of the Torah a meaning with multiple ramifications. The Kabbalah was next enriched by what has remained its most important book, the *Sepher ha Zohar* or *Book of Splendor*, appearing in Spain after 1275. An agreeable compilation due probably to Moses de León, it represents the summit of the Jewish Kabbalah, i.e., a speculative mysticism applied to the knowledge and description of the Divinity's mysterious works. The Zohar considerably prolonged the Talmudic dimension relative to the tasks or rites for developing a mythology of Nature, a cosmic valorization from which Renaissance thought profited. Finally the great mystic Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291), born in Saragossa, taught a medita-

tion technique of interest to esotericism in its initiatory and symbolic aspect but calling on physical techniques also.

B) Chivalry and Initiatory Societies

The art of church building was transmitted to the workshops from which modern Freemasonry is derived. Masons' obligations constitute the "Old Charges" wherein the texts which have come down to us go back to the end of the fourteenth century. (These are the *Regius*, ca. 1390, and the *Cooke*, ca. 1410, which discuss geometry as a script of God that arose simultaneous with the origin of the world.) Chivalry is also initiatory in some of its aspects. (The Templar sites of Tomar, Portugal, for example, bear traces of certain forms of esotericism within that knightly order.) But let us take care not to confuse history and literature! The destruction of the Order of the Temple in 1312 has given rise to a Templar myth that barely corresponds to the facts. Likewise the Albigensian Crusade undertaken in 1207 has given rise to legends concerning their alleged "esotericism." When there was esotericism, it was generally less in those orders or movements properly speaking than in much later discourses they inspired, especially since the beginning of modern times. Thus the symbols of the Order of the Golden Fleece, founded by Philip the Good in 1429, served to launch once more the myth of Jason into the Western imaginary, notably in alchemical literature and esoteric Freemasonry. We find a more obvious esotericism in Amaury de Bène's "Frères du Libre Esprit" ("Brothers of the Free Spirit," 1206) or, even more, in the *Gottesfreunde* ("Friends of God"), gathered around laic Rulman Merswin (1307–1382) in their Alsatian cloister called *Ile Verte* ("Green Island").

C) Esotericism in the Arts

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, churches and cathedrals made use of a visionary theology filled with theophanies and metamorphoses. Their repertoire of symbols was founded on a subtle knowledge of the relationships uniting God, humanity, and the universe. But we should not attribute to their architects and builders more esoteric intentions than they had, despite some possible references to alchemy (e.g., the bas-reliefs on the central portal of Notre Dame in Paris) or astrology (Sun and Moon Tower of Chartres Cathedral, zodiac signs on the cathedral of Antwerp, etc.). It is once again alchemy that in the fourteenth century appeared in beautiful illuminated manuscripts e.g., Constantinus or at the beginning of the fifteenth century, *Aurora consurgens*, the *Book of the Holy Trinity*, while in architecture the palace of Jacques Coeur (1395–1456) at Bourges has been interpreted by some alchemists as a "philosophical dwelling." Astrology is present in art in the very widespread form of engravings showing the "children of the planets." Playing

cards, appearing around 1375, began from the early fifteenth century to be symbolic repositories for the gods and the planets.

Initiation, secrecy, love, and illuminated knowledge blend together in a chivalric imaginary wherein an immense literature surrounds the legendary King Arthur. This is the *Matière de Bretagne* ("Brittany material") with heroes like Arthur, Perceval, Lancelot, and the Fisher King. Initiatory scenarios and symbols characterize even more the specifically Grail literature. This appears around 1180 when the books of Chrétien de Troyes and Robert de Boron associate Western traditions of chivalric and Celtic type (notably the Druidic traditions, cf. the *Vita Merlini* in the twelfth century) with an esotericism linked to Christianity, especially to the powers of the blood of Christ, collected by Joseph of Arimathea. Then, between 1200 and 1210, Wolfram von Eschenbach devoted his *Parzival* to the Grail and chivalry, in which some alchemical and hermetist elements might be identified. Without always being alchemical, though always at least initiatory, the quest of the Grail, recalled in *Der Junge Titurel* by Albrecht von Schwarzenberg, a long epic written a little after 1260, contains a striking evocation of the *Imago Templi*, the Temple of Solomon, and the Heavenly Jerusalem. The science of Hermes is also present in *Le Roman de la Rose* begun by Guillaume de Lorris and continued by Jean de Meung. (This editing was carried out from 1230 to 1285.) We see there a rich symbolic universe that miniatures and illuminated pages would soon embellish further.