

## THE MERCURIAN MASTER: HERMES' GIFT TO THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

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Once endowed with the creative fire, completely evolved mankind had no further need for the help of the Powers or creative Gods, such as the *Elohim* of chapter ii of *Genesis*. Men became creative Gods, in their turn, able to give life to beings like themselves ... since men had discovered, thanks to Prometheus, the *secret of the various methods of creation*, and were creating in their turn, what was the use of god-creators?<sup>2</sup>

### *The Madame and the Masters*

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (born Elena Petrovna von Hahn, 1831-1891) is remembered chiefly as the founder and prime ideologue of the Theosophical Society<sup>3</sup>. Although celebrated in her day, she has since been pressed to the peripheries of academic discourse, no doubt due to the taint of occultism (a word first introduced into the English language in her *Isis Unveiled* of 1877) which adheres to her works. Yet Blavatsky's engagement with the challenging epistemologies of her era, and her attempt to steer an innovative course be-

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this article alludes directly to Brooks-Davies' *Mercurian Monarch*. Much indebted to the researches of Frances Yates (esp. *Astraea*), Brooks-Davies resolved to limn the presence of Hermetic imagery and motifs in the monarchical panegyrics of Elizabethan and Stuart England. In so doing he established the presence of a link between charismatic authority, governance, and revelation—a link he suspected to have been consciously reinforced by allusion to the power of divine mediation accorded to Mercury. Brooks-Davies' notion that political, literary, and religious potentialities can be (more or less) seamlessly fused *via* the Hermetic leitmotifs has profound resonances for Theosophy. One is reminded of Ernest Lee Tuveson's comment: 'Hermes was a god, and capable of many avatars. In the last as we shall see, he became a mortal, the Poet: fittingly, for essentially the Poet he was from the beginning' (Tuveson, *Avatars*, 8). Tuveson's research is interesting, but should be avoided on technical points regarding the *Hermetica*.

<sup>2</sup> Blavatsky, 'Notes', 387.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of Blavatskian Theosophy see French, 'Theosophical Masters'.

tween religious dogmatism and Positivist materialism (by the means of novel redactions of the Western esoteric corpus), indicate that the ideational components of the Blavatskian *Weltanschauung* demand analysis.

Blavatsky buttressed her Theosophical edifice by claiming that hers was not a novel configuration, but simply the *prisca theologia* expressed in a modern idiom. Indeed, Theosophy was not new at all; rather, she maintained, it was the esoteric heart of all exoteric religio-philosophical structures. But Blavatsky's warrant was not as a mythographer or comparativist; her mythopœic vision—presented as the “Ur-gnosis” of humanity—was announced as scientifically-generated, historically verifiable, and empirically-testable: in short, *as fact*. Recognising that hers was an age characterised by concerns over facticity, Blavatsky asserted that her teachings had been mediated to her by documents of remarkable (indeed Atlantean!) antiquity, and—crucially—by a Brotherhood of Masters whose perennial task it was to oversee human development. Theosophy, thus, was presented as nothing less than an *empirically-determined revelation*. It appears clear that in order to reconsecrate the cosmos—for that was the scope of her intention—Blavatsky had intuited the need for a new mythos, but one which would be acceptable to a society grown wary of deity. The aspirational figure she sought to fill this nineteenth-century lacuna of faith would not, therefore, be able to occupy the undifferentiated mesocosm of myth, but would be required to tread the ground of fact.

Blavatsky depicted the Masters as living men who had perfected themselves through conscious effort, and who had undertaken rigorous ascetical training in a fraternity situated for the main in remote Tibet<sup>4</sup>. The Masters, it seems, are possessed of an ambiguous ontology; having progressed physically and spiritually beyond normative limits, they have achieved supranormal powers and evolutionary endowments. The Great White Lodge<sup>5</sup>—a collective title—ordinarily operates in secrecy to advance human perfectibilism, but on rare occasions the Masters will accept pupils (“chelas”) for instruction in the Ancient Wisdom. Blavatsky was one such *chela*, to whom was granted the warrant to publish their arcane lore. Interestingly, Blavatsky was further aided in her mission by an extensive correspondence which the Masters undertook

<sup>4</sup> For details see French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 1, 60-247; vol. 2, 472-487, 639-660.

<sup>5</sup> There is a seemingly endless stream of cognates: the Brotherhood, the Enlightened Guardians, the Guiding Helmsmen, the Guild Masters, the *Hyperanthropos*, the Nautioners, the Supermen, the *Khwajagan* (a Persian approximation of “Master”), the Elder Brothers, etc. The title afforded greatest currency by today's esoteric groups is “The Great White Brotherhood”, a term popularised by Charles Webster Leadbeater, the second-generation Theosophist who sought to provide the “Penny Catechism” version of Blavatsky's *Summa Theologica*. For Leadbeater's rather baroque Theosophy see French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, *passim*; see also *infra*.

with several Theosophists<sup>6</sup>. It should be noted at the outset, therefore, that the Masters (unlike the God of the deists) did not stand apart from their Theosophical creation; theirs is a constant—if elusive—presence in the Society.

It is clear that antecedents of the Theosophical Masters can be found throughout the modern history of esotericism under the guise of the “Hidden Master”, most memorably, perhaps, in the form of the Rosicrucian fraternity and the “Unknown Superiors” of some rites of *Écossais* Freemasonry<sup>7</sup>. No less obvious is the near ubiquity of this particular mythologem in the discourse of late modern occult and New Age groups<sup>8</sup>. Yet Blavatsky’s insistence on the physical ontic reality of her Masters (namely: Koot Hoomi, Morya, Hilarion, Djual Khool, *inter alia*) has meant that what little attention the Masters have received from scholars has devolved upon the question of their verifiable historical existence, and not on the more eminently interesting *semiosis* of the Masters *Gestalt* as a whole. Although it is clear that, as with all claims to meta-empirical insight, the scholarly apparatus does not exist to prove or to disprove Blavatsky’s assertions of contact with the Masters, highly partisan and uninformed polemical debate on exactly this abortive exercise has nevertheless proved to be the dominant tone of the discourse<sup>9</sup>. Unsurprisingly, such methodologically-impooverished enquiry has led to an indentured religionist *versus* reductionist divide, to the detriment of Theosophical studies. It is the present author’s contention that not only is the concentration on the ontology of the Masters a relatively fruitless exercise for the empiricist, but—more significant—it only serves to obscure an otherwise semiotically-rich phenomenon of late modern religiosity. It is to be hoped that the study of esotericism, particularly under its Hermetic aspect, will serve to alleviate this barrenness by its contribution to the history of ideas of one indubitable gift: the necessity to

<sup>6</sup> The “Mahatma letters”, as the Masters correspondence is called, constitute one of the several abiding mysteries of Theosophy. What might be called the orthodox canon of letters were received in the early 1880s, mostly by two prominent Theosophists, Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921) and Allan Octavian Hume (1829–1919). These documents—about 170 full or partial letters—were later deposited in the British Museum (Department of Manuscripts: Additional Manuscripts MSS 45284, 45285, 45286), and run to about 1300 pages. Further letters—some of dubious provenance—were received for at least the next 45 years, the recipients numbering about 30 persons and with seven Masters ascribed authorship. For an examination of the conceptual component of the correspondence, as well as the vast secondary literature, see French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 1, 135–157 *et passim*. For a chronologically-arranged transcription of the letters themselves see Chin Jr. (ed.), *Mahatma Letters*.

<sup>7</sup> See French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 1, 31–42 *et passim*; vol. 2, 557–596.

<sup>8</sup> See French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 2, 699–763.

<sup>9</sup> See French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 1, 7–25. The work of Paul Johnson (such as his *The Masters Revealed*) must be exempted from this judgement, though he is himself prey to criticisms of methodological laxity: see French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 1, 7–25.

accept paradoxicality and unresolvable dialecticism *ab initio*. Consequently, an *acceptance of deliberate ambiguity* might well be the key to understanding the message the Masters have to tell—and the “past Master” of ambiguity, of course, is Hermes.

### *The god-man Hermes*

If there is a presiding genius of esotericism, it is surely Hermes, the god-man of antiquity<sup>10</sup>. The classical aretalogies of Hermes, or Mercury in his Latin cognate, typically tell of his extraordinary mutability and subversive potentialities—qualities which underscore his ambiguous ontology. The Hermesian locus, it seems, is at the interstices of the human and the divine, heaven and hades, text and meaning<sup>11</sup>. Unsurprisingly, then, the mesocosm inhabited by Hermes, and the mobility with which he can enter and alter other spheres, make him the likely conceptual forebear for the Masters, though such an observation occurs nowhere within the vast Theosophical literature.

Among the cluster of attributes of Hermes, none is so ubiquitous, nor so regularly overlooked, as the dynamogeny of presence and absence. Hermes is never content to undergo scrutiny; he is rather to be discovered in remnants, in the remains—in fact, in the effluvium of his activity. He is indeed “mercurial” for he hints at rich treasures of meaning, yet flirtatiously withholds the elusive prize. He is just as unobtainable as his element quicksilver is uncontainable—always defying efforts to manage and “own” it through its capture.

Hermes exists to subvert finite notions of truth and meaning. He flirts with the tumescent sureties of epistemology, and elicits a grudging demurral from those whom he touches. It follows that in his guise of trickster he adds grit to the epistemological “oyster”, forcing the production of ever more baroque

<sup>10</sup> An illuminating collection of essays on the esoteric Hermes is to be found in Faivre, *Eternal Hermes*. The most comprehensive English-language analysis of the cultural, historical, and cultic foundations of the figure of Hermes Trismegistus is to be found in Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*; see also Boylan, *Thoth: The Hermes of Egypt*, cf. Mahé, *Hermès en haute-Egypte*, 2 vols. For other pertinent discussions see Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 1-61; Faivre, ‘Ancient and Medieval Sources’, 3-7; Grese, ‘Magic in Hellenistic Hermeticism’, 45-58. The literature is vast and uneven.

<sup>11</sup> In this context it should be remembered that Hermes is also considered to be the god of crossroads. It is interesting that the other figure well known in reference to crossroads, Hecate, has been adopted by modern Neopagan witchcraft (“Wicca”) as a prototypology of modern witches (who see themselves as occupying such a place). This is interesting primarily because it is surely the Hermesian qualities of ambiguity and alocality which are the truer reference points. Such unacknowledged homages to Hermes are everywhere evident in modern esoteric structures, thus reinforcing the appropriateness of the term “Hermeticism” as a broad rubric.

pearls of meaning<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, Hermes' attire is cut to the latest fashion for, in keeping with his penchant for morphological plasticity, he has now become something of a *daimon* for modern deconstructionism<sup>13</sup>. Just as during his earlier earthly visitations he was known as the god of destabilisation and disruption, so in latter days he has incarnated as the supreme hermeneutical irritant, chafing at ossified precepts and triggering novel outgrowths of meaning. Unsurprisingly, then, much has been made of his paternity of the term "hermeneutic" itself<sup>14</sup>.

