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A SHORT HISTORY OF ROSICRUCIANISM

1. HERMES TRISMEGISTUS

You should all know, as experienced Fratres of the Society, that "the aim of the Society is to afford mutual aid and encouragement in working out the great problems of Life, and in discovering the Secrets of Nature: to facilitate the study of the system of Philosophy founded upon the Kabalah and the doctrines of Hermes Trismegistus." What are those doctrines, and why are they of interest to us today?

It has been said by Alexander Pope that "the proper study of mankind is man", and the same idea has been expressed by philosophers down the past twenty centuries. The study of man calls in turn for an examination of his beliefs and ideas, even when these have been modified or even largely discarded, as in the case of alchemy. Sympathetic studies of alchemy, and of its devoted followers, the alchemists, may well be able to point a moral for this modern age, which so often overlooks or affects to despise its origins; this age, in which science has outstripped man's abilities to cope with the conditions he has created; in which thought is increasingly dominated by science to the exclusion of faith, and in which higher thought

on a moral and spiritual plane is called for in order to bring about a more rational plan of living and a greater reverence for life and its underlying mysteries.

It is my purpose, then, as part of a general study of Rosicrucianism, its history and its meaning, to invite you to consider first the debt which we owe to our predecessors, the alchemists, and to the grandiose system of philosophy known as alchemy which they built up over many centuries of human endeavour.

No definite origin can be ascribed to alchemy. The alchemists often called themselves the "sons of Hermes" and ascribed the origin of alchemy, which they called the "Hermetic art", to Hermes Trismegistus - Hermes the Thrice - Great. Who he was, and even whether he ever existed, cannot be said with any certainty, for the alchemists themselves, in their enthusiasm, have produced so many legends that it is difficult to separate the precious metal from the dross and to sift the grain of truth from a bushel of falsehood. Some legends identify him with the Egyptian god THOTH the god of wisdom and the intellect, and in the later hieroglyphics \equiv Thoth is called "the thrice very great". Thoth was the scribe of the gods and was described as the inventor of letters and numbers. Other legends describe Hermes Trismegistus as being an Egyptian priest who lived about 2000 B.C. or at about the time

of Moses, and who served in the temple of the first Hermes or Thoth, who had engraved sacred characters upon tablets of stone, which had lain hidden in the earth for many centuries. The second Hermes translated the sacred characters, and wrote the explanation in books, which were deposited in the Egyptian temples. He thus established a Divine authority, obtained a high degree of respect among the people, and he was long revered as the founder or restorer of learning.

From the stone tablets of the first Hermes he is said to have written as commentaries and explanations, an incredible number of books. These, according to Clemens Alexandrinus, our sole ancient authority, amounted in number to forty two. They are said to have dealt with astronomy, cosmography, geography, philosophy and religion and particularly medicine and alchemy. The Egyptian name for Egypt was Khen, and it is said that the last named art was transmitted to the Arab world as "al Khen" and thence to the Western world as alchemy. It is from the same word that we derive the modern word "chemistry".

Before I proceed further with my story, I must give you a word of warning with regard to the acceptance of these old legends, widespread and oft-repeated though they have been for centuries. If Alchemy is to be understood as an actual or suppositious science of metallic transmutation by any means whatsoever (including Magic) then it is very certain that none

of the Books of Hermes or any of the other Hermetic writings attributed to ancient Egypt, dealt with Alchemy in that sense.

However, the alchemists have always claimed Hermes Trismegistus as their tutelary deity, and if Hermes did not write about metallic transmutation some enthusiastic student and disciple of a later age was willing to write upon the subject and to give his work a synthetic value and dignity by describing it as a translation of a recently discovered manuscript of the Master.

The French writer Berthelot (Collection des Anciens Alchimistes Grecs) says in the introduction to his great work "Despite the universal tradition which assigns to Alchemy an Egyptian origin, no hieroglyphic document relative to the science of transmutation has yet been discovered. The Graeco-Egyptian alchemists are our sole source of illumination upon the science of Hermes, and that source is open to suspicion because it was subject to the tampering of mystical imaginations during several generations of dreamers and schollasts".

The greater part of the Hermetic writings, known as the Corpus Hermeticum, as they have come down to us from mutilated manuscripts, (none of them earlier than the eleventh century) have no resemblance to the system of religion and philosophy taught in ancient Egypt. The general theme and teaching seem

to resemble those of the movement known as Gnosticism which first came into prominence in the second century A.D.

If you wish to study the Hermetic writings in detail let me refer you to Mr. G. R. S. Mead's "Thrice - Greatest Hermes: Studies in Hellenistic Theosophy and Gnosis" (3 vols, 1906). For the purpose of the present paper we must content ourselves with a brief summary of the Hermetic doctrines.

