

# FROM LEAD TO GOLD: HERMES AND ALCHEMY

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**H**ermeticism and alchemy lead us to inner and outer transformations. These practices have their roots in ancient Egypt and Greece. Well-known author and lecturer Richard Smoley considers how these ancient traditions affect us today.



Where and when he lived, whether he was a man or god, or whether he ever existed on this planet at all, we do not know. He is variously identified with the Greek Hermes, the Egyptian Thoth, the Muslim Idris, and the biblical Enoch. Who was, or is, Hermes Trismegistus, Hermes Thrice-Greatest? Why “Thrice-Greatest”? What is Hermeticism?

Hermes Trismegistus makes his first appearance in known records in an unprepossessing fashion: on the minutes of an ancient meeting held to deal with certain abuses in the cult of an Egyptian god. In the second century A.D. devotees of Thoth were accustomed to offering sacrifices of

his emblematic bird, the ibis, which then abounded on the banks of the Nile. (The popularity of the sacrifices may explain why the ibis can no longer be found there.)

Evidently there were irregularities either in the feeding of the sacred birds or in their sacrifice; at any rate transactions of some meetings on this matter, written on *ostraka*, or broken potsherds, the memo pads of antiquity, have survived. One of them reads in part: “No man shall be able to lapse from a matter which concerns Thoth . . . Thoth, the three times great.”<sup>1</sup>

This title was affixed to the name of Hermes, Thoth’s Greek counterpart, who stands at the head of the Hermetic tradition. The Renaissance magus Marsilio Ficino says: “They called him Trismegistus or thrice-greatest because he was the greatest philosopher and the greatest priest and the greatest king.”<sup>2</sup> Some Christian Hermeticists, on the other hand, have claimed that Hermes got his title because he taught the doctrine of the Trinity.

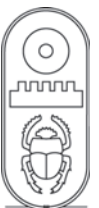
Hermes Trismegistus, though, is not exactly a god, but more of a superhuman benefactor of our race. Like the bearded demigods of Mesoamerica or the legendary emperors who begin the Chinese chronicles, he is at once teacher, ruler, and sage, who brought science and art to humankind in its infancy.

## Renaissance Views of Hermes

During the Renaissance Hermes Trismegistus was regarded as the “contemporary of



Thoth Votive Mummies (Late Period-Ptolemaic, ca. 525–30 BCE). To either side are ibis mummies wrapped in the most expensive manner, and in the center, a gilded cartonnage coffin for an ibis, sacred to Thoth (Djehuti). From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.





Bernardino di Betto (Pinturicchio), *Isis with Hermes Trismegistus and Moses* (1492–94). Room of the Saints, Borgia Apartments, Vatican City.

Moses.” Though few today believe this literally, there is some justice in seeing a parallel between them, since Hermes Trismegistus is revered as the primordial sage of the Egyptian esoteric tradition, as Moses is of the Hebrew one. Like Moses, Hermes left distinguished pupils: his line is said to include Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, Apollonius of Tyana, and Plotinus.<sup>3</sup>

Over the centuries, the god Hermes metamorphosed into the master Hermes Trismegistus, and as the French scholar Antoine Faivre notes:

Hermes Trismegistus obviously possesses several of the essential attributes of the god Hermes: mobility, mutability (eclecticism), discourse and inspiration (hermeneutics), the function of crossroads (tolerance, irenicism). . . . Like Hermes-Mercury, he runs between various currents, linking the separate, skimming over oppositions while stealing their substance.<sup>4</sup>

Hence the tradition of the Thrice-Greatest one, which we call Hermeticism,<sup>5</sup> has as its main concern the esoteric arts of transmutation and change. One facet of this tradition is alchemy, with its well-known objective of turning lead into gold. But Hermeticism involves much more than that. It is concerned not only with changing

one substance into another but also with transforming grosser substances into subtler ones. As the *Emerald Tablet*, the primordial document ascribed to Hermes, says, “you will separate the fine from the coarse, sweetly, with great ingenuity.”

Taking a slightly different perspective, Peter French, in his excellent book on John Dee, defines the most basic concept of Hermeticism thus: “Man must know himself and recover his divine essence by reuniting with the divine *mens* or mind.”<sup>6</sup>

These two objectives—changing lead into gold and reuniting human consciousness with the divine mind—don’t, on the face of it, seem to have much to do with each other. If one embodies the highest of human aspirations, the other looks like a cheesy get-rich-quick scheme. Yet they may not be so far apart.