The essentially *constructive* play of Hermes has been undervalued by a tendency to overstate the self-indulgence of his thievery; as Faivre has noted, 'Hermes, unlike Prometheus, steals things only in order to put them back into circulation'<sup>15</sup>. That which he steals, he returns in altered guise; or, to adopt Faivre's concise articulation, his task is that of 'demystifier so as to remythify'<sup>16</sup>. Thus it is that he can simultaneously embody a touching adolescent *naïveté* and a sage-like *gravitas*; when vested in his joker's garb he delights in challenging comfortable verities and pomposity, when adorned as savant and *facundus* he deigns to become the preeminent pedagogue whose task it is to mediate divine gnosis to humanity. For aspirants to arcane wisdom, then, Hermes came to be the ultimate hieratic intercessor, instantiating the key to a universal hermeneutic—as well as remaining the guardian of its keeping.

The constellation of attributes of Hermes/Mercury metastasised in the figure of the Alexandrian Hermes Trismegistus, to whom was credited the authorship of a large body of magico-philosophical texts, the most famed of which are known for the most part under the aggregate title of the *Corpus Hermeticum*<sup>17</sup>. With one notable exception, the *Asclepius*, these texts did not

<sup>12</sup> It was Hermes *qua* Trickster who so captivated Carl Jung (1875-1961): see Jung, 'On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure', 135-152. For Jungian (and related) approaches see: Radin, *Trickster*; Kerényi, *Hermes. Guide of Souls*; Belmonte, 'The Trickster and the Sacred Clown', 45-66. See also Doty, 'Hermes: Guide of Souls', 358-364; id., 'Hermes' Heteronymous Appellations', 115-133; Hynes & Doty (eds.), *Mythical Trickster Figures*; Grotanelli, 'Tricksters, Scapegoats, Champions, Saviours', 117-139.

<sup>13</sup> In this context see Derrida, *Dissemination*, esp. part I.3. Cf. also Tilley, 'Derrida's reading of Plato'.

<sup>14</sup> As Faivre has noted: 'In *hermeneutics* there is Hermes, but *Hermèneuein*, "to explain", is an *explicatio* quite different from that furnished by the new *Hermocopides* or Multilators [*sic*] of Hermes (to pick up on the image furnished by the events in Athens in the year 415 B.C.)' (Faivre, 'Children of Hermes', 430). As Faivre has noted, the prime antique source for the etymology of 'Hermes' (as having to do with speech and language) is to be found in Plato's *Cratylus*, 408A.

<sup>15</sup> Faivre, *Eternal Hermes*, 14. See also Brown, *Hermes the Thief*.

<sup>16</sup> Faivre, 'Children of Hermes', 431.

<sup>17</sup> A useful bibliographic history of the *Corpus Hermeticum* is to be found in Faivre, *Eternal Hermes*, 181-201. The standard translations and commentary remain those by Nock & Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*; Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*. The earlier

reappear in the Latin West until Ficino's translation of 1462 (published in 1471). Few scholars would now doubt the seminal influence of these treatises upon the Neoplatonically-inclined minds of the Medici court, nor fail to appreciate the catholic place of the Hermetic scriptures in the syncretistic esotericisms which developed in their wake. Until quite recently, though, analyses of the *Hermetica* (a more inclusive, if rather abstracted, generic noun for the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Asclepius*, the *Fragments of Stobaeus*, certain portions of the Nag Hammadi codices, various gnomologies, and the multifarious astrological and alchemical works attributed to Trismegistus) concentrated mostly upon the literary character of the works, with particular attention afforded to questions of genre<sup>18</sup>. Of more profound significance for the student of Theosophy, perhaps, is the figure of Trismegistus himself.

Central to the mystery of revelation at the core of the *Hermetica* is the dynamic of disclosure; the treatises are thus appropriately termed scriptures (ἱεροὶ λόγοι), for they mediate the workings and *mens* of God to humanity. Significantly, the revelation does not reside solely in the text, but also *in the person* of Hermes Trismegistus himself, who, it is crucial to remember, was deemed responsible for the instantiation of writing in the first place<sup>19</sup>. It is

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translations and commentary of Scott, *Hermetica*, (1924-1936) remain valuable. For the present purposes, unless otherwise noted, Brian Copenhaver's 1992 translation has been used (Copenhaver, *Hermetica*). The latter contains a comprehensive scholarly bibliography (o.c., lxii-lxxxiii).

<sup>18</sup> It might be noted that genre analysis (when applied to antique sources) can occasionally appear somewhat anachronistic. So it is that the tendency developed to make an arbitrary division of the *Hermetica* into "philosophical" and "magical" texts: see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 89ff; Yates, *Ideas and Ideals*, 58. Such a demarcation is not supported by the texts themselves (which often contain elements germane to both), and seems mostly to have been predicated upon a desire to "rescue" the philosophically-richer treatises from the taint of theurgy. One is reminded of an equally arbitrary distinction between "white" and "black" magic, though here one can at least trace the lineaments of the argument historically.

<sup>19</sup> It is widely understood in the antique literature that Thoth/Hermes, particularly, was credited with granting the gift of writing to humanity. Less well recognised, perhaps, was the broader attribution to him of human communication: i.e., speech. In this sense, it is interesting to recognise that writing (the "trace") is the remnant of meaning, and thus that here again Hermes can only be known through his absence or in the residues of his activity. Yet the link between meaning and artefact remains a living one and, for esotericists, is able to facilitate further communication/communion with Hermes. In other words, for (Hermetic) esotericists, there is no absolute ontological separation between the signified and the signifier, thus words themselves *retain the trace of their magical character* and may become "ladders" not just for meaning, but for human transmutation. Kabbalah, of course, is a case in point. For an interesting analysis of antique theurgic adjurations around the Mediterranean basin see Lesses, 'Speaking with Angels', 41-60. It is useful to keep Hermes in mind when reading Brian Vickers' work on occult linguistics and semiotics: Vickers, 'Analogy versus identity', 95-163; id., 'On the Function of Analogy in the Occult', 265-292. The parallels with Theosophy are obvious: though the Masters may not now be physically contactable (if, indeed, they ever were), they nevertheless "remain" within Theoso-

certain that the philosophically-rich Hermetic scriptures had as their intention the broadening of the aperture of spiritual perception such that aspirants might view unoccluded their own animating divine spark and then, through such superior gnosis, come to apprehend the extra-cosmic God and recognise their own divinity. Less obvious, though surely no less intended, is the inference that the once mortal Hermes Trismegistus had himself achieved his place within the pantheon of the gods *through the self-same process*. In other words, Hermes Trismegistus, in a typically Hermesian circular artifice, enfleshes his own precepts.

The ambivalent ontology of the Hellenistic Hermes/Mercury and the Egyptian Thoth was both a structural necessity and a predicate for the syncretistic Hermes Trismegistus of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The special gnosis of the treatises is underpinned by the belief that the *nous*, or divine intellect (or 'the soul of God'), mediates between the structural affinities of God and humanity<sup>20</sup> (thus it is that the kinship shared between humans and the divine insinuates that God can never be utterly transcendent). Such a belief naturally presupposes a multiple-tiered cosmology and, crucially, a hierarchy of being<sup>21</sup>. If, as seems sure, the gnosis of the *Corpus Hermeticum* is an unrestrained theology of *theosis* (divinisation), then *divinity is attained by degree*, and Hermes

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phy's seminal texts, *Isis Unveiled*, *The Secret Doctrine*, and, especially, the *Mahatma letters*. Robert Tilley has noted that 'Hermes merges into his invention, disappears into his trickery, that is, into writing' (Tilley, 'Derrida's Reading', 8). The Masters "disappear" no less successfully. See French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 2, 462-471.

<sup>20</sup> It is hardly insignificant that in Nag Hammadi Codex VI.6, *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (or *The Ogdoad reveals the Ennead*) Hermes Trismegistus *himself becomes nous*: mediator and mediation are finally united in the person of Trismegistus. See NHC, VI.6.58.1-29. See also Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 104-115. One is reminded of Richard Valantasis' interpretation of this text (58.32-59.11): 'The cosmic and philosophical god has been collapsed into the person of the guide. The nous connects the guide, through his empowerment, to the divinity and then, for the initiate, becomes the point for complete identification of the divinity with the guide by a sort of transference of natures and attributes' (Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides*, 97). One can only begin to imagine just how much joy the discovery of this particular codex would have given to Blavatsky, and what she would have made of its contents (let alone its iatromathematics). It is some sort of comment on the present dominance of the specialist scholar, rather than the sophisticated generalisers of Blavatsky's era, that with few exceptions (notably, *The Gospel of Thomas*) the Nag Hammadi codices have sponsored no significant new literary esotericisms. Incidentally, the definitive *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* includes an 'Afterword' by Richard Smith in which the author notes that it was 'Madame Blavatsky who first claimed the Gnostics as precursors for the occult movement' (o.c., 537; not true, but indicative of her importance) and that 'H. P. Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society wrote the book on secret traditions. Most esoteric movements ever since have found it almost impossible to step outside of her (sometimes unconscious) influence' (o.c., 538). Smith's 'book' metaphor, though itself perhaps unconscious, is particularly apposite. See Smith, 'Afterword', 532-549.

<sup>21</sup> For the idea of a 'multiple-tier cosmology' see Platvoet, 'Definers Defined', 184-185.

Trismegistus—as man-made-God—incarnates the process of divinisation. Thus the traditional ambivalence regarding the exact status of Hermes becomes an absolute virtue in the *Hermetica*, for it is there that Hermes' ambivalence is rearticulated as Trismegistus' semiotic polyvalency. Crucially, it is this very polyvalency which undergirds the graduated elevation of the initiate Trismegistus into what Gilles Quispel has termed 'the Deifying Vision'<sup>22</sup> and which thereafter allows the aspirant to view 'Father Hermes' as man *and* god.

### *Vertical Transit and Macroyclicism in the Hermetica*

The articulation of the process of divinisation as undergone by Hermes Trismegistus (self-abnegation, *ascesis*, purification, initiation, and so on) is of less concern for the study of Theosophy than the central *ascensus/descensus* motif which is retained at the centre of the scheme. Significantly, the fluid mobility of the Hellenistic Hermes/Mercury, either as *psychopompos* or the flighty Messenger of the Gods, has been tightened and regulated in the Alexandrian recension: as the proto-initiate, the human Hermes undergoes an existential *palingenesis* and, whether immediately or in stages—the sources disagree<sup>23</sup>—he *ascends* into apperception of the divine. Having encountered the God within and without, the God-man Hermes Trismegistus *descends* to the sensible world in order to impart the secrets of true knowledge to humanity<sup>24</sup>. This *ascensus/descensus* figuration—beloved by esotericists—was adopted by Blavatsky and made to form the teleological and cosmo-historical spindle around which she wove her various macrohistorical constructions<sup>25</sup>.

