

# Hermes<sup>1</sup>

by

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THE Hermetic tradition is, strictly speaking, concerned with knowledge which is not metaphysical but only cosmological, in the double sense of "macrocosmic" and "microcosmic." This statement must not be taken in any sense as a depreciation of the traditional sciences which come under the heading of Hermetism, or of those which correspond to them in other doctrinal forms of East and West; but if everything is to be put in its rightful place, then it must be admitted that these sciences, like all specialized knowledge, are merely secondary and derivative with regard to the principles. In fact they are no more than a particular application of the principles at a lower level of reality. To maintain the contrary would mean giving precedence to "Royal Art"<sup>2</sup> over "Sacerdotal Art."

It cannot be contested that it is from Hermes that Hermetism takes its name. The Greek Hermes has in fact characteristics which correspond exactly to the sciences in question and which are strikingly expressed, for example, by his chief attribute, the Caduceus. No doubt there will be another opportunity for us to examine its symbolism more fully; suffice it to say for the moment that this symbolism is essentially and directly related to what might be called "human alchemy"<sup>3</sup> and is concerned with the possibilities of the subtle state, even if these are to be taken merely as the preparatory means to a higher realization, as are, in Hinduism, the equivalent *Hatha-Yoga* practices. This can moreover be transferred to the cosmic order, since everything in man has its correspondence in the outer world, and *vice-versa*<sup>4</sup>; here again, and by reason of this very correspondence, the domain in question is the "intermediary world" where are brought into play forces whose dual nature is very clearly figured by the two serpents of the Caduceus. It may be remembered also, in this connection, that Hermes is represented as the messenger of the Gods and as their interpreter (*hermeneutes*), that is, precisely, an intermediary between the celestial and terrestrial worlds, and that he has in addition the function of "guide of the souls of the dead" which, in a lower order, is clearly related also to the domain of the subtle possibilities.<sup>5</sup>

It might be objected that in so far as concerns Hermetism, Hermes takes the place of the Egyptian Thoth with whom he has been identified, and that Thoth represents Wisdom, which is related to the priesthood as guardian and transmitter of the tradition; that is true, but since this identification cannot have been made without some reason, it must be admitted that it concerns more especially a certain aspect of Thoth which corresponds to a certain part of the tradition, the part that comprises those branches of knowledge which are related to the "intermediary world"; and the remains that the ancient Egyptian civilization has left behind do in fact show that the sciences of this order were much more developed there and had taken on an importance far more considerable than anywhere else. There is moreover another comparison, we might even say another equivalence,

which shows clearly that this objection would have no real bearing: in India the planet Mercury (or Hermes) is called *Budha*, a name of which the root letters mean Wisdom; here again, it is enough to specify the domain in which this Wisdom (in its essence the inspiring principle of all knowledge) is to find its more particular application when it is related to this specialized function.<sup>6</sup>

Strange though it may seem, the name *Budha* is in fact identical with that of the Scandinavian Odin, *Woden* or *Wotan*;<sup>7</sup> there was thus nothing arbitrary in the Roman assimilation of Odin to Mercury, and in some Germanic languages the day of Mercury (in French *mercredi*) is still called the day of Odin, which is precisely what the word Wednesday means.

Still more remarkable, perhaps, is the fact that this same name is to be found exactly in the *Votan* of the ancient traditions of central America who has moreover the attributes of Hermes, for he is Quetzal cohuatl, the "bird-serpent," and the union of these two symbolic animals (corresponding respectively to the two elements air and fire) is also figured by the wings and the serpents of the Caduceus.<sup>8</sup> One must indeed be blind not to see, in such facts, a sign of the fundamental unity of all traditional doctrines.

Another equally interesting point is that in the Islamic tradition the Prophet Idris is identified both with Hermes and with Enoch; this double assimilation seems to indicate a continuity of tradition going back beyond the Egyptian priesthood which, as far as Enoch is concerned, could only have been heir to the heritage of what he represents, for he himself clearly belongs to an earlier age.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the sciences attributed to Idris and placed under his special influence are not the purely spiritual sciences, which belong to Christ, but alchemy and astrology and other "intermediary" sciences; these are, in fact, the sciences which can, strictly speaking, be called "Hermetic." But this brings us to another consideration, which might seem, at any rate at first glance, to be a rather strange reversal of the usual correspondences: as we shall see in a forthcoming article,<sup>10</sup> for each of the planetary spheres there is a major Prophet who presides over it and is its "Pole" (*Qutb*); now it is not Idris who presides over the Heaven of Mercury, but Christ, whereas Idris presides over the Heaven of the Sun; and, naturally, this involves the same transposition in the astrological correspondences of the sciences which are attributed respectively to these two "Poles." This raises a very complex question, the full treatment of which would be quite beyond the scope of the present article; we may have occasion to come back to it, but for the moment the following few remarks will perhaps afford a glimpse of the solution and will in any case show that far from being a mere confusion, the reversal which might seem erratic in the eyes of a superficial and "outward" observer has in fact a deep-rooted cause.