### Transmutation: Lead into Gold

To begin with the transmutation of lead into gold, we know that gold is good for tooth fillings and wedding rings, for



Jean-Jacques Boissard, *Apollonius of Tyana* (sixteenth century), in *De Divinatione et Magicis*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.





Heinrich Khunrath, *The Emerald Tablet* (1606), in *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

To begin with, the Hermetic arts speak of two fundamental principles, *sol* and *luna*. The epithets applied to them are numerous and confusing: *sol* is Sun, gold, heaven, light; *luna* is Moon, silver, water, stone, ocean, night, and many more. It is far from clear at first what these terms mean. Baron Julius Evola, the quirky Italian esotericist whose book [The](#)

[Hermetic Tradition](#) offers perhaps the clearest discussion of the alchemical process, says such strings of words “are symbols in the hermetic cipher language that refer, often in the same passage, to one continuous object and thereby create an enormous difficulty for the inexperienced reader.”<sup>8</sup>

Evola goes on to quote Cornelius Agrippa: “No one can excel in the alchemical art without knowing these principles *in himself* and the greater the knowledge of self, the greater will be the magnetic power attained thereby and the greater the wonders to be realized.”<sup>9</sup>

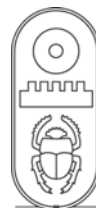
So what are these principles in ourselves? “We can say that in general the Sun is ‘form’ and the power of individuation,” Evola writes, “while the Moon—which preserves the archaic Mother and Woman symbols—expresses the ‘material’ and universal: to

stabilizing currencies, and for diversifying one’s portfolio. But is it really worth all the attention it’s gotten? Is it so important that the occult secrets of its manufacture were encrypted in the sculpture of the great French cathedrals, as the mysterious alchemist Fulcanelli asserts?<sup>7</sup> Even our own age, so roundly decried for its materialism, hasn’t resorted to the ploy of putting scientific formulae on the walls of churches.

If you are sophisticated about such things, you may reply that of course alchemy isn’t *really* talking about literal gold and literal lead—it’s all a symbol for something in the psyche. And alchemists, in their cryptic way, seem to agree. “Our gold is not the gold of the vulgar,” they say. How can we reconcile the apparent opposition between the symbolic and the substantial, or, as the *Emerald Tablet* puts it, between the “above” and the “below”?

I must state here that I’m not an alchemist; my practical knowledge of the art does not exceed the capacity to mix a few simple cocktails. All the same, in struggling with various Hermetic materials over time, I’ve come to some conclusions that strike me as useful.

Michael Maier, *Hermes Trismegistus with Alchemical Sun and Moon* (1617), in *Symbola Aureae Mensae Duodecim Nationum*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



the undifferentiated vitality, to the cosmic spirit or the ether-light, corresponds the feminine.”<sup>10</sup>

Still a bit abstract. To simplify further, we could say that *sol*, the Sun, gold, represents the principle of consciousness, that which *experiences*—the “I.” The Theosophist Annie Besant calls this the Self, the Knower, “that conscious, feeling, ever-existing One that in each of us knows himself as existing.”<sup>11</sup>

*Luna*, on the other hand, is a name for that which *is experienced*. The Greeks called it *hyle*. This word is usually translated as “matter,” but it seems more to resemble Eliphas Levi’s “astral light”—a watery astral substance that has no shape of its own but can take on the shapes of specific things.

This is to say that experience has no qualities in a pure state; we never just experience, but rather we experience *something*, and we experience it *as* something—a table, book, chair, or what-have-you. This is matter in its fixed state, or “lead.”

If so, then Hermeticism, in one of its many dimensions, could have to do with transmuting the “lead” of ordinary



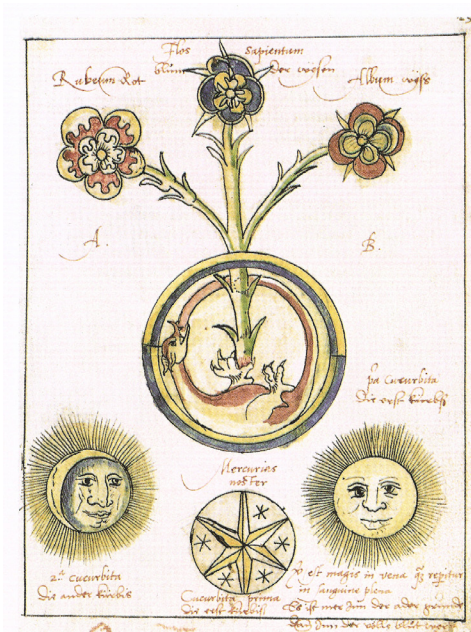
Michael Maier, *The Philosophers' Vulture (their Mercury)* (1618). The vulture proclaims “I am the black, the white, the yellow, and the red” referring to the alchemical stages, in *Atalanta Fugiens*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

experience into the “gold” of consciousness. Alchemists say you have to have gold in order to make gold. This would mean that you have to start with the raw material of your own experience (“lead”), using what consciousness you already have (“gold”) to create more consciousness.