Hermes Trismegistus was by no means alone within the antique pantheon as the divinised man: Heracles, Dionysus, and Orpheus also possessed such unusual ontologies. Nevertheless, the morphic plasticity of Hermes, the venerable tradition of the Hermes/Mercury/Thoth syncretistic *cultus*, and the long asso-

<sup>22</sup> Quispel, 'Judaism, Judaic Christianity and Gnosis', 53-58; see also Deutsch, *Gnostic Imagination*, 75-79.

<sup>23</sup> The divergent notions of the nature of the *ascensus* typify the agglomerate character of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (and the *Hermetica* generally). CH I:24-26 suggests that apperception of the divine occurs only after death; CH XIII:1 suggests antemortem revelation. Further, the former makes clear that the soul will ascend through the heavenly spheres (and be thus purified) on its journey to the divine, while the latter describes an initiation which 'purges Tat of his vices at a stroke' (Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 109).

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of the *ascensus/descensus* motif in the classical world see Culianu, *Psychanodia* I, 10-15, 48-54.

<sup>25</sup> For such major Theosophical themes as the ascent/descent *leitmotif*, macrocyclicism, and "heavenly ascent" see French, 'Theosophical Masters', 2 vols, *passim*. See also Trompf, 'Macrohistory', 269-296.



ciation of Hermes with the plethora of magical technologies, ensured that Hermes Trismegistus assumed the rôle of esoteric *paterfamilias*. Significantly, as the Hermetic template espouses a *via ascendendi*, it has provision for any number of initiates to enter the family of adepts. So it was that very early in the esoteric aretalogies Hermes Trismegistus became the central axis around whom were spun the various representatives of the *philosophia perennis*. Typical lists included Trismegistus in the company of Zoroaster, Orpheus, Abraham, Pythagoras, Plato, the (Matthean) Magi, *inter alia*<sup>26</sup>. Such genealogies naturally took the *Corpus Hermeticum* at its word and assumed the veracity of Hermes Trismegistus' historical existence<sup>27</sup>. In so doing, they contributed significantly to the notion that Trismegistus was a contemporary of Moses<sup>28</sup> and, *ergo*, that the *Corpus Hermeticum* held chronological priority over the Bible—a position which would not be undermined until 1614 by the publication of Isaac Casaubon's *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI*<sup>29</sup>.

The Renaissance project to establish the identity of the *prisca theologia*, the one true dispensation veiled by the accretions of the ages, was predicated, naturally enough, on the grounds of temporal priority. The common assumption among enthusiasts that the *Corpus Hermeticum* antedated Biblical revelation allowed for (Platonic) philosophy and (Christian) theology to be rearticulated as wisdoms refracted through the *original* creed and revelation: Hermetic gnosis. Such was the stance adopted by one of Blavatsky's most revered esoteric "hierophants", the Egyptophile Giordano Bruno, for whom all religious and philosophical dispensations could be traced to an Hermetic unitive core—a particularly Alexandrian *prisca theologia*<sup>30</sup>. Such esoteric

<sup>26</sup> Typical genealogies are to be found in Faivre, *Eternal Hermes*, 95-98.

<sup>27</sup> The Renaissance belief in the historical existence of Hermes Trismegistus was based on the imprimatur given to the notion by various early Christian authorities, notably Clement of Alexandria, Lactantius, and Augustine of Hippo. For some instances see *infra*.

<sup>28</sup> In this context see Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, *passim*.

<sup>29</sup> For a concise analysis of the reaction to Casaubon's findings (i.e., that the *Corpus Hermeticum* postdated Christianity by a century or more) see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 390-391. For an interesting discussion of dating in Western scholarship, see the references to Casaubon in Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, 76-98 *et passim*. It should be noted that Casaubon's findings remained generally unknown for many years; further, those Hermetists or Hermeticists who were aware for the most part ignored his conclusions.

<sup>30</sup> For Bruno's belief in the Egyptian wellspring, and for his own sophisticated construction of an Hermetic *philosophia perennis*, see Mendoza, *Acentric Labyrinth*, ch. 13; cf. also Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 1-61, 205-256. It is informative that Bruno considered the Kabbalah to issue from an Egyptian original, and that Moses (as a crucial link in the mediational chain of the *philosophia perennis*) was instructed in its tenets: see Bruno, *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, 239-241. The degree of Bruno's idealisation of Egyptian religion can be ascertained from

relativism, it seems, had paved the way for genuinely pious Christian Hermeticism, and provided the philosophical underpinning for such brilliant appropriations as Christian Kabbalah. Less well acknowledged, though systematically akin, is the certainty that Blavatskian synthetic Theosophy, as both a textual hermeneutic and a latter-day syncretistic *philosophia perennis*, has a direct progenitor in the search for origins begun by the Renaissance Hermeticists<sup>31</sup>.

If this all-too-brief sampling of themes from the *Corpus Hermeticum* indicates an obvious ascent/descent framework at the individual level, it is not surprising that the other theme beloved by Blavatsky, cosmic cyclicism, is no less evident<sup>32</sup>. In the *Asclepius* (originally the Greek *Perfect Discourse*) Egypt is deemed to be 'an image of heaven' and 'the temple of the whole world'<sup>33</sup>. Yet the glory of Egypt will be sundered by a foreign invasion which will cause the gods to retreat to heaven:

A time will come when it will appear that the Egyptians paid respect to divinity with faithful mind and painstaking reverence—to no purpose. All their holy worship will be disappointed and perish without effect, for divinity will return from earth to heaven, and Egypt will be abandoned. The land that was the seat of reverence will be widowed by the powers and left destitute of their presence. When foreigners occupy the land and territory, not only will reverence fall into

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his belief that it had perfected the *ars ascendendi*: 'The Egyptians ... used to ascend and (as their successes demonstrate) used to penetrate divinity' (Bruno, *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, 248-249).

<sup>31</sup> One hopes that as scholars continue to examine the conceptual infrastructure of Theosophy, those involved in the academic study of esotericism will accept that Theosophy can confidently be placed under the rubric of Hermetic esotericism. Perhaps, then, Faivre's comments might be broadened: 'This tracing of Hermes through history, trying to single out the cultural traits which he anonymously inspired, of the signifiers of certain constants of the imagination, comes down in practice to a summary history of esotericism itself—not that the pertinence of that is in question here. This is esotericism as understood from a perspective broad enough to include the Philosophy of Nature, in the Romantic sense, and the synthesizing eclecticism of Pico or Ficino, as well as *traditional theosophy* and alchemy. The enterprise is a perfectly legitimate one, in so far as esotericism, thus encompassed, is altogether under the sign of Hermes, and considering that this quicksilver god transcends its boundaries' (Faivre, *Eternal Hermes*, 49-50, emphasis added). It should be noted that Faivre is here discussing the historiography of Gilbert Durand).

<sup>32</sup> One is reminded of the passage from the *Asclepius* (*Ascl.* 30): 'On earth one tells time by the quality of the air and the change of hot seasons and cold, but in heaven time runs by the return of the coursing stars to the same places in chronological cycles. The world is time's receptacle; the cycling and stirring of time invigorate it ... [but God] is his own steadfast stability, and no external impulse can move him from his place since everything is in him and he alone in everything—unless one ventures to say that his motion is *in eternity*'. Further (*Ascl.* 31): 'Eternity has no limitation within time. But time, granted that it can be limited by number or alteration or periodic return through recurrence, is eternal'. The twin themes of the vertical transit of the soul and macrocyclicism are explored in French, 'Theosophical Masters', *passim*.

<sup>33</sup> For comparative purposes cf. the Coptic recension in NHC VI:8.70-75: *Ascl.* 21-29.

neglect but, even harder, a prohibition under penalty prescribed by law (so-called) will be enacted against reverence, fidelity and divine worship. Then this most holy land, seat of shrines and temples, will be filled completely with tombs and corpses<sup>34</sup>.

Garth Fowden has illustrated that the *topos* of foreign invasion need not be an allusion to Christian persecution of native religion, nor indeed that the references to legal prohibitions are thereby fourth-century interpolations, as has been commonly adduced<sup>35</sup>. Fowden, interpreting the text as a direct reference to the Ptolemies' hegemony and Romano-Hellenic ethno-cultural oppression of the indigenous population, employs a sometimes surprising range of comparables from the experiences of other colonised traditional societies such as the Australian Unambal aborigines, the Incas, the Aztecs, and the Mayas<sup>36</sup>. It is significant for the present study that by dislocating the apocalypticism of the *Hermetica* from traditional historiographical suppositions, Fowden has brought to the fore the universalist applications of the passages: irreligion and disrespect for tradition breed contempt for the gods—and the gods will exact their revenge. Intriguingly, Blavatsky had employed a similar exegesis a hundred years prior to Fowden.

There is no doubt that Blavatsky was well acquainted with the *Asclepius*<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, the quite apocalyptic passages quoted *supra* (*Ascl.* 24-27) were incorporated into her macrohistory as evidence of the growing marginalisation of the Ancient Wisdom in the face of the strident materialism now impinging upon Fourth Round humanity (that is, humanity as presently evolved and constituted)<sup>38</sup>. Unsurprisingly, her vision is rather clever:

<sup>34</sup> *Ascl.* 24.

<sup>35</sup> *Contra* Nock and Festugière. See Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 38ff. One might add (following Fowden) that the early tendency to interpret this passage as a prophecy of the ascendancy of Christianity, as gleefully evident in Lactantius (*Divine Institutes* VII.15: 212-213) and Augustine (*City of God* VIII.23: 159-161), has perhaps coloured subsequent interpretation.

<sup>36</sup> Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 37-44, esp. 42-43. For a picture of the tensions in Egyptian society see Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*; also esp. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*.

<sup>37</sup> Selections of Blavatsky's commentaries on the *Hermetica*, recently assembled by Henk Spiereburg, indicate the breadth of her reading. See Blavatsky, *On the Gnostics*.

<sup>38</sup> The Blavatskian imaging of Rounds and Root Races is too complicated to investigate here. It is sufficient to note that the teleological dynamics of her system are essentially gnostic in so far as spirit, having "fallen" into matter in the First Round, is now experiencing its densest engagement in matter (the Fourth Round), and will be required to disengage itself so as to begin the process of "respiritualisation". The latter will culminate in the ultimate reintegration of spirit into the Absolute at the end of the Seventh Round. It should be noted that this process is in a state of constant reticulation, and will require many lifetimes; indeed, Blavatsky has wedded the *ascensus/descensus* motif to a vast macrocyclicism which has resulted in a complex and quite sophisticated cosmo-historical map. For a more detailed examination see French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 1, 177-235 *et passim*.

As was predicted by the great Hermes in his dialogue with Aesculapius, the time had indeed come when impious foreigners accused Egypt of adoring monsters ... Her sacred Scribes and Hierophants became wanderers upon the face of the earth. Those who had remained in Egypt found themselves obliged for fear of a profanation of the sacred Mysteries to seek refuge in deserts and mountains, to form and establish secret societies and brotherhoods—such as the Essenes; those who had crossed the oceans to India and even to the (now-called) New World, bound themselves by solemn oaths to keep silent, and to preserve secret their Sacred Knowledge and Science; thus these were buried deeper than ever out of human sight<sup>39</sup>.