According to the preaching of Hermes to Tat, under the designation of "The Cup, or Mund", the World was made with Reason, not with hands, and consists of the four elements - Fire, Water, Earth and Air. The World-Maker is God, the Cause of all, Who is the Eternal Good;

"not Mind, but Cause that the Mind is";

"not Spirit, but Cause that Spirit is";

"not Light, but Cause that the Light is."

Himself unmaximist and beyond all name; the Glory of all things, all-pure and Father of the soul in man.

The most important intimations are, however, on man himself, his origin and destination at the highest. He is divine in that part of him which is Soul, Sense, Spirit and Reason, whence he can ascend into Heaven.

"But in his cosmic part he stayeth mortal on the earth. Thus human kind is made in one part deathless, and in the other subject to death while in the body."

The Perfect Sermon
iii, 1.

Corpus Hermeticum
vi, 14

Ib. v, 1.; iii, 1.

Ib. xviii, 12.

The Perfect Sermon
x, 10.



That which is deathless, that which is man essential,
is "the form of the Divine Similitude".

It is said also that the soul in its rational part is
"set above the lordship of the daimons" and is designed
to be a "receptacle of God". Moreover, man in virtue
of Mind, which is "of God's very essence" is not only
recipient of God, but also is "co-essential with Him".

The Soul's divinity is contingent, however, on that which is
understood as piety; but the sense attached to this term
removes it far from the familiar conventional meaning.

It is the kind of piety on which the mind ascends to the
Revelation of God and the True Light, for the virtue of the
soul is Revelation, and it is possible therein and thereby
to be made like unto God, while the soul is still in the
body - that is to say by knowledge in goodness and the
contemplation of the Beauty of the Good, the Vision of which
is instinct with all immortal life. The desirable lot is to
"fall asleep out of the body" into this "fairest Spectacle".

But the Revelation of the Good, and the Vision which it
connotes are attained in "holy silence" and when all the senses
are at rest. He who perceives it, perceives, sees and hears
nothing else. It is said then of the Vision that "it shines
through his whole soul and draws it out of the body,
transferring all of him to essence". The Revelation of God is

The Perfect Sermon
vii, 2.

Corpus Hermeticum
xii, 1 and 19.

the only salvation for man, for by God, and not otherwise, does the soul become good of necessity, and is most blessed when it is most filled with Him.

There are three comments I must make upon these doctrines : -

1. The essential part of all these conceptions was the Revelation or Illumination from which came perfect Understanding and Knowledge of God. That was also the essential teaching of Gnosticism which was in existence and fully developed before the rise of Christianity and which formed so much of the religious atmosphere in which early Christianity developed. Christian Gnosticism actually introduced only one new figure into the already existing Gnostic theories namely that of the historical Saviour, Jesus Christ. Gnosticism flourished as a religion of mysticism from about a hundred years before the birth of Christ until about two hundred years after His death. From the fact that the Hermetic books as a whole put forward what were in fact the teachings of Gnosticism but without a single reference to Jesus Christ it seems a fair assumption that they were largely written a little before or a little after the birth of Christ.

2. There is nothing in any of the Hermetic writings which puts forward the religion of ancient Egypt, with its great

pantheon of gods and goddesses and its worship of Amun-Ra, the Sun God, and Aten, the Sun's Disc. It is incredible that these Hermetic doctrines could have been propounded by an Egyptian priest of 2000 B.C., steeped in the elaborate tradition of the temple ritual with its ceremonial preparation of the dead body by mummification and its study of the "Book of the Dead" as a guide book to the soul for use in the next world.

3. There is nothing in any of these Hermetic writings of that period which appear to relate to alchemy in the sense of transmutation of metals. The only transmutation which appears to have been considered and discussed is a transmutation of the soul.

The conclusions which I write you to draw from these three comments are that the Hermetic writings, so far as their fragments are still available for study, were not the work of the Egyptian god Thoth, the first Hermes, one of the early kings of Egypt or of an Egyptian priest of the time of Moses; that they were written not earlier than the first century B.C. and possibly rather later; that they do not set forth the religious philosophical and scientific teaching of ancient Egypt but, in fact, represent the teaching of Greek philosophers living in Alexandria shortly before and after the birth of Christ.

century. Let us concentrate our attention instead upon the precepts themselves and endeavour to construe their meaning, for they have been regarded as being of almost and indeed supreme authority among alchemists from the time that they first became known, in the thirteenth century. They were first printed at Nuremberg in 1541 with the works of Geber, the Arabian Alchemist, in Latin with a commentary under the name of Hortulanus believed to have been written in the 13th or 14th century. It was originally published in Latin, and if ever there was a Phoenician, Egyptian or Greek text no trace has ever been found.