### The Descent of Consciousness into Matter

The alchemical process, then, can be seen as an elaborate allegory of the descent of consciousness into the matter and the means by which it returns to its pristine state. Other metals such as copper and iron, as well as the stages such as *nigredo*, *albedo*, and *rubedo*, would refer to intermediate steps in this process.

The idea of “mercury,” for example, serves as a symbol for the means by which mind “mediates” between the knower and the known. Mercury, or quicksilver, as you know, is what we have in our thermometers; changing shape, it tells us the temperature. In the same way our own perceptions “change their shape” to reflect how the world is. (The accuracy of their reporting has always been a subject of lively debate among philosophers. And of course you’ll remember that Hermes is the trickster among the gods.)



H. Reussner, *Alchemical Ouroboros, Sun, and Moon* (1592), in *Pandora*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



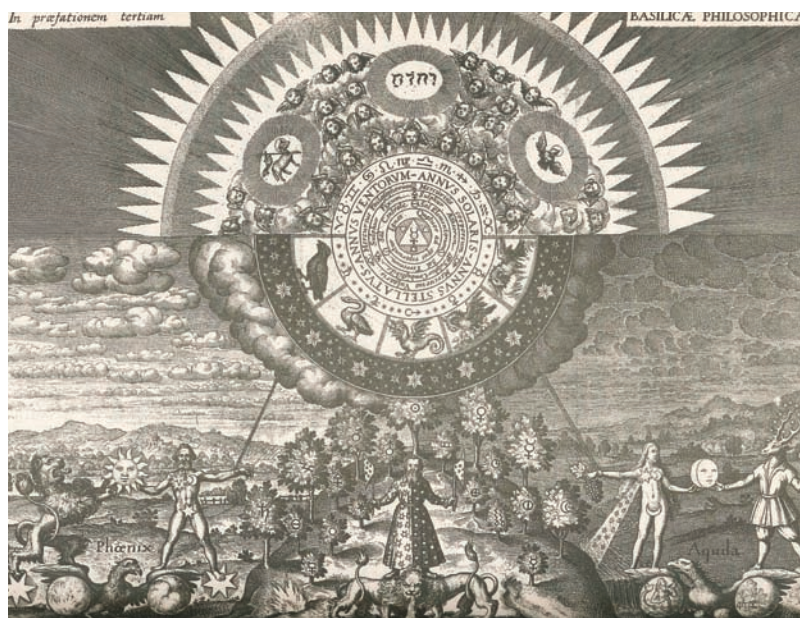
Similarly the stage of *nigredo* or blackness is associated with Venus or desire. (This points to one interpretation of the symbol of the Black Madonna, sometimes identified with Isis.) At this stage the “I” or sol becomes conscious of its own desire and its attachment to that desire. One of Venus’s names, as Fulcanelli reminds us, is Cypris, in Greek *Kupris* or “the impure one.”<sup>12</sup> Like Venus, desire has this dual aspect: it is beneficent, life-giving, but it cements us to our own experience, bringing death and destruction.

To realize this truth at a deep level brings about the next stage: whitening or *albedo*—the triumph of purity, the freedom from attachment to desire. Evola suggests that this purification can be accomplished in two opposite ways. There is the familiar means of asceticism (associated with Mars or iron, suggesting struggle and discipline), which is the conquest of desire, but there is also the possibility of embracing desire, especially sexual passion, and transforming it. But, Evola bluntly warns, “This is an extremely dangerous path!”<sup>13</sup>

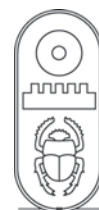
Assuming that the *albedo* is accomplished without mishap, consciousness becomes purified. In this stage the “I” is known as White Gold, White Sulfur, “matter that turns copper white”—possibly meaning that it makes desire pure. (Copper, you’ll remember, is the metal of Venus.)<sup>14</sup>

And finally, the last stage, *rubedo*, or reddening. If white is associated with purity, redness is associated with warmth. We all know people who have been stuck at the stage of *albedo*: they may well seem pure, ethereal, clean, but they also exude a certain remoteness or disembodiment. *Rubedo* adds, or reveals, another characteristic of consciousness. Evola characterizes it as the “return to earth” of purified consciousness. As the *Emerald Tablet* says, “its power is intact, if it shall have been turned toward earth.”