Much of the attention which the *Asclepius* apocalyptic passages have garnered has focussed on the socio-cultural impacts of new paradigms (whether Christian or Hellenic) on traditional Egyptian society. There can be no doubt that Blavatsky, upon studying the *Asclepius*, was singular in noting its applicability to the religio-epistemological conflicts of her own century. Indeed, the following passage reads very much like Blavatsky's own tirades against the materialism of her age:

A land once holy, most loving of divinity, by reason of her reverence the only land on earth where the gods settled, she who taught holiness and fidelity will be an example of utter [un]belief. In their weariness the people of that time will find nothing to wonder at or to worship. This all—a good thing that never had nor has nor will have its better—will be endangered. People will find it oppressive and scorn it. They will not cherish this entire world, a work of god beyond compare, a glorious construction, a bounty composed of images in multiform variety, a mechanism for god's will ungrudgingly supporting his work, making a unity of everything that can be honored, praised and finally loved by those who see it, a multiform accumulation taken as a single thing. They will prefer shadows to light, and they will find death more expedient than life. No one will look up to heaven. The reverent will be thought mad, the irreverent wise; the lunatic will be thought brave, and the scoundrel will be taken for a decent person. Soul and all teachings about soul (that soul began as immortal or else expects to attain immortality) as I revealed them to you will be considered not simply laughable but even illusory<sup>40</sup>.

The gods, having retreated to their heavenly abode, will countenance only a certain amount of 'irreverence, disorder, disregard for anything good', and the 'god whose power is primary' will sweep away the unrighteousness with flood, fire, and plague<sup>41</sup>. Thereafter a regeneration will take place:

Then he will restore the world to its beauty of old so that the world itself will again seem deserving of worship and wonder, and with constant benedictions and

<sup>39</sup> Blavatsky, 'Last of the Mysteries in Europe', 294.

<sup>40</sup> *Ascl.* 25.

<sup>41</sup> *Ascl.* 25.

proclamations of praise the people of that time will honor the god who makes and restores so great a work. And this will be the geniture of the world: a reformation of all good things and a restitution, most holy and most reverent, of nature itself, reordered in the course of time [but through an act of will,] which is and was everlasting and without beginning<sup>42</sup>.

The evident cyclicism of the Asclepian prophecies (from pristine purity to corruption, to annihilation, to rebirth) is the obvious contender for the provenance of such a foundational *leitmotif* of esotericism. The value of such figurations, of course, is their applicability for diverse purposes and programmes. Remarkably, in the vast Theosophical literature the seminal influence of the Hermetic template upon Blavatskian conceptual mapping has passed virtually unmentioned. Concentration on the Orientalism of the post-1878 Theosophical Society—that is, the period following Blavatsky's removal to India—has ensured that antecedents for the vertical transit of the soul (the ascent/descent motif) and “Ages” theory (the macrocyclicist historiography), both so crucial to Blavatskian mapping, have been sought far afield in Indic sources, rather than in the most predictable place of all—the *Hermetica*, crucible of esotericisms. For many and varied reasons it simply proved convenient for religionist and scholar alike to situate Theosophy outside of the thoroughfare of Western thought. That so many themes and motifs of gnostic Hermetism<sup>43</sup> could resurface in such manifestly ‘modern’ garb, with such alacrity, and, above all else, to such tremendous popular acclaim, is a profoundly disquieting notion for those enamoured of the idea that the march of scientific rationalism gained inexorable momentum in the years following 1859<sup>44</sup>.

Even from the few isolated examples listed *supra*, it is surely obvious that the Hermetic strains in modern Theosophy deserve singular analysis. Indeed, it is not improbable that as a “history of ideas” project, this should be the

<sup>42</sup> *Ascl.* 26.

<sup>43</sup> The term “gnostic Hermetism” might appear odd to those who believe that gnosticism (as well as historical Gnosticism) automatically presupposes an absolute ontological dualism. Certainly, there are “pessimistic” dualist elements in the *Hermetica*, but they are maintained in a healthy tension with the optimistic creation-affirming elements (and Blavatskian Theosophy could not ever honestly be deemed dualistic, nor readily incorporate any such philosophy). It appears that the recent trend in scholarship is to de-emphasise the (if the term may be forgiven) singularity of dualism to gnosticism. Gilles Quispel has even attempted to drive a wedge between those two previously inseparable words, “Manichaean dualism”: ‘Manichaeism in its original and authentic form is gnostic and hellenistic and owes very little to Iran. It is a myth of the Self, *dualitudo* rather than dualism’ (Quispel, ‘Hermes Trismegistus’, 17). In this context see also Culianu, ‘Angels of the Nations’, 78–91. For a concise overview of the differences between historical Gnosticism and Hermetism see van den Broek, ‘Gnosticism and Hermetism in Antiquity’, 1–20.

<sup>44</sup> It is rare that a year is remembered primarily for the publication of a book: Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

priority concern for historians of Theosophy. Only thus will the locus of Blavatskian conceptual mapping be properly determined, and Theosophy be welcomed *sui generis* into the company of its Hermetic forebears and consequently brought fully into the light of impartial scholarship. For the present, though, it suffices to observe that Blavatsky's engagement with the *Hermetica* was profound, and that she incorporated many of its mythemes into her own Theosophical synthesis. If such is the case, then is it not also likely that she found in the figure of Hermes Trismegistus himself the ideal prototypical Master?

### *Hermetic Mediations*

Fowden's compelling thesis—that the Hermetic texts were a consonance of native religionisms and the Hellenistic idiom—has interesting ideational parallels to the Theosophical corpus. Fowden has suggested that Græco-Roman paganism, encumbered by its legacy of cultic decentralisation and competing philosophical schools, found in the Oriental texts *the revelatory solution to the problem of authority*<sup>45</sup>. In a cultural matrix which sponsored ever more baroque syncretisms, 'it was only a matter of time before somebody thought of combining the divine authority of the oracle with the systematic reasoning of the philosopher', and the *Hermetica* provided the ideal template<sup>46</sup>. The unitive quality of the *Hermetica* ensured that *pronunciamenti* concerning ontology, eschatology, soteriology, and teleology could be bound together, and presented as having issued from a divine warrant. As unitive discourse *and* revealed doctrine the *Hermetica* are 'unique in the pagan sphere'<sup>47</sup> and, although their influence may have been less pronounced at the time than that of Pythagoras, the Chaldean Oracles or the Orphic poems, their capacity to present a *tertium quid* to cultic *praxis* and philosophical *theoria* would ensure they were ideally placed to mediate during future periods of conflict between the (ontic?) sparring partners, Church and School. Of course it should also be remembered that there is a compelling irony in the certainty that the life of the *Hermetica* was almost extinguished in its infancy by another Oriental revelatory system, Christianity. However, the latent doctrinal authoritarianism and ecclesiastical exclusivism which soon became a defining feature of the new *cultus*, in attempting to suppress the Hermetic gnosis, characteristically ensured its posterity.

<sup>45</sup> Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 213-215.

<sup>46</sup> Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 215.

<sup>47</sup> Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 215.

The capacious mediational potential of the *Hermetica* was intuited by Blavatsky and brought to bear upon the epistemological dilemmas of her own era in a curiously analogous way to that described by Fowden. The rhetoric of Church and Academy, as Blavatsky saw it, had adumbrated the spiritual vision of humanity. Christianity ('Churchianity')<sup>48</sup> had been denuded of its transformative potentialities, its mythos denied. Certainly the *Zeitgeist*—if not, perhaps, the Holy Ghost—now appeared "to bloweth" almost exclusively extra-ecclesially, making any return to Biblical sureties a matter of an unattractive blend of *pathos* and *bathos*. Philosophical materialism and scientific rationalism proffered no more attractive option; the world, denuded of its spiritual sheath, offered no solace to counter the uncertainties of a coolly mechanistic universe. It seemed to Blavatsky that the gods had indeed departed from 'the temple of the whole world'<sup>49</sup> and that the void created by their absence would likely be filled by a bastard scientism possessed of no transformative powers whatsoever. What was required was an inspirational figure who could open up the infinite by beckoning from beyond and inviting the aspirant over the threshold<sup>50</sup>. Yet the problems which inhere within any exclusively immanentist or transcendent model of divinity weighed against all traditionalist exemplars and convinced Blavatsky that the answer she so desperately sought would be found, rather, at the interstice of both.

Blavatsky turned for inspiration to the referential corpus of Western esotericism, and there intuited that the man-god she needed had been invoked throughout the centuries in epistemologically-trying times under the *personae* of Hermes. A nineteenth-century Hermes, though, would require significant rearticulation to embrace the skepticism and cynicism of her era. He could no longer occupy an undifferentiated mesocosm inhabited equally by myth and fable: it was an age of facts, and *he would have to be one*<sup>51</sup>. If Hermes' ontic

<sup>48</sup> Blavatsky often employed the derogatory term 'Churchianity': cf., eg., Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* VIII, 296-297; X, 164, 243; XII, 28, 268-270.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *supra* nt 33.

<sup>50</sup> The use of the term "threshold" necessarily reminds one of the liminality of Hermes. The descriptive "liminal" has not been employed herein, however, as much recent scholarship has tended to use the term primarily in metasemiotic terms; the present author finds such a use methodologically suspect. One is reminded of T. O. Beidelman's injunction: 'I also urge that we avoid global explanatory terms, such as Turner's *communitas* and *liminality*' (Beidelman, 'Moral Imagination of the Kaguru', 191).

<sup>51</sup> Blavatsky lamented the reductionism which was meted out upon mythology in her era: 'Legends, myths, allegories, symbols, if they but belong to the Hindu, Chaldean, or Egyptian tradition, are thrown into the same heap of fiction. Hardly are they honored ... Is this justice to either the past, the present, or the future?' (Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* II, 431). It should be noted that the present author is of the opinion that the concentration on the physical ontology of the Theosophical Masters has unfortunately robbed Theosophical discourse of much of its inherent

“otherness” could not be constructed by reference to the apparatus of myth, it could be maintained geographically and culturally (in hallowed fashion) by locating him in the absolute alterity of the East<sup>52</sup>. Significantly, the East had never lost its function as the font of divine revelation, nor its reputation for authoritative syntheses of religion and philosophy—indeed, exactly the sorts of thing Blavatsky planned to inculcate in the Western imaginal.

Blavatsky’s Hermes *became* the Theosophical Master. It might be argued—by those who reject the Masters’ physical ontology—that Blavatsky employed overt reductionism, indeed Euhemerism, in marginalising the mythic potentialities of Hermes by steadfastly maintaining the physical existence of her Masters at the cost of their metaphysical valencies. There is some truth in such a claim, though a degree of mitigation is provided by the extraordinary challenges she faced as a myth-maker in an era characterised by an ever-deepening religious cynicism; crucially, she understood intuitively that her society would be more likely to accept a god-like man than a man-like God<sup>53</sup>. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, it seems that Blavatsky’s project is more akin to a counter-Euhemerism<sup>54</sup>. She recognised that heretofore divine processes *had*

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polyvalency. So it is that the only methodological position which can yield an analytically-rich harvest is that of empirical agnosticism. For details see French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 2, esp. 399–607; see also esp. Hancgraaff, ‘Empirical method’, *passim*.

