Book Review


Some thirty years ago I came across a brief extract from the Corpus Hermeticum in which the Egyptian Thoth (known to us as Hermes Trismegistus) acts as spiritual teacher to his son Tat. The setting is important: they apparently converse on a mountain, perhaps Mount Sinai. I later pursued its various translations and it still remains a favourite religious text for me, as it is both transcendentally beautiful and eminently *realistic* as a record of what takes place between a spiritual teacher (guru, Master, adviser) and a disciple at the point of breakthrough. It is reminiscent, for example, of the breakthrough that Arjuna receives at the hands of his brother-in-law Krishna, but made all the more poignant because Thoth is Tat’s father. I stress the word *realistic* because I am congenitally allergic to terms like ‘magic’ and ‘myth’ when it comes to studies in spirituality. Either a real man Thoth taught this to his son Tat, whatever their original names and epoch might be, or it is meaningless. And I would add: unless this can take place between two humans today, I am not interested.

This is by way of preamble to Lachman’s interesting new work on the figure known to us as Hermes Trismegistus. Lachman’s book sits on my table alongside a translation of the Hermetica by Walter Scott from 1924 (not highly regarded), Frances Yates’s book on Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic tradition from 1964, Freke and Gandy’s book of poetic extracts from 1999, and the 1906 Meade translation of the Hermetica available on the Internet (generally better received than Scott’s but to my ear rather clunky). What then is Lachman’s contribution to the long history of scholarship on the Hermetic tradition, of which this short list is a random sample?

To answer this I need to make another introductory detour in order to place the Hermetic tradition in the Western context. If asked, the early Christians had a name for the confluence of traditions that included Hermeticism, Platonism, Gnosticism and Kabbalism: ‘paganism.’ It was a derogatory term, and two brutal murders book-end the period of Christian hatred towards ‘paganism’: that of the Platonist Hypatia in 415 and that of the Hermeticist Bruno in 1600. The hostility to ‘paganism’ continued long after 1600 of course, but the ecclesiastical murder of pagans and other heretics waned as the Enlightenment eventually brought religious tolerance. However, the collective anguish that the European and Mediterranean world experienced in this persecution of ‘paganism’ is still felt today as anger against all things Christian, and is probably the energetic source of works as differing as Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy and the atheist rants of Richard Dawkins. What term then can we use to avoid the hostile word ‘paganism’? In fact many scholars use ‘the Western esoteric tradition’, which is useful enough, but begs a precise definition of ‘esoteric’. I prefer to use the term ‘Neoplatonism’, because I find the key Neoplatonist thinker Plotinus to best represent the entire tradition. I also like the term ‘the counter-religion of the West’, of my own coinage. The tradition is not of course a monolithic entity, but what gives it a common core is that it contains all that was indigestible to Christian thought. And Hermeticism was, at certain periods, the name of what was most indigestible.

Lachman’s new book on the Hermetic tradition is therefore of great interest. As part, or perhaps central to, ‘the counter-religion of the West’, Hermeticism deserves far wider attention. Of the books mentioned above Lachman’s comes closest to Yates’s
account of the progression of Hermetic ideas through Western history, but it greatly expands the account and frames it for a wider, modern, readership, and hence it is welcome. As with Yates, Lachman traces the history of the Hermetic texts as they burst forth onto the Renaissance scene via Ficino’s translations; traces their subsequent fate to be dismissed by Causabon around 1610 as Christian-era Greek writings that merely adopted Egyptian names; and traces their continued clandestine circulation and influence to this day. Lachman makes all this accessible to the modern reader by attempts to link Hermetic ideas to contemporary thought, whether the philosophy of Bergson, Whitehead and Gebser, or ideas from evolution and neuroscience. I’ll return to whether or not this move is helpful, but first I need to characterise Lachman’s approach to the core of Hermetic spirituality, which is in itself usefully summed up in two phrases: ‘man as microcosm’ and ‘as above so below’.