That is to say, consciousness, the “I,” *sol*, having become purified and detached from the dross of experience, must now return to give it warmth and light. This stage brings to mind the myth of the Buddha’s enlightenment: having achieved supreme illumination, he yields to the entreaties of the gods and returns to earth to teach the Dharma.



Matthaeus Merian, *The Great Work* (1618), in J. D. Mylius, *Opus Medico-Chymicum*. It was later included in the appendix of the *Musaeum Hermeticum*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



This is, as you can see, an extremely brief and schematic view of the Hermetic transformation; there are many stages and substages that I've left out. (Earlier alchemists, for example, described another phase, *xanthosis* or yellowing, after the *rubedo*. This stage lays additional stress on illumination or gnosis, symbolized by the color yellow, as a characteristic of the perfected *sol*.) Clearly it's not possible to go into all these variations here, but I think the general outline holds true.

Alchemical texts are well known for their obscurities and omissions, so it comes as no surprise that we are left wondering just what technique enables this transmutation to take place.

The answers are as varied as spiritual experience itself. C. G. Jung, for whom alchemy furnished an elaborate blueprint for his view of individuation, favored work with dream figures, images, and symbols through "active imagination."

While admitting that these images are endowed with unimaginable profundity, I feel tempted to sound a note of caution here. The psychic world of dreams and images is notorious as a realm of delusion and fascination; we can wander in and forget how to find our way out. Hence dream and imagery work can prove dangerous and disorienting unless one makes a serious effort to ground oneself in ordinary work and life. (This does not seem to be a mistake that Jung himself fell into, but it does seem to be one that some Jungians fall into.)

### Awareness of One's Own Body

There is, however, another means of approach, which involves a practice that probably goes back to the ancient Egyptian mysteries. It has acquired a new name in the modern world: *proprioception*, or the ability to sense one's own body. In choosing the matter on which to perform the Great Work, one alchemist advises: "Take some *real earth, well impregnated with the rays of*

*the sun, the moon, and the stars.*"<sup>15</sup> This could refer to bodily sensation and experience, "real earth" impregnated with celestial and cosmic influences as manifested in our own psyches.

*Sol*, then, would here be conscious attention, the ability to sense and experience the body from the vantage point of "I." This is simultaneously a separation from and an immersion in the experience of the body here and now. If carried out properly, the "lead" of ordinary sensation, dull, inert, nearly dead, becomes "gold," bright, lustrous, and untarnishable. The life force itself, which begins as a thing of the earth, doomed to die like a plant or beast, becomes adamant and immortal. Evola writes:

The goal of Hindu alchemy was to introduce consciousness into this vital force, causing it to become part of it; then to reawaken and retrace all the phases of the organization, reaching thereby an actual and creative rapport with the completed form of one's own body, which could then literally be called regenerated. "The living man," as opposed to the



Robert Fludd, *The Microcosm* (1617). Frontispiece to the first volume of *Utriusque Cosmi*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

tradition of the “sleeping” and the “dead,” esoterically would be precisely the one who has realized such direct contact with the innermost source of his corporeal life.<sup>16</sup>

Isha Schwaller de Lubicz teaches that much the same is true of Egyptian esotericism:

The way is the conscious reanimation of the entire body, the confirmation of the interplay between its functions and all its vital reactions. . . . No earthly man can perceive Spirit except in his own flesh. And this is no mere literary simile, but a most positive reality. You can only find your God by generating Him in yourself, in the darkness of your own body. For when He takes cognizance of a substance, then He becomes its God.<sup>17</sup>

This process of transformation through conscious attention to the body could even offer a key to the central myth of ancient Egypt, the legend of Isis and Osiris. Osiris, or the force of consciousness, is slain by Set, the

force of oblivion. Osiris’s limbs are scattered all over Egypt. Esoterically this could mean that consciousness in the ordinary state forgets its own embodiment; our own limbs and body parts are “scattered” in the sense that we are normally oblivious to them. Only attention and integration, represented by the gods Horus and Isis, manage to defeat Set and restore Osiris to life.