<sup>52</sup> For the Master as an exemplar of esoteric Orientalism see French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 2, 472–487.

<sup>53</sup> One is reminded of Fowden’s comment that ‘in fact, if Hermes had not existed he would have had to be invented’: Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 187. For Blavatsky’s purposes, it might be said, he needed to be *incarnated*.

<sup>54</sup> Intriguingly, a similar counter-Euhemerism is still employed to a large degree in the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, a Church with which Blavatsky was well acquainted (for which see French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 2, esp. 435–461). In a number of Coptic churches, among the small shrines around the nave (for the veneration of saints and relics) there is a shrine to “St. Asclepius”. St. Asclepius does not appear in the official Coptic *Synaxarion*, nor in the *Difnar* (a Coptic martyrology and contemplative text), but is nevertheless regarded by a number of Copts as the bringer of language (hieroglyphs and, interestingly, Coptic itself) and medicine. One monastic priest well known to the present author, Abouna Tadros El-Bakhoumi, has noted that Thoth/Asclepius—the characters are merged—was responsible for bringing surgery to the ancient Egyptians. He considers that such medical techniques were far in advance of modern forms. The reference to Thoth/Asclepius as a “saint” of surgery is not insignificant as Hermes is, in certain obvious ways, a god of healing, capable of “mending the fabric of life”: i.e., resolving conflict (it is also not immaterial that a remarkably large percentage of contemporary prosperous Copts are doctors and pharmacists—thus St. Asclepius/Thoth is maintained as something of a “personal” cultic deity of the Copts, who consider themselves the real “sons of the pharaohs”—in contrast, they believe, to the Arab invaders). In this context Meinardus’ comments are particularly apposite: ‘In the VIIIth century B.C., popular devotion raised Imhotep to the status of a demigod, and finally, during the Hellenistic Era, he became deified under the name of Imouthes and identified with Aesculapius. He was invoked as a god and was believed to visit suffering people during their sleep and heal their diseases’ (Meinardus, *Christian Egypt Faith and Life*,



*already been reduced* to mechanistic procedures and deterministic outcomes by the new epistemologies brought in the wake of Enlightenment-consciousness<sup>55</sup>. Her own riposte, Theosophy, was an attempt to reinvest the *anthropos* with its Hermetic gnostic spark, and thereby re-enchant the cosmos. Yet Blavatsky was fully enamoured of the critical apparatus of modernity—committed though she was to premodern epistemologies—and sought to reconstruct her occultistic gnosis not only as the *prisca theologia* but also as the *theologia civilis*. In describing the latter, David Walsh's comments are curiously apposite to Blavatsky: 'It [a *theologia civilis*] would have to perform the same existential role as Christianity, and [yet] remain fully supportive of the Promethean humanist spirit of the age'<sup>56</sup>.

That Blavatsky had decided upon the centrality of Hermetism to her endeavour was obvious from as early as the publication of *Isis Unveiled* (1877): 'This mystery of first creation, which was ever the despair of science, is unfathomable, unless we accept the doctrine of the Hermetists'<sup>57</sup>. She was fully

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220-221). Another saint unknown to the Coptic *Synaxarion* is Abū Tarbū (or Abū Tarabū), whose special provenance is the curing of hydrophobia (rabies). The Service of Abū Tarbū involves seven loaves, seven dates, seven cheeses, and seven prepubescent boys. Seven prayers are recited by the priest, and the boys circle the diseased party seven times with arms joined. It is not improbable that Abū Tarbū, identified with St. Theraon, is a personification of healing (θεραπεύω), which indicates the propensity within the Coptic Church for survivals of pagan antiquity to remain within popular piety. The present Patriarch, Pope Shenouda III, has suppressed the Service of Abū Tarbū and removed it from authorised translations of Coptic service books for the communities in diaspora. For the Service see Galtier, 'La Rage en Egypte', 112-127; Vycichl, 'Magic', 1499-1509. It is interesting to consider that the process of Christian counter-Euhemerism undertaken by the Copts has allowed for the rather seamless fusion of certain distinct Gnostico-Hermetic traits with a rigorous, even occasionally militant, Christian orthodoxy. Much of the responsibility for this characteristic can be traced to the extraordinary authority of monastics in Coptic life: Pachomian monks (such as Fr. Tadros El-Bakhoui, *supra*) appear always to have insisted on the maintenance of native tradition and theology. That Thoth/Hermes should have prevailed—indeed, been newly venerated—under the guise of Christian hagiology is a tribute to the tenacity of both Hermes and the monks (though it perhaps would not please the latter to know it). Of course, it is highly likely an identical tenacity in the Pachomian community of the late fourth century is responsible for the survival of the Nag Hammadi library—itsself a repository of crucial Hermetic materials. For the Master *qua* monk see French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 2, esp. 435-461.

<sup>55</sup> It should be noted that Blavatsky did espouse an overt Euhemerism in her macrohistory: 'The chief gods and heroes of the Fourth and Fifth Races, as of later antiquity, are the deified images of these men of the Third' (Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine* II, 172). This usage in no way undermines the thesis that she employed a sort of counter-Euhemerism with regard to the Masters.

<sup>56</sup> David Walsh, 'A Mythology of Reason', 157-158.

<sup>57</sup> Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* I, 429. It is worth noting that Blavatsky included a variant of this statement in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). The changes are illuminating: 'On page 429 of *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. I., we said that "the mystery of first creation, which was ever the despair of Science, is unfathomable unless they (the Scientists) accept the doctrine of Hermes. *They will have*

familiar with the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius*, and kept abreast throughout her life of new texts and commentaries as they became available to her<sup>58</sup> (indeed, it is by no means insignificant that early members of the Theosophical Society were among the first to translate and popularise the *Hermetica* for a modern readership)<sup>59</sup>. Yet no significant studies have noted that the gnosticism at the core of the *Hermetica* was perfectly suited to assist in Blavatsky's objective of wresting Promethean fire from the materialists and transmuting it into the 'divine spark within man'<sup>60</sup>. Further, no scholar, it appears, has considered that the figure of Hermes Trismegistus was at least as influential upon Blavatskian imaging as the texts ascribed to him. Such an oversight is somewhat remarkable given the hints which she occasionally, if covertly, volunteered: 'Thot-Hermes is a generic name ... It is not the proper name of any one living man, but a generic title of many adepts'<sup>61</sup>.

Blavatsky's stratified Theosophical cosmos presupposes that all humans are situated along an optimistically-inclined evolutionary path—yet the pilgrimage back to primordial Spirit is likely to occupy many thousands of lifetimes. However, central to the Theosophical endeavour is the contention (*contra* Spiritualism) that individual ante-mortem spiritual advance is both possible and desirable. Consequently, the enlightened esotericist is able to shorten the trajectory of his or her personal development by stepping upon the path to Master-ship. The Masters, significantly, provide the template for conscious evolution—a quest personified in the figure of Trismegistus whose own divinity is self-generated through heavenly ascent. Following his *theosis*, the

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to follow in the footsteps of the Hermetists". Our prophecy begins to assert itself' (id., *Secret Doctrine* I, 625, emphasis in original).

<sup>58</sup> References to the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius* (spelled variously by Blavatsky) are legion throughout her *œuvre*. She made a point of procuring new versions, such as the 1884 edition of *The Divine Pymander*, which employed John Everard's 1650 translation from the Arabic with a new introduction by Hargrave Jennings. She also quoted from Anna Bonus Kingsford's and Edward Maitland's *The Hermetic Works* in her *Secret Doctrine* I, 281 *et passim*. There can be no doubt that Blavatsky mined the *Hermetica* rather thoroughly.

<sup>59</sup> Cf., eg., Everard (ed. & transl.) *The Pymander of Hermes*, intro. Westcott: William Wynn Westcott (1843-1925) was general editor of the *Collectanea Hermetica* series, of which this was vol. II, and mediated much of Theosophical Hermeticism into a variety of para-Masonic Rites. Primary among the Theosophical students of the *Hermetica* was G. R. S. Mead (1863-1933) who devoted much of his life to the publication and analysis of the Hermetic and Gnostic treatises. Among the Hermetic works are: Mead, *Thrice Greatest Hermes*; id., *The Hymns of Hermes*. It is interesting to note that Mead's translations of the Gnostic materials (esp. *Pistis Sophia*; *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*) were among the favourites of C. G. Jung, who visited Mead in England around the year 1930: see Cooper, 'Professor Gilles Quispel', 202; conversations between the author and Gilles Quispel, Sydney, August, 1994.

<sup>60</sup> Blavatsky, 'Dreams', 255.

<sup>61</sup> Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine* II, 211.

man-god Hermes undertook the necessary countervailing descent by returning to the sensible world in order to convey to mundane humanity the secrets of his own divinisation. So, too, the Masters benevolently deign to assist those few aspirants possessed of sufficient insight and resourcefulness to initiate the journey to the 'Deifying Vision' within. The ascent/descent figuration of the *Hermetica* is thus exactly reproduced in Blavatskian Theosophy; there is no need to search for Oriental Bodhisattvas when Blavatsky's Hermesian modelling is fully acknowledged<sup>62</sup>.

The aretalogies of Hermes note that he is most often found when unsought, and seen most readily in twilight. Aside from the more obvious parallels with the mercurial Masters—whose own visitations to the faithful Theosophists were nothing if not frustratingly capricious<sup>63</sup>—it might be noted that Hermes' appearance at half-light underscores his capacity to synthesise otherwise opposing dualities. He exists in order to illuminate the pathway to unexpected "dialectical" passages. This function is precisely that which Blavatsky arrogated unto her Masters, for their primary soteriological task is to provide a living example of a sophiology not dependent upon institutionalised religion or science; they, like Hermes, incarnate the necessity for a *tertium quid*. In this context, Faivre's comments are apposite: 'A Hermesian reading of the world is necessarily a plural reading. The caduceus of Hermes is plural because it is constituted of a bipolarity whose symbolism reflects back to a ternary'<sup>64</sup>. The caduceus of the Masters is *Theosophy itself*. Encircled by what Blavatsky believed to be the narcissistic authoritarianism of Church and Academy, the Masters point to a synthesis of *pistis* and *sophia* beyond the visible horizon. Thus the dialecticism for which Hermes is so ably fitted was exploited to the full in the figuration of the Master<sup>65</sup>.

The Masters' Theosophy, in a classically Hermesian enterprise, is, for all of

<sup>62</sup> It should be remembered that the two most significant tasks ascribed to Hermes in innumerable accounts are that of escorting certain souls to Hades, and searching for others there and returning them to the land of the living (indeed, to life). See Faivre, *Eternal Hermes*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> It is a rather intriguing exercise to note the number of occasions during which the Theosophical Masters appeared at dawn or dusk.