I will read the text first and will then endeavour to assist you in discovering the meaning.

THE EMERALD TABLE OF HERMES

The following is cited as the inscription of the "Smaregdine Table", and is to be found in very early MSS. in various languages : -

Firstly. -

I speak not fictitious things but that which is certain and most true.

Secondly. -

What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is below; to accomplish the miracle of one thing.

Thirdly. -

And as all things were produced by the one word of one Being, so all things were produced from this one thing by adaptation.

Forthly. -

Its father is the sun, its mother the moon, the wind carries it in its belly, its nurse is the earth.

Fifthly. -

It is the father of all perfection throughout the world.

Sixthly. -

The power is vigorous if it be changed into earth.

Seventhly. -

Separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross, acting prudently and with judgment.

Eighthly. -

Ascend with the greatest sagacity from the earth to heaven, and then again descend to the earth and unite together the powers of things superior and things inferior. Thus you will obtain the glory of the whole world, and darkness will fly away from you.

Ninthly. -

This has more fortitude than fortitude itself, because it conquers every subtle thing, and can penetrate every solid.

Tenthly. -

Thus was the world formed.

Eleventhly. -

Hence proceed wonders which are here established.

Twelfthly. -

Therefore I am called Hermes Trismegistus, having three parts of the philosophy of the whole world.

Thirteenthly. -

That which I had to say concerning the operation of the sun is completed.

If this is your first experience of alchemical writings you may feel inclined to dismiss this as a meaningless jargon or an empty farrago of words, carrying no message or interest for the ordinary reader. These views are not unreasonable, yet in spite of the obvious difficulty of interpretation of the inscription of the Emerald Table learned men, and men of extraordinary capacity have during the past six hundred years laboured long and lovingly to prove its authenticity, to interpret it, and to show that it is, in fact, a marvellous revelation full of sublime secrets of considerable importance to mankind.

"Alchemy is often defined as the pretended art of transmuting base metals into silver and gold, but there is no doubt that it was, in reality a grandiose system of philosophy, embodying a field of human beliefs and ideas vast in range and extending in time over a period of more than a thousand years. In the mid-nineteenth century, when scientific chemistry was still young, Liebig pointed out the injustice of confounding alchemy with gold-making. "Alchemy was a science", he wrote, "and included all those processes in which chemistry was technically applied. Among the alchemists there was always to be found a nucleus of genuine philosophers, who often deceived themselves in their

theoretical views, whereas the gold-makers, properly so-called, knowingly deceived both themselves and others." (J. van Liebig, Familiar Letters in Chemistry, p.91, 4th edition: London 1859)

Even Liebig, however, took a restricted view of alchemy: for the complex ramifications of this great corpus of human imagination and experience drew ideas richly from philosophy and religion and spread out into astrology, occultism, magic, mythology, and other strange fields. From the point of view of the true adepts, the spectacular attempts to raise the base metals to the perfection of gold, by transmutation, were merely of interest in so far as they might afford material evidence of the truth of a philosophical system which was concerned alike with the formation of inanimate substances and the still more formidable mysteries of life. The arbitrary and uninformed operations of mercenary gold-makers were nothing more than a debasement of the real alchemy". (John Read, The Alchemist in Life Literature and Art, page 1, Nelson, London, 1947.)

The alchemists prided themselves upon that "noble practise" which led them to "vaile their secrets in mistic speache". Their extensive use of every conceivable form of cryptic and mystical expression gave rise to a veritable library of literature, every page of which is calculated to discourage and dismay even the most ardent explorer.

One thing which nearly all the alchemical writings have in common is their constant concern with the "Magnum Opus" or "Great Work". After long study the student will find that he can divide the alchemists into three classes. First there were the gold-makers, who were alchemists in the sense in which the word is understood generally at the present day, viz., those who were only concerned with certain physical experiments in elementary chemistry and metallurgy, - those who sought to transmute base metal into gold or to discover the Philosopher's Stone. Secondly, there were the mystical philosophers, who were not in any way interested in chemistry, but who concerned themselves solely with explorations into the spiritual nature of man and the refining of the precious metal of the soul from the dross of human passions by the fires of experience. It is difficult to assign a specific reason why they should have chosen to conceal their writings under the veil of elementary chemistry. On the other hand, speculative Freemasons receive their teachings of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by the symbols of operative masonry, and see nothing peculiar or unreasonable in doing so. Thirdly, there were those who were interested in both the physical and the metaphysical

aspects of the "Great Work" and who believed that they were inextricably interwoven, that purity of heart and deep religious faith were greater qualifications than deep scientific knowledge and that much of an alchemist's time should be spent on his knees in prayer as well as bending over his furnace and his retorts, and who combined both Faith and Works.