Specific techniques of proprioception, or conscious sensing of the body, are still taught today in various esoteric schools, some of which trace their practices back to Egypt itself.<sup>18</sup>

### Deep Symbolic Importance of Alchemy

We can perhaps accept that alchemy, so far from being an archaic collection of nonsense, has deep symbolic import. C. G. Jung certainly thought so. In works like *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, he traces an elaborate correlation between alchemical images and the images that arise in the psyche. Jung, however, had little interest in practical alchemy, and he insisted more than once that “the alchemists did not know what they were writing about.”<sup>19</sup>

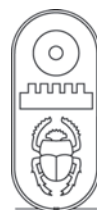
I think one would need to be very cautious in making such a statement. Every so often one encounters a practicing alchemist like François Trojani, who contends that the transmutation of lead into gold is meant very literally indeed. And a great deal of alchemical writing, it seems to me, makes no sense unless it is so understood.

If so, then practical alchemy is an analogous process to what I’ve sketched here: the alchemist goes through parallel procedures in the laboratory and in himself. The matter in his beaker is transformed alongside the matter of his body.

Exactly how this is done in concrete terms I can’t say, and you are very much at liberty to disagree. But for the moment grant me my point. Let’s suppose an alchemist can change ordinary, physical lead into gold. The literature



Statues of Osiris (Late Period, 525–332 BCE). From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.







The rosa alba (white rose) of alchemy (fifteenth–seventeenth centuries), in *Donum Dei*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

is full of warnings about doing it for reasons of greed. And the operation is secret, so there can be no question of proving a point to somebody. So why go through this procedure?

As I've stated it here, alchemical transformation involves taking something with only a minimal amount of life and intelligence in its ordinary state and refining and perfecting it until it reaches a state of higher being. Hermes Trismegistus says: "As above, so below." What does this enable us to conclude about laboratory alchemy?

### **Everything is Endowed with Consciousness**

Here you might recollect an idea that appears often in esoteric thought: the notion that everything in the universe is endowed with consciousness. Even a sodium atom, which we normally regard as having no intelligence at all, "knows" how to recognize, and bind with, a chlorine atom. An atom's consciousness is very narrow and rigidly determined, but it does have consciousness nonetheless.

Hence it would stand to reason that some substances have more "consciousness"

or "knowledge" than others. Gold is in this sense more "intelligent" than lead: it "knows" how to shine, and unlike baser metals, such as copper, iron, or silver, it also "knows" how to stay free from tarnish or rust. To transmute lead, a comparatively dull and dense substance, into an intelligent one is thus a means of raising the consciousness of matter.

Again, though, what's the point? Even if an alchemist were able to transmute several pounds of lead into gold, this is still an infinitesimal quantity of all the matter known to exist. Can the consciousness of the universe really be raised by this procedure?

Here it's important to avoid a common trap. As good Americans, we automatically assume that more is better. But it may not always be so. The point of alchemical transmutation may not lie in the size of the final product but in the transmutation itself. There may be something in the procedure that acts like a homeopathic remedy, stimulating the growth of consciousness in the universe in ways we can't imagine. After all, consciousness, like life, wants and needs to perpetuate itself.

At this point we stand on the borders of other schools and other disciplines. To liberate the infinitesimal shards of intelligence that groan under the oppression of dullness, to produce "gold," not only in the literal sense but by increasing the consciousness of an inert substance, calls to mind, for example, the idea in Lurianic Kabbalah that "sparks" of the primordial Light are imprisoned in all things and that it is the duty of the righteous to liberate them. I don't imagine the Hermetic Great Work (or for that matter Lurianic Kabbalah) is the *only* way of enacting such a liberation. But it may be one way.

This all may sound rather superstitious. It's not so superstitious, though, to think that the world, inanimate as well as



animate, possesses an interiority that can be either neglected and despised or awakened and cultivated. It's even possible that this great secret offers a clue to our purpose on earth, which we've forgotten as we've become identified with the shifting shapes of our own mercurial perceptions. Does the *Emerald Tablet* allude to this purpose when it says, "This is the father of all consecration of the whole world"?

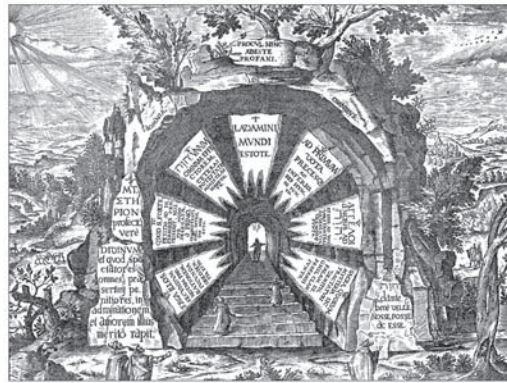
## Hermes Trismegistus

Enough, perhaps, about Hermeticism for now. What of Hermes himself? I hesitate to use words like "god" or "archetype," but possibly we can think of him as a superhuman intelligence who not only reminds us of our function in linking the "above" and the "below," but who regulates the great spiritual streams of humankind.