<sup>64</sup> Faivre, *Eternal Hermes*, 67.

<sup>65</sup> The presence of an Hegelian dialectic (influenced heavily, of course, by Boehme) in Blavatskian Theosophy links her with other historical generalists, notable Marx. A predicate for both systems is the conviction that collective progress can be intuited historically, and thus that forecasting is possible or even necessary. The common element is that of a progressivist eschatology: the process of history will result in ultimate collective transformation. David Walsh has noted the "Hermetic background": 'The theme of man as magus, as co-creator with God, as the shaper of his own being and the god of the material world, has reached its conclusion in Marx's evocation of the socialist secular messiah' (Walsh, 'A Mythology of Reason', 163). For Hegel's indebtedness to esotericism see Hanratty, *Studies in Gnosticism*, 81-116.

its staunchly nineteenth-century iconography, a rearticulation and recirculation of old ideas. Blavatsky mined the esotericisms of the past—as well as such novelties as comparative mythology—in order to construct an account of the travails of the *philosophia perennis* over the ages. Yet the resulting schema appears surprisingly, and deceptively, modern in its method and detail. The writings of the Masters *via* their amanuensis Blavatsky (which, in effect, comprise the entirety of the Theosophical canon: *Isis Unveiled*, the Mahatma letters, *The Secret Doctrine*) are replete with the scientific idiom of the Victorian age, but are more structurally akin to the Gnostic-Hermetic religiosities of the ancient world. This play of appearances, of verisimilitude, highlights the Hermesian art-of-seeming which stands behind the sombre faces of Blavatsky's Masters. When the Masters made history into mythology, and mythology into history, they became none other than Harlequin—in a turban.

*Text and Immanence: strategies of disclosure*

It is characteristic of Hermes that a part of his playfulness is devolved upon the dynamic of disclosure; he hints at treasure but inevitably withholds the prize. So, too, for the Theosophical Master, whose task is to some degree a propædeutical one—to whet the aspirant's appetite and to encourage ever deeper commitment. Part of the reason that the Theosophical Society gained and shed members so readily under Blavatsky was that the promise of real chelaship under a personal Master never eventuated (at least for the vast majority of members). This situation, for which Blavatsky herself cannot but be held at least nominally accountable<sup>66</sup>, ensured the inevitable ascendancy of a figure such as Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854-1934), the ideologue of Theosophy's second generation, whose avowed clairvoyant psychism obviated the necessity for physical contact with the Brotherhood. Yet Blavatsky's Hermesian template for the Masters was much misunderstood—no doubt partly because of her own vanity (exhibited in crowd-pleasing phenomena) and hubris (the escalation, in the face of skeptical criticism, of her polemical assurances about the reality of *her* Masters). In fact, the real prize had less to do with finding a Master than with becoming one, and for the latter *the physi-*

<sup>66</sup> As the mouthpiece for the Masters, Blavatsky directly and indirectly encouraged the desire in her associates to share in her good fortune: chelaship. Although she was not primarily responsible for the publication of Sinnett's *Occult World* (1881) and *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883)—which popularised the Masters for the general readership—she certainly enjoyed the successes which followed.

*cal existence of the Brotherhood, paradoxically, was not nearly as significant as the teachings ascribed to it.* This last notion is of paramount importance and underscores Blavatsky's profound reliance upon the dynamics of divine authority exhibited by the Hermetic treatises.

It has been noted *supra* that Hermes is to be found in the remains, or the effluvium of his activity. Blavatsky was well aware that all of the Theosophists 'ripe for chelaship'<sup>67</sup> would seek for the Masters, searching as modern Parzivals in quest of the Grail of True Knowledge—indeed one, the young Brahmin Dâmodar, would become the Galahad for the Society, having "passed over" into Shamballah<sup>68</sup>. Yet the Hermesian Masters were deceptive to the end and had, in fact, retreated into the remains of their activity (and Hermes' first gift), *language*. Like Hermes, the Masters were not content for long to undergo scrutiny, and soon faded from view, choosing instead to vivify their written teachings with their own semi-divine presence, thus making scriptures of the Theosophical canon. The most intriguing observation about this process was that it was by no means the first time that Hermes had purposely effaced himself with his own progeny, discourse<sup>69</sup>: in *The Discourse on the Eighth and*

<sup>67</sup> The phrase is taken from Joyce's *Ulysses*: 'Yogibogeybox in Dawson chambers. *Isis Unveiled*. Their Pali book we tried to pawn. Crosslegged under an umbrel umbershoot he thrones an Aztec logos, functioning on astral levels, their oversoul, mahamahatma. The faithful hermetists await the light, ripe for chelaship, ringroundabout him' (Joyce, *Ulysses*, 191-192). Joyce certainly read Blavatsky's works and was particularly fascinated with her notion of cycles and aeonic time. The definitive analysis of esoteric motifs in Joyce, particularly Blavatskian themes, remains to be written; otherwise see Cranston, *H. P. B.*, 473-476.

<sup>68</sup> Dâmodar K. Mâvalankar (1857-[1885?]), a young and ardent Theosophist desperate to be accepted as a student of one of the Masters, undertook the arduous journey to Tibet where Blavatsky had indicated they lived. Soon afterwards news reached the Adyar (Madras) headquarters of the Theosophical Society that his frozen body had been found naked in the snow near Chumboi, Sikkim. For years thereafter, however, the Society taught that Dâmodar had been accepted by the Masters, was undergoing training, and that the corpse may in fact have been *mâyâ*, an illusion to deceive the faithful. Indeed, Blavatsky claimed to have received a letter from him, and the Master Koot Hoomi mentions him as a neophyte in one of the "Mahatma letters". Publicly, Blavatsky fostered the Galahad identification: 'Happy Damodar! He went to the land of Bliss, to Tibet and must now be far away in the regions of our Masters. No one will ever see him now, I expect' (H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett in *Mahatma Letters* [Letter No. 135: 17 March, 1885] 443-444). Yet Blavatsky wrote in a personal correspondence to the Theosophist Franz Hartmann that if the body were discovered to be that of Dâmodar, 'I think I would commit suicide; for it is out of pure devotion for me that he went. I would never forgive myself for this, for letting him go. That's the truth and only the truth': H. P. Blavatsky, 'Letters of H. P. B. to Dr. Hartmann, 1885-1886, III', 333. For Theosophical perspectives on Dâmodar's demise see Eek, comp., *Dâmodar*, 10-22; cf. also Meade, *Madame Blavatsky*, 342. For Theosophical notions of Shamballah see French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 2, 639-660. Interestingly, the influence of the *Hermetica* on the Grail legend may be direct, especially upon Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* of 1210: see Kahane & Kahane, *Krater and the Grail*.

<sup>69</sup> The phrase is Tilley's: see Tilley, 'Derrida's reading', 17.

*Ninth*, it can be shown that he did much the same thing. Tellingly, this particular second-century C.E. Hermetic tractate was not discovered until 1945 among the Nag Hammadi library, and thus certainly was unavailable to Blavatsky.

*The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (or *The Ogdoad Reveals the Ennead*) is the record of an Hermetic initiation during which the initiand, having undergone instruction and prayer, experiences the 'Deifying Vision' at the hands of a mystagogue, Hermes Trismegistus<sup>70</sup>. Following the initiation (into the eight and ninth spheres), Hermes instructs his student to 'write this book for the temple at Diospolis in hieroglyphic characters, entitling it "The Eighth Reveals the Ninth"'<sup>71</sup>. Hermes further informs his charge to inscribe the hieroglyphics on turquoise steles to be placed in the sanctuary, and gives him elaborate details about their construction, installation, and keeping<sup>72</sup>. Finally, an oath is to be included in the book:

And write an oath in the book, lest those who read the book bring the language into abuse and not (use it) to oppose the acts of fate. Rather, they should submit to the law of God, without having transgressed at all, but in purity asking God for wisdom and knowledge. And he who will not be begotten at the start by God comes to be by the general and guiding discourses. He will not be able to read the things written in this book, although his conscience is pure within him, since he does not do anything shameful, nor does he consent to it. Rather, by stages he advances and enters into the way of immortality. And thus he enters into the understanding of the eighth that reveals the ninth<sup>73</sup>.

For the present purposes, the most crucial phrase regarding the book and steles is that which concerns language:

My son, it is proper to write this book on steles of turquoise, in hieroglyphic characters. For Mind himself has become overseer of these<sup>74</sup>.

That 'Mind' is commonly synonymous with Hermes in this tractate is signified by several earlier uses in the same document<sup>75</sup>. It is apparent that Hermes, the

<sup>70</sup> For details of *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* see *supra* nt 20.

<sup>71</sup> NHC VI.6.61.18-23.

<sup>72</sup> NHC VI.6.61.25—62.2.

<sup>73</sup> NHC VI.6.62.23—63.15.

<sup>74</sup> NHC VI.6.61.25—62.1.

<sup>75</sup> *Contra* Valantasis who maintains that '[t]he supervisor of the account (both of the initiation and of the production of the text) is the Mind: it is significantly not the divinity (Hermes, or Trismegistus), nor is it the newly divinized initiate' (Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides*, 101). Yet Valantasis had earlier noted (in reference to an explicit identification of Hermes with Mind in the text) that '[t]he mind may be within the guide as well as continuing to move other souls' (o.c., 95). Fowden is convinced of the identification: Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 105, 110. Mahé has stated: 'the disciple starts praying to Hermes who, from then onward, has become identical with the Self-Begotten Intellect' (Mahé, 'A Reading of the *Discourse*', 80)—but cf. Merkur, 'Stages of Ascension', 88.

inventor and interpreter of words, has transmuted himself into his progeny, and reinforced the now-inherent sanctity of the language by having it placed in the *naos* of his own temple<sup>76</sup>.

Richard Reitzenstein has posited the notion of the 'literary mystery' for various of the philosophical *Hermetica*<sup>77</sup>. Accordingly, the divinity is immanent in the initiatory texts themselves, and, through reading, the latent divinity is released to activate the numinous and otherwise ineffable experience of initiation in the *actual* initiand, the reader<sup>78</sup>. Such a process does not dismiss the possibility that the account is the record of a previous initiation in a Hermetic community (just as finding the Master *in* the text of the Theosophical canon in no way disproves Blavatsky's claims about physical Masters instructing certain privileged Theosophists), but expands its initiatory potential beyond the personal narrative and into an atemporalised readership<sup>79</sup>. Even here, Hermes will have his tricks. Having *become* language, and performing his mystagogical function *via* the text itself, he disingenuously speaks of its ineffectiveness in communicating noetic experience—yet it is precisely to engender such experience that he had "textualised" in the first place:

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<sup>76</sup> The belief in the location of a god, particularly Hermes, within a statue (as opposed to the Asclepian theurgic sense of the god being called down upon a statue) was not uncommon in the classical world: 'Hermes was the patron of crafts: the "hermoglyphic technē" was the art of a sculptor, the phrase "Hermes in the stone", a reference to the potential shape that the artist might discover within the raw materials' (Hynes, 'Mapping the Characteristics', 64). Interestingly, Blavatsky was well aware of the tradition and wrote an extended article on the subject, entitled, tellingly, 'Animated Statues': Blavatsky, 'Animated Statues', 65-73.