Nevertheless, to which ever of these three classes the alchemists might belong, they seem to have at least one thing in common, that their writings seem to be without any real meaning for the general world, and convey the impression that they are talking about one thing in the terms of another.

Let us now consider the precepts of the "Emerald Table" and endeavour to ascertain just precisely what are the doctrines of Hermes Trismegistus which are contained in or concealed beneath those precepts. As I have said before, they have been of the highest, indeed of supreme authority among alchemists from the time when they first became known among them, somewhere in the thirteenth century. The alchemists who concerned themselves with the transmutation of metals regarded the precepts as giving instructions for the "Great Work" and the discovery of the Philosopher's

Stone. To them the second and third precepts embodied the alchemical doctrine of the unity of all things, sometimes called the doctrine of correspondences. The fourth precept signifies both the primitive materials of the "Great Work" and the Aristotelian elements of Earth, Air, Water and Fire. The fifth precept refers to the Philosopher's Stone itself; the alchemists considered that ordinary perfection was attained in gold, and the quintessence of perfection in the Philosopher's Stone. The remaining eight give further information required by the practical alchemist if he could but interpret them correctly. But the transmutation of metals is no concern of ours, and I must leave those who are interested in that subject to study the "Emerald Table" from that point of view. As Rosicrucians, we are mystical philosophers, concerning ourselves with spiritual values and principles and the knowledge of the purposes of God. Let me therefore offer to you some suggestions for the interpretation of the "Emerald Table" in this sense.

Precept No. 1.

I speak not fictitious things, but that which is certain and most true.
(Alternative reading: "It is true, it is certain without error, it is of all truth.")

In physics and in chemistry what we believe to be true must

be confirmed by experiment and by experience. In philosophy, belief must be purged of any alloy of error before it can become certainty. In the domain of religion and the infinite, faith must be supported and illuminated by the revelation of that Light which is from above. Such are the first necessities of true science in every sphere to the true adept.

On the pediment of an ancient temple consecrated to the God of Light was an inscription of two words: "Know thyself", and the same counsel must be given to every man who studies philosophy in its more mystical aspects. The man who is enslaved by his passions or by worldly pre-occupations or prejudices can never be truly initiated. He must begin by reforming himself before he can clear his vision to see the Light and the Truth. He must slough off his hard, tough worldly skin before he can be sufficiently sensitive to feel the warm glow which comes to him from the radiant East and which alone can in due course make him a true adept. This word signifies a person who has achieved by will and by work. The man who loves his own opinions and prejudices, and fears to part with them; who suspects new truths; who is not prepared to doubt everything rather than admit anything on chance, will avoid much disappointment and wasted effort if he makes at the very beginning the clear choice either to abandon the study of mystical philosophy or to be re-made. This is what Jesus

the Great Adept, meant when He said to Nicodemus,
"Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the Flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee. Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master in Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily I say unto thee, We speak that we do know and testify that we have seen". And those words of Jesus Christ are practically identical with the first precept of Hermes Trismegistus,

Precept No. 1

What is below is like that which is above;
and what is above is like that which is
below: to accomplish the miracle of one
thing.

This is the doctrine of analogies, that whatsoever is in the great Universe, the Macrocosm, is reproduced in the small world of man's body and life, known as the Microcosm.

" So God created man in his own image, in the
image of God created him them " (Genesis I,27.)

The doctrine of analogies is one of the most important of all the doctrines of the alchemists. The Magus raises one hand towards heaven and points down with the other to earth, saying "Above, immensity: Below, immensity; still! Immensity equals immensity." This is true in things seen as well as in things unseen. In other words, the form is proportional to the idea; the scabbard is as deep as the sword is long; the shadow is the measure of the body, calculated in its relation to the luminous ray.

Precept No. 5

And as all things were produced by the one word of one Being, so all things were produced from this one thing by adaptation.

This is one of the simplest of all the precepts to understand, and requires but little explanation. The reference is, of course, to the first chapter of the book of Genesis -

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"

"And God said, Let there be light and there was light" - FIAT LUX, the first great command and the very basis of our Universe.

This precept embodies the doctrine of the theoretical/unity of all things. The alchemists believed that there is one principle. There is one truth, there is one reason, there is one absolute and universal philosophy. Whatsoever is subsists in unity, considered as the beginning and returns into unity, considered as the end. One is in one; that is to say, all is in all. As St. Paul said "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear". (Hebrews 11, verse 3).