The Hermetic spiritual tradition, as with so many others, is claimed by two rather different communities. I label them ‘transcendent’ and ‘esoteric’ respectively, and use the examples of two men (who were both in some ways products of Theosophy) to tease out this distinction: Jiddu Krishnamurti (as a teacher of transcendence) and Rudolf Steiner (as a teacher of esotericism). There isn’t space here to even begin this discussion, other than to say that they could equally have made claims to honour the spirit of Hermeticism, if either had been inclined to do so. Lachman doesn’t recognise such a distinction directly, but explores instead the obvious fact that there is a non-alchemical Hermeticism deriving from the major texts (the Asclepius, the Corpus Hermeticum and the fragments) and an alchemical Hermeticism deriving from the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus. Lachman’s inclinations are clear when he says: ‘A work on Hermeticism without some account of alchemy seems somehow criminal’. My own instinct is the reverse I am afraid – i.e. I think that the introduction of alchemy vitiates the Hermetic legacy – but that doesn’t prevent me taking an interest in Lachman’s account, based on prodigious research into the history of alchemical Hermeticism.

If we return to the idea of the microcosm, or the key dictum of the Emerald Tablet, ‘as above so below’, then we can argue for either a transcendent or an esoteric interpretation of these phrases. It is the same with the term ‘gnosis’, which Lachman insists is at the heart of Hermeticism, and which I would also place at the heart of the ‘counter-religion of the West’. What is the ‘knowledge’ referred to by gnosia? Is it a knowledge of things, or is it pure unmediated knowing? Does ‘microcosm’ imply a reflection of the cosmos in the discursive human mind, made up of a knowledge of things, or does it imply identity of self with universe? Lachman is pretty sure it is the former in each case, concluding: ‘You cannot have gnosia – knowledge, understanding – without a knower and the known, even if these two are ultimately in some way the same.’

I would ripost: Krishnamurti insists that the knower and the known are, first off and forget ‘ultimately’, the same. Lachman works up to his conclusion about gnosia by saying: ‘To strive to be absorbed in the cosmos, to obliterate one’s individual, discrete, separated consciousness and melt into the infinite buoyant waters would, I think, quality as an attempt to slip into previous consciousness structures.’ (Lachman is drawing on Gebser’s work on consciousness structures here.) He continues: ‘But
that is not what Fludd or the other Hermeticists are doing. In this sense they are not “mystics”…”

I would ripost, returning to the moment when Tat experiences full gnosis (or enlightenment, moksha, liberation, self-realization as in the Eastern traditions) through the teachings of Thoth: ‘Father, now that I see in mind, I see myself to be the All. I am in heaven and in earth, in water and in air; I am in beasts and plants; I am a babe in the womb, and one that is not yet conceived, and one that has been born; I am present everywhere.’ (Note that this is found in Scott’s translation of Libellus XIII of the Corpus Hermeticum, which in this case I find superior Meade’s translation.) Clearly this is a moment of mystical union, achieved through the ministrations of a spiritual teacher.

It is for the spiritual seeker and the spiritual scholar (who should be one and the same) to decide which Hermeticism they are drawn to; perhaps agreeing with Fludd and Steiner that they are not ‘mystics’ (Steiner has a whole chapter in his autobiography on why he is not a mystic), but rather esotericists, alchemists or occultists. On the other hand they may take the teachings of Thoth, as in the example with his son, to be better placed alongside those of Plotinus, Eckhart, Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi for example, not forgetting of course Krishnamurti. Lachman certainly gives support for the occult-alchemical position, drawing on – as I mentioned earlier – contemporary science and philosophy. I don’t personally align myself with any of the occult traditions or teachers, nor for that matter do I care for analogies drawing on modern science and philosophy. Both contemporary science and contemporary philosophy, are, in my opinion, profoundly indifferent if not actively antithetical to the spiritual life. Of course some readers will enjoy all of this, but for me the real value of the book is firstly in bringing Hermeticism to our attention in the first place, and secondly because of the wealth of historical connections Lachman is so good at drawing out. The emphasis on the occult-alchemical may skew this history, but any substantial exposition on the counter-religion of the West is to be welcomed. The language of Christianity, as wonderful as it is, still dominates both religious and secular thought today, leaving little room for the radically different languages of the spiritual life to be found in such traditions as Hermeticism. May this book provoke the reader to further study them.