<sup>77</sup> Reitzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions*, 62-64.

<sup>78</sup> Fowden has taken exception to Reitzenstein's 'reading mysteries', characterising the idea as 'desk-bound religion': Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 149. Certainly, Reitzenstein is rather declarative in assuming that the texts are to be read primarily, or even solely, in this way. In fact, there appears to be insufficient historical record to assume anything about their primary purpose as literature, which is not to say that Fowden is thus not overly dismissive of Reitzenstein's hypothesis.

<sup>79</sup> Lack of historical and sociological *documenta* has meant that no firm conclusions can be made regarding the existence and forms of the Hermetic community. Valantasis has maintained that: 'The texts strategically create particular guides to promulgate their understanding of formation within specific cultural and religious traditions. The guides and the relationships result from textual strategies, not from a description of historical reality' (Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides*, 150-151). Fowden, in his 1993 preface to *Egyptian Hermes*, specifically mentions Valantasis' thesis, which he rejects categorically: 'I persist in thinking there is more to life than literature' (Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, xix). Yet one suspects that Valantasis is not reducing the texts to literature as much as elevating them to scripture—exactly the sort of scripture which Fowden's posited "Hermetic community" would likely have recorded and employed. There is no reason to suspect that both interpretations are not viable: indeed, were Hermes himself to oversee the debate, one presumes he would plead for as broad a hermeneutic as manageable. For another model of the "Hermetic community", this time emphasising Jewish patterning, see Pearson, *Gnosticism*, 136-147.

[Hermes:] I have said, my son, that I am Mind. I have seen! Language is not able to reveal this. For the entire eighth, my son, and the souls that are in it, and the angels, sing a hymn in silence. And I, Mind, understand.

[Tat:]<sup>80</sup> What is the way to sing a hymn through it (silence)?

[Hermes:] Have you become such that you cannot be spoken to?

[Tat:] I am silent, my father. I want to sing a hymn to you while I am silent.

[Hermes:] Then sing it, for I am Mind.

[Tat:] I understand Mind, Hermes, who cannot be interpreted, because he keeps within himself<sup>81</sup>.

The dissembling does not end there. It should be noted, even when Hermes has metamorphosed into language, he has yet another veil of seeming: the language of the steles is hieratic, not demotic, and is thus an encoded text. The initiation is unavailable, then, for those who are uninitiated *into language itself*—who cannot interpret the hieroglyphs. The (priestly) language is in the (priests') sanctuary; itself holy, it demands holiness in all aspirants: it will announce itself only to the esoteric elite.

Blavatsky knew very well the interrelationships between Hermes and sacred language:

The story about Enoch, told by Josephus, namely, that he had concealed under the pillars of Mercury or Seth his precious rolls or books, is the same as that told of Hermes, 'the father of wisdom', who concealed his books of Wisdom under a pillar, and then, finding the two pillars of stone, found the science written thereon<sup>82</sup>.

Blavatsky's 'books of Wisdom' were a career spent in fostering an alternative paradigm of human origins and destiny. Her Theosophy was a reasoned and systematic response to what she saw as the curse of materialism: the dislocation of persons from themselves, from one another, from the product of their labour, and from the cosmos<sup>83</sup>. Yet as a realist she was well aware that she required an authority for her dictates which only a higher power could provide. The ontological ambivalence of Hermes, who was empowered (through his own divinisation) to impart the secrets of heavenly ascent to others and was thus the ideal oracle, was rearticulated as the Master—a man whose own ef-

<sup>80</sup> Although the name of the initiand is absent from the tractate, it is likely from similar *Corpus Hermeticum* treatises that the name would be "Tat" (a contraction of "Thoth"); see Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides*, 86; also Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 110. The name has been employed here primarily for convenience and comparative purposes.

<sup>81</sup> NHC VI.6.58.14-31.

<sup>82</sup> Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine* II, 530.

<sup>83</sup> The clear parallel with Marx's four stages of alienation is surely not accidental. That such is the case should hardly be surprising given that both were engaged in a process of fashioning progressivist historiographies predicated (perhaps ironically, in Marx's case) upon an anti-materialist paradigm.



forts had achieved for him both a semi-divine ontology and an unassailable authority. As a thoroughly nineteenth-century Hermes, however, he had to parry somewhat with science, and one of the requirements for this task was that he be seen to be more a “man of science” even than his detractors; hence, the Master should be no *mere* god, but a *real* man<sup>84</sup>. Typically for Hermesian entities, Blavatsky’s Masters were themselves ever-mobile, and soon ceased to appear in the flesh—much to the chagrin of the many thousands of aspiring chelas. Where were Theosophists to go for the longed-for words of wisdom and comfort? They need not have worried, for the Masters had provided massive Theosophical scriptures into which their *nous* had descended. In an avowedly Hermesian artifice, the mystical distant Shamballah of the Masters was thus made available to the esoteric elite (Theosophists) in the many thousands of pages of Masters’ letters and teachings—the irony, of course, is that that is where it had always been.

When Theosophists read their scriptures today, they employ a hermeneutic that is informed by the existence of the Masters. They may never meet one in the flesh, but this is now of little ultimate concern—for the Theosophical texts which bear the Masters’ imprint and imprimatur now perform the same function. They are the *psychopompoi* who lead souls on their journey through each incarnation. Thus it is that the Masters are now effaced by their own progeny, *Theosophy*. The question of the historicity of the Masters is thereby entirely circumscribed by the value of the texts as “reading mysteries”. A more interesting question, surely, is *who* exactly did Hermes inhabit: the Master or the Madame?

### *Leadbeater, Theosophical god-maker*

If Blavatsky’s *œuvre* is characterised by extraordinary erudition, particularly with regard to the literature of esotericism, the same cannot be claimed for that of Theosophy’s next major ideologue, Charles Webster Leadbeater. For such a massive body of work, the first and most startling observation to be made of the Leadbeaterian corpus is its very lack of reference to anterior esotericisms<sup>85</sup>. Yet the poverty of sources is more comprehensible when it is re-

<sup>84</sup> The emphasis on the facticity of the Masters is evidence of Blavatsky’s occultistic gnosticism—her desire to apply the discursive powers of rationalism to the numinous and otherwise ineffable domain of personal religious experience: see French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 1, 232-235 *et passim*. For ‘occultistic gnosticism’ see Hanegraaff, ‘Dynamic Typological approach’, 5-43.

<sup>85</sup> For an examination of Leadbeaterian Theosophy see French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 1, 249-397. See also Tillett, ‘Charles Webster Leadbeater’.

membered that Leadbeater's primary tool (one which, unlike a good deal of Blavatsky's methodology, was unfalsifiable) was clairvoyance<sup>86</sup>. He maintained consonance with Blavatsky by remaining for the most part within the idiomatic structures of her Theosophy but there is no indication that he was ever more than superficially informed about *her* sources.

The first part of Leadbeater's Theosophical career had been spent mapping the Blavatskian terrain, yet he was temperamentally disinclined to engage with a broad cosmo-historiographical vision as she had done, and instead set about reducing her grand metastructures into more manageable portions; the universe gave way to the solar system, the four Hindu yugas (so central to Blavatskian imaging) became truncated and compressed as the eras of the Seven Rays, and the Masters of the Wisdom were depicted as being akin to roving 'Ministers and Secretaries of State'<sup>87</sup>. In so doing he was able to translate Blavatsky's sophisticated esotericisms into a popular (and occasionally populist) Spiritualistic occultism, given colour and dynamism by the often fantastic visions afforded him by his astral perception. Whereas Blavatsky's *modus operandi* was to employ a form of eccentrically-scientific esoteric textual hermeneutic, through which all human discourse could be sifted and reconfigured to expose the underlying *philosophia perennis*, Leadbeater ignored history, scripture, and philosophy altogether, choosing instead a quasi-Spiritualistic visionary process. By focussing upon an apparatus of "astral perception" he was able to "see" the Theosophical metastructures at first hand, and describe them for others in terms borrowed self-consciously from scientific rationalism. Necessary concurrence with Blavatsky was maintained by abiding (at least initially) within the circumscribed boundaries of her pre-mapped cosmological, anthropological, and historiographical paradigms<sup>88</sup>. Eventually, however, he began to overlay the Blavatskian model with his own idiosyncratic goetic and theurgical *theologoumena*—notably under the forms of Co-Freemasonry and the Theosophically-driven Liberal Catholic Church—which culminated in his promotion of the young Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) as the candidate for 'Vehicle' of the World-Teacher (variously known as

<sup>86</sup> Thus: 'What I can tell you with regard to the ancient mysteries is not derived from any special study of old manuscripts, or of the history of this subject. It happened to me in another life to be born in ancient Greece, and to become initiated there into some of the mysteries' (Leadbeater, *Inner Life*, 73).

<sup>87</sup> Leadbeater, *Australia & New Zealand*, 63. For details of Leadbeater's deliberate reduction of the Blavatskian perspective, see French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 1, chaps. 16-22.

<sup>88</sup> Several works have been produced by those Theosophists (and/or disciples of Blavatsky) antipathetic to Leadbeater who have found contradiction between the cosmologies and historiographies of Blavatsky and Leadbeater. A typical example is Morgan, *Misleading Mayavic Ideations*. There are many others.

the Lord Maitreya/Maitreya Bodhisattva/Christ). This episode, which witnessed the peak in the Society's membership<sup>89</sup> has universally been regarded by Theosophists and critics alike as a species of Theosophical messianic adventism. Yet, as Hermes himself might argue, appearances are often deceptive.

Given Leadbeater's emphasis on experiential astral perception, it is hardly surprising that there are scant references to the *Hermetica* in his publications. Where mentioned, the 'Books of Hermes' are simply noted as an antique example of the Ancient Wisdom, with little or no accompanying explanation. The most substantial reference to Hermes is as part of the chain of authorities who bore the torch of the *philosophia perennis*. In his 1913 clairvoyant Genesis, *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, Leadbeater considered Hermes to have been the 'Mahâguru':

It was to [the Egyptians] that the Mahâguru came as Tehuti or Thoth, called later by the Greeks Hermes ... And to the people He gave as motto: 'Thou art the Light. Let that Light shine'. And He set that motto round the pylon in a great Temple, running up one pillar, and across the bar, and down the other pillar. And this was inscribed over the doors of houses, and little models were made of the pylon on which He had inscribed it, models in precious metals, and also in baked clay, so that the poorest could buy little blue clay models, with brown veins running through them, and glazed<sup>90</sup>.