Hermes Trismegistus has stood at center stage in world history three times so far. Of his first manifestation, in predynastic Egypt or earlier, we can say nothing; it is all but completely obscured by its remoteness. The second time he comes to the fore, this time in a historical epoch, is in late antiquity, when the gods of the Pagan pantheons had



*Hermes and the Charities* (ca. 480 BCE). Collection of the Louvre. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.



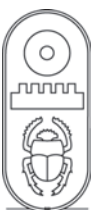
Heinrich Khunrath, *The Gate of Eternal Wisdom* (1606), in *Amphiteatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

grown weak and old. Here the Hermetic works served as a bridge between the ancient faiths and the new Christian milieu that would supplant them.

Then Hermes reappears in the Renaissance, when the Christian stream itself had grown tired and corrupt. At this point the *Corpus Hermeticum*, rediscovered among the ruins of Byzantium in 1460, helped inspire the Renaissance and served as a midwife for the birth of modernity, which over the past century has grown into the first truly global civilization.

Today modernity seems to have reached its own state of exhaustion. Is Hermes reappearing in our own age to reformulate his tradition once again? Certain impulses suggest it. There is on the one hand the looking backward of certain streams of contemporary Neopaganism, which are trying to revive the worship of the gods of Greece and Egypt. There is also the looking forward of various new religions, with their admixtures of old forms with contemporary science and psychology.

Though both of these directions are valuable and necessary, I'm not sure that any of the current attempts at reformulation have arrived at their goal. It seems unlikely that bird-headed figures will inspire worship in the humanity of the third millennium. On the other hand, any



new religion will have to join the pack of squabbling faiths that are already crying for the allegiance of humankind.

Perhaps the Hermetic impulse today, rather than reformulating the traditions of the past, will have as its chief objective the tolerance and irenicism of which Antoine

Faivre speaks. That is to say, rather than inventing a new faith, it may instead try to teach the ones that already exist to live in peace. At the same time it may also remind them of the goal that lies at the heart of each: the transformation of the “lead” of ordinary being into the “gold” of true consciousness.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xiii–xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, xlvi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1995), 104–5.

<sup>5</sup> Faivre says that the term “Hermetism” should be used to refer to the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the literature directly inspired by it, while “Hermeticism” should be used in a wider sense to refer to “many aspects of Western esotericism, such as astrology, alchemical speculations, and the like” (See his introduction to *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, coedited with Jacob Needleman [New York: Crossroad, 1992], 3). But this distinction strikes me as more likely to confuse than enlighten the general reader, so I have chosen simply to use the term “Hermeticism” in all instances.

<sup>6</sup> Peter French, *John Dee* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1987), 146.

<sup>7</sup> Fulcanelli, *Le mystère des cathédrales*, trans. Mary Swarder (Albuquerque, NM: Brotherhood of Life, 1984). Reviewed in *Gnosis* 10 (Winter 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Julius Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition: Symbols and Teachings of the Royal Art*, trans. E. E. Rehmus (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1995),

23. For an overview of Evola’s writings available in English, see *Gnosis* 40 (Summer 1996): 64.

<sup>9</sup> Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, 25. Emphasis, here and in other quotations, in the original.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36–7.

<sup>11</sup> Annie Besant, *Thought Power* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1966), 13. Besant does not, however, explicitly equate the Knower with alchemical *sol*.

<sup>12</sup> Fulcanelli, *Le mystère des cathédrales*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, 140.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Fulcanelli, *Le mystère des cathédrales*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, 164.

<sup>17</sup> Isha Schwaller de Lubicz, *The Opening of the Way: A Practical Guide to the Wisdom Teachings of Ancient Egypt* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1981), 39–40.

<sup>18</sup> See Robert Masters, *The Goddess Sekhmet: The Way of the Five Bodies* (Amity, NY: Amity House, 1988), and *Neurospeak* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1994); also Jean Houston, *The Passion of Isis and Osiris* (New York: Ballantine, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, C. G. Jung, “The Psychology of the Transference,” quoted in *Jung on Alchemy*, ed. Nathan Schwartz-Salant (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 69.