Precepts Nos. 4, 5 & 6.

Its father is the sun, its mother the moon, the wind carries it in its belly, its nurse is the earth. It is the father of all perfection throughout the world. The power is vigorous if it be changed into earth.

The initiates of the philosophical school of Alexandria taught that the sun was one of the four emanations of the life-principle. They called the sun "the eye of the world" and said that it was the mirror of the reflection of God, and that the soul of the earth is a permanent glance of the sun which the earth conceives and guards by impregnation. The moon concurs in this impregnation of the earth by reflecting a solar image during the night, so that Hermes is quite right when he says "its father is the sun, its mother the moon". Then he adds: "The wind has borne it in the belly thereof." because the atmosphere is the recipient and, as it were, the crucible of the solar rays, by means of which there forms that living image of the sun which penetrates the whole earth, fructifies it and determines all that is produced on its surface by its emanations and permanent currents, analogous to those of the sun itself.

This solar agent subsists by two contrary forces - one of attraction and one of projection, whence Hermes says,

in Precept No. 8, that it ascends and descends eternally.

Time and space will not permit of my enlarging upon each of these precepts, some of which would call for a volume of explanation to themselves.

Let me therefore pass on to Precept No. 7.

Separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross, acting prudently and with judgment.

To separate the subtle from the gross is to liberate the soul from all prejudice and all vice, which is accomplished by the use of Philosophical Salt, that is to say, wisdom: of Mercury, that is, personal skill and application: finally of Sulphur, representing vital energy and fire of will. By these we are enabled to change into spiritual gold things which are of all least precious and most earthly and material.

We must separate our certitudes from our beliefs and distinguish sharply between science and faith, realizing that we do not know things which we believe and we cease immediately to believe anything which we come actually to know. The essence of the things of faith is the unknown and the indefinite, while it is quite the reverse with the things of science. It must be inferred from this that science rests on reason and

experience, whilst the basis of faith is sentiment and reason. Faith is nothing else but reasonable confidence in the utility of reason. To believe is to place confidence in that which as yet we do not know, when reason assures us beforehand of ultimately knowing or at least recognising it. This was summed up by St. Paul in his famous phrase: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen". (11 Hebrews 1.)

Precept No. 8. Ascend with the greatest sagacity from the earth to heaven, and then again descend to the earth and unite together the powers of things superior and things inferior. Thus you will obtain the glory of the whole world and obscurity will fly away from you.

Let me quote first the words which Jesus Christ used to Nicodemus "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up" (3 John, verses 13-14).

St. Paul said "Now that **he** ascended, what is it but that **he** also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above *all heavens, that he might fill all things*" (4 *Ephesians 8-10*)

We are reminded too of the story of Jacob and his dream

of the ladder which reached from earth to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending on it (28 Gen.12). The story is explained nowhere in the Bible, but surely it illustrates this precept of Hermes that all progress of mankind towards the Light consists of a continual striving towards heaven and a subsequent descent to earth that we may bring down to each earthly existence a greater amount of the divine power and knowledge.

Furthermore, the universe is balanced by two forces which maintain it in equilibrium, being the force which attracts and that which repels. They exist alike in physics, in philosophy and in religion. In physics they produce equilibrium, in philosophy, criticism, in religion, progressive revelation. It is illustrated symbolically by the caduceus of Hermes or Mercury, which has two snakes entwined spirally about it in opposite directions.

Now let me sum up the doctrines of Hermes Trismegistus as set forth in the precepts of the Emerald Table.

To the scientific alchemist who is concerned with physics and chemistry, the precepts could be interpreted as embodying the immense physical secret which has already produced the destructive power of the atomic bomb and which, we hope, will in due time produce the constructive energy to serve the world of the future. The third precept could refer to the atomic theory, the seventh to the production of plutonium from uranium and the eighth to the principles of electricity and magnetism embodied in the cyclotron by which are isolated those ions which, as the ninth precept says, have "more strength than strength itself they conquer every subtle thing and penetrate every solid".

To us, as mystical philosophers, the precepts relate to the alchemical work in man, the purification of the soul and the search for unity with God. They teach us that man is himself a little world which is the epitome of the universe, that man is the true laboratory of the Hermetic Art, his life is the subject, the grand distillery, the thing distilling and the thing distilled, and self-knowledge is at the root of all alchemical initiation and the true key to all alchemical discovery.

I hope that a study of the precepts of the Emerald Table will give to each of you an appreciation of the debt which alchemists owe to their Great Master - Hermes Trismegistus.

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