Firstly, it is not a single isolated case in traditional doctrine for it has something like a counterpart in Hebrew angelology: generally speaking Michael, is the angel of the Sun and Raphael is the angel of Mercury, but sometimes the relationship is reversed. On the other hand, if Michael, as the representative of the solar Metatron, is assimilated esoterically to Christ,<sup>11</sup> Raphael, according to the meaning of his name, is the "divine healer," and Christ appears also as "spiritual healer" and as "repairer"; one could find also other connections between Christ and the principle represented by Mercury among the planetary spheres.<sup>12</sup> It is true that, for the Greeks, medicine was attributed to Apollo, that is, to the Solar principle, and to his son Asklepîos (in Latin Aesculapius); but in the

"Hermetic boobs" Asklop̄ios becomes the son of Hermes, and it is also to be noted that the staff which is his attribute is closely related, symbolically, to the Caduceus.<sup>13</sup> The example of medicine shows us how one and the same science can have aspects which relate to different orders, and which therefore have different correspondences, even if the outward effects obtained seem to be alike, for there is purely spiritual or "theurgic" medicine, and there is also Hermetic or "spagyric" medicine; this is directly related to the question we are considering; and perhaps it will lead to a subsequent article explaining why medicine, from the traditional point of view, was considered essentially as a sacerdotal science.

On the other hand, there is nearly always a close connection made between Enoch (Idris) and Elijah (Ilyâs), both of whom were taken up to Heaven without passing through bodily death,<sup>14</sup> and the Islamic tradition places both in the sphere of the Sun. Similarly, according to the Rosicrucian tradition, *Elias Artista*, who presides over the Hermetic "Great Work"<sup>15</sup> has his dwelling place in the "Solar Citadel" which is moreover the abode of the "Immortals" (in the sense of the Chirajivîs of Hinduism, that is, beings "endowed with longevity," whose life lasts throughout the whole cycle<sup>16</sup>) and which represents one of the aspects of the "Centre of the World." All this is certainly worth reflecting on, and if one adds also the traditions, from almost all parts of the world, which liken symbolically the Sun itself to the fruit of "the Tree of Life",<sup>17</sup> one will perhaps understand the special relationship between the Solar influence and Hermetism, inasmuch as the essential aim and end of Hermetism, as of the "Lesser Mysteries" of antiquity, is the restoration of the human "primordial state": is it not the "Solar Citadel" which, according to the Rosicrucian doctrine, is to "descend from Heaven to earth at the end of the cycle, in the form of the Heavenly Jerusalem," realizing the "squaring of the circle" according to the perfect measure of the "golden reed"?

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Voile d'Isis*, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> With regard to the expression "Royal Art," which Freemasonry still uses, we may note here the curious resemblance between the names Hermes and Hiram; this does not mean, needless to say, that these two names have the same linguistic origin, but their constitution is none the less identical, and the combination HRM from which both are essentially formed suggests other comparisons also.

<sup>3</sup> See *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedanta*, ch. XXI

<sup>4</sup> As is said in *Rasâ'il Ikhwân as-Safâ* "the world is a great man and man is a little world" (*al-awn insân kabir wa 'l-insân âlam saghir*).—It is moreover in virtue of this correspondence that a certain realization in the "microcosmic" order can cause, accidentally as regards the being who has achieved it, an outward realization relating to the "macrocosmic" order without any special effort having been exerted in that direction, as has been known to happen, for example, in certain cases of metallic transmutations.

<sup>5</sup> The functions of Divine messenger and "guide of souls" could, astrologically, be related respectively to a diurnal and a nocturnal aspect; they may also be said to correspond to the descending and ascending currents symbolized by the two serpents of the Caduceus.

<sup>6</sup> *Budha* is not to be confused with *Buddha*, the title of Shâkya-Muni, although both appellations have clearly the same radical meaning, and although certain attributes of the planetary *Budha* were eventually transferred to the historic *Buddha* who is represented as having been "illuminated" by the irradiation of this planet, whose essence he was said to have absorbed into himself. It may be noted in this connection that the mother of the *Buddha* is called *Mâyâ-Devi* and that, for the Greeks and Romans, *Maia* was also the mother of Hermes or Mercury.

<sup>7</sup> The change of b to v or w is an extremely frequent linguistic phenomenon.

<sup>8</sup> See in this connection *La Langue des Oiseaux (Symboles fondamentaux de la Science sacrée, ch. VII)*.

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The serpent is opposed or allied to the bird according to whether it is being considered in its malefic or benefic aspect. Moreover a figure such as that of an eagle holding a serpent in its claws (which is to be found, precisely, in Mexico), does not evoke exclusively the idea of that antagonism which is represented, in the Hindu tradition, by Garuda's fight against Nâga ; on occasion, especially in heraldic symbolism, the serpent is replaced by the sword, and this substitution is all the more striking when the weapon in question, has the form of a flaming sword, which is moreover closely akin to the lightning in the grasp of Jupiter's eagle ; and the sword, in its highest sense, is a figure of Wisdom and the power of the Word (see for example Revelations, I, 16). It may be noted that one of the chief symbols of the Egyptian Thoth was the ibis, destroyer of reptiles and hence a symbol of Christ ; but in the Caduceus of Hermes we have the serpent in its two contrary aspects as in the Mediaeval figure of the "amphisbaena" (see *Le Roi du Monde*, pp. 34-35).

<sup>9</sup> Should it not be concluded from this same assimilation that the *Book of Enoch*, or at any rate what is known by this name, must be considered as an integral part of the whole corpus of the "Hermetic books" ?—On the other hand, some say also that the Prophet Idris is the same as the Buddha. What has already been said shows well enough how we are to take this assertion which refers in fact to *Budha*, the Hindu equivalent of Hermes. It could not refer to the historic Buddha, whose death is known to have taken place, whereas Idris is expressly said to have been borne up to Heaven alive, just as is Enoch in the Bible.

<sup>10</sup> The author is clearly referring here to his article on *The Science of Handreading in Sufism* which is to appear in the next number of *Studies in Comparative Religion*.

<sup>11</sup> See *Le Roi du Monde*, pp. 32-34.

<sup>12</sup> If Hindu doctrine considers the Buddha as being the ninth *avatâra* of Vishnu, that is the *Mleccha* (foreign) *avatâra*, this does not necessarily exclude other divine interventions which have taken place on behalf of "foreign" (non-Hindu) peoples during this same period. In particular, Christ might even be said to share with the Buddha the ninth avataric function, since his first coming was, for the West, what the advent of the Buddha was for the Far East (and what the Qoranic "descent" was for the "middle" region). Now as we have seen in connection with the Buddha, the ninth *avatâra* is a "Mercurial" manifestation. It would seem then that the two comings of Christ may be related to his "Mercurial" and "Solar" aspects, the Solar Christ being Christ Glorious, that is, the tenth or Kalki *avatâra*, who is to come at the end of the cycle, the 'white horse' of this final descent being a Solar symbol *par excellence*. As to the first coming of Christ, it may be mentioned that the month of May takes its name from Mercury's mother, *Maia*, who is said to be one of the Pleiads and to whom that month was consecrated in ancient times ; and in Christianity it has become "the month of Mary," by an assimilation which is doubtless not merely phonetic, between *Maria* and *Maia*.

(This note has been somewhat modified by the translator in the light of conversations which he had with the author, many years after the article had been written.)

<sup>13</sup> Around the staff of Aesculapius is coiled a single serpent, which represents the benefic force, the malefic force being bound to disappear inasmuch as the attribute in question belongs to the genius of medicine.—The relationship may also be noted between this same staff of Aesculapius, as an emblem of healing, and the biblical symbol of the "brazen serpent" (see *Symboles fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée*, ch. XX).

<sup>14</sup> It is said that they are to appear on earth again at the end of the cycle : they are the two "witnesses" mentioned in Revelations, ch. XI.

<sup>15</sup> He incarnates as it were the nature of the "philosopher's fire," and according to the Bible narrative, the Prophet Elijah was taken up to Heaven on a "chariot of fire" ; this is related to the "fiery vehicle" (*taijasa* in the Hindu doctrine) which in the human being corresponds to the subtle state (see *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedanta*, ch. XIII).

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17. Let us recall also, from the alchemical point of view, the correspondence between the Sun and gold, which Hinduism denotes as "mineral light"; the *Aurum potabile* (drinkable gold) of the Hermetists is moreover the same as the "draught of immortality," which is also called "liquor of gold" in Taoism.

<sup>17</sup> See *The Symbolism of the Cross*, ch. IX.