By 1926, and at the height of the frenzied expectation of the Coming of the World-Teacher (which Leadbeater had generated), the vision was rearticulated to encapsulate overt references to the office of the World-Teacher:

It was to [the Egyptians] about 40,000 B.C. that the World-Teacher came forth from the White Lodge, bearing the name Tehuti or Thoth, called later by the Greeks Hermes: He founded the outer cult of the Egyptian Gods and restored the Mysteries to the splendour of bygone days<sup>91</sup>.

Leadbeater's nomination of Thoth as the World-Teacher places Hermes in a distinctly Theosophical ambit; indeed, given that the World-Teacher is articu-

<sup>89</sup> The period of the World-Teacher craze (this is not an exaggerated term) lasted from about 1909 to 1929, at which point Krishnamurti rejected his rôle in the organisation. The membership peaked at just over 45,000 in 1928, and has declined since. For details see French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 1, 351-381, esp. 353 nt 9.

<sup>90</sup> Besant and Leadbeater, *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, 284-286. The motif of the "pillars of Hermes" was common mythological coin throughout the Mediterranean basin, and need not have been mediated to Leadbeater by any close reading of the aretalogies or the *Hermetica*. Indeed, as the present author has discovered, such clay models as Leadbeater described are still widely available to tourists in Egypt (in fact, it is not impossible that Leadbeater is describing such pieces as he himself might have seen in his 1884 visit to Alexandria in the train of Blavatsky).

<sup>91</sup> Leadbeater, *Glimpses of Masonic History*, 28.

lated in Leadbeaterian Theosophy as something approaching an Arch-Master<sup>92</sup>, the imputation is clear that Hermes is a prototype of what was to be expected of the young Krishnamurti.

The present author has written elsewhere that Leadbeater's promotion of Krishnamurti as the Vehicle for the Coming should *not* be interpreted as Theosophical messianic expectation, but rather as an occultistic experiment in "Master-making"<sup>93</sup>. Such a view is comprehensively at odds with the consensus opinion which suggests that the post-1929 Krishnamurti was something of an antinomian phoenix, rising from the ashes of naïve Theosophical adventism. This latter evaluation—almost a credal formula for followers of the post-Theosophical Krishnamurti (as well as many of today's religionist Theosophists, interestingly)—may have some provenance in contemporary popular opinion, but still seems to accept axiomatically that Krishnamurti's mature philosophy somehow irrupted into his thinking, fully-formed, following his rejection of his rôle as Vehicle for the Coming. The problem is founded in the marked tendency of virtually all Krishnamurti scholarship to misinterpret the nature of the Coming itself; Leadbeaterian "adventism", for all of its protestations to the contrary, must be understood within the *ascensus* framework of Theosophical progressivist evolutionism—thus it was not primarily concerned with the mode of the *descent* of the Maitreya/Bodhisattva/Christ, but with preparations for the *ascent* of the Vehicle. *It was nothing less than an exercise in the controlled creation of a Master.*

<sup>92</sup> The easiest analogy is that of ecclesial office. In Leadbeaterian Theosophy, a Master is presented as a parish priest—he has a particular orbit of influence and is under obedience to a superior, yet enjoys much autonomy. The World-Teacher (or Bodhisattva/Lord Maitreya/Christ), the Manu, and the Mahachohan—each on the next level of initiation, the eighth—enjoy much greater power and can be considered in episcopal terms as Archbishops or Metropolitans. They oversee those Masters directly beneath them and are accorded much greater authority. Thus, when the World-Teacher descends—or incarnates—he has semi-global authority and purview. Leadbeater himself noted that '[t]he great World-Teacher might be described as the Minister for Religion and Education' (Leadbeater, *The Christian Gnosis*, 113).

<sup>93</sup> See French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 1, esp. 294-397. It could be argued that the entire project of presenting a young child as the "Vehicle" for the great sage World-Teacher, the Bodhisattva Maitreya, was but another characteristically Hermesian endeavour. The traditional paradoxicality of Hermes is often reflected in similar iconographic contrasts. In the Mediterranean context there exists, e.g., the classical juxtapositioning of two different *personae* of Hermes: the *sphênopôgôn* (an elderly man with a wedge-shaped beard) and the *achnous* (a beardless baby or youth). For examples see Hynes, 'Mapping the Characteristics', 48ff. Further, the ambivalent ontology of Hermes might be detected in Leadbeater's claim that his Masters could simultaneously project themselves onto the various planes of existence, no less than in the fact that the great cosmic Bodhisattva might concurrently oversee much of the cosmos as well as teach through the mouth of a young itinerant Theosophist. Indeed, it might be said that the vagarious explanations for the mode of descent of the Lord Maitreya occasionally have greater Hermesian echoes than the more predictable Christological ones.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the attempt to engineer a Master is a logical and predictable development in Theosophical conceptualising. It was the Masters, after all, who circumscribed the edges of the Theosophical domain, were its supreme revelators, and the embodiment of its authority. Yet the Masters *qua* Masters were an elite—necessarily at a remove from human commerce. The dynamic tension between the ontological separateness of the Masters, and the exigencies of guaranteeing their oversight and personal involvement in the lives of Society members, caused occasional breaches in the Theosophical edifice during Blavatsky's tenure as "mouthpiece"<sup>94</sup>. Yet the medium of the Mahatma letters, the sheer indomitability of Blavatsky, and the occasional sightings of the Brothers themselves, enabled the Masters to appear sufficiently close to the mundane realm to maintain an adequate *esprit de corps* among the faithful. Leadbeater, in characteristic fashion, sought to bring the Masters even closer to the membership (while maintaining their necessary physical distance); he was only rarely the recipient of Masters-letters, and had no need to "produce" Masters *in propriis personis* for the simple reason that *he was in constant psychic communication with the entire hierarchy*<sup>95</sup>. (Conveniently, he was thus also protected from latter-day "Coulombs" and "Hodgsons")<sup>96</sup>.

Leadbeater's ardent occultistic desire to rationalise his clairvoyant visions,

<sup>94</sup> There were three major occasions during Blavatsky's tenure which might be called "breaches in the metaphysical edifice": the so-called "Kiddle Incident" (which suggested plagiarism on the part of a Master in a Mahatma letter), the so-called "Coulomb conspiracy" (in which disaffected employees claimed they assisted Blavatsky in the engineering of fraudulent phenomena) and the "Hodgson Report" (the colloquial title for the damning, if methodologically-suspect, investigation of Theosophical phenomena by the newly-formed Society for Psychical Research). For details see French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 1, ch. 11.

<sup>95</sup> Leadbeater noted: 'Letters used to be received from the Masters ... that was quite a feature of that early system of propaganda. The Masters Themselves not infrequently materialized and showed Themselves among us. I have seen, I think, nearly all of Them in that way in the earlier days. That time has entirely passed. We do not now accept letters for the Masters. They do not materialize Themselves among us. Instead, They communicate, when They wish to do so, through Their pupils, and very rarely, except with those who are already pupils of Theirs. They rarely send messages for outer people' (Leadbeater, 'H. P. Blavatsky', 135). It is interesting to note that many of Leadbeater's latter-day disciples attempted to contact the Masters through his own techniques; Elvis Presley (1935-1977), who regarded Leadbeater highly, attempted such—even to the degree of wearing a green Mahatma-like turban while performing healings: see Goldman, *Elvis*, 452-453, 464-465, *et passim*.

<sup>96</sup> See *supra* nt 94. It might be noted that Leadbeater's acknowledged psychism ensured a certain unfalsifiability for his clairvoyantly-determined dictates, but did not protect him from subsequent analysis of his empirically-testable self-referential claims. Tillett's extensive researches have indicated that Leadbeater falsified the year of his birth and the circumstances of his early life and family; indeed, few of Leadbeater's romantic claims (of university education, overseas travel, *inter alia*) appear to have any basis in fact. For details see Tillett, 'Charles Webster Leadbeater', vol. 1, chaps. 2-3; see also French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 1, ch. 17.

and to appeal to scientific causality to explain putative meta-empirical phenomena, meant that he was much less interested in the nature of the gnosis conferred by the Masters, than in the dynamics of its transformative potentialities<sup>97</sup>. Where Blavatsky had taught that wisdom was what made the Masters unique (although, by displaying a Masters-granted phenomenalism, she never really closed the door on hysterical Himalayan searches for paranormal boons), Leadbeater concentrated on their occult power. *In his occultistic drive to explain the metaphysical in quasi-scientific and rationalistic terms, he came upon the obvious corollary that the Masters' power could be understood in an identical way.* If, then, the Masters' power belonged in the empirical domain, it could be independently examined *and replicated*. As a consequence, Leadbeaterian Theosophy is, unlike its Blavatskian equivalent, divorced from text and meaning: interest in the Masters is less in the "what", than in the "how". *Ergo*, the ceremonial of Leadbeaterian Liberal Catholicism and Co-Masonry is of far greater significance than the transmission of sensible meaning<sup>98</sup>. (To this degree, Leadbeater proposed a form of applied occult semiotics). Yet the value of the revealed text or liturgy, whether *The Secret Doctrine* or the *Missa Romana*, is not entirely abandoned—just reinterpreted mechanistically as a conduit for transmutational power: when grace and gnosis are placed in the crucible of Leadbeaterian Theosophy, they reappear simply as power. For Leadbeater, then, Theosophy was more or less synonymous with

<sup>97</sup> Rudolf Steiner's assessment of Leadbeater might be apposite in this context, and is reminiscent to some degree of Hanegraaff's distinction of artistic *versus* occultistic gnosis (cf. Hanegraaff, 'Dynamic Typological approach', *passim*): 'Mr. Leadbeater's occult methods ... can only lead to a positive result if, standing behind everyone who enters on the path of development, there is the absolute authority of a *guru*—which is impossible in the West due to the general cultural situation. Western people can be led to the stage of psychic development where Leadbeater stood only if the part of their guidance that can no longer proceed from the *guru* is replaced by a *mental* development that has reached a certain stage. And Mr. Leadbeater lacks this stage of development. In this case I do not refer merely to an intellectual philosophical training, but to the development of a stage of consciousness that consists of inwardly contemplative insight, which simply demands the stage of brain development that must be the prerequisite of the Westerner. In Germany, for example, the way to this kind of learning must be taken from the thought-mysticism of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, which is not at all understood according to its true occult basis' (Rudolf Steiner to Annie Besant, July, 1906, in: Steiner, *From the History*, 269-270).

<sup>98</sup> Space disallows examination of the theurgic basis of Leadbeaterian sacramentalism and ritualism, as exhibited most profoundly in his writings for the Liberal Catholic Church and Co-Masonry. These fields are examined in French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 1, 295-350 *et passim*. Suffice to say that Leadbeater espoused a theology of grace akin to a "spiritual physics"—the transmission of divine power is explained in discursive, highly occultistic language, and suprasensible dynamics (observed by Leadbeater's clairvoyancy) are rearticulated as empirically-verifiable technologies.

theurgy, and the ultimate objective for the theurgist was—entirely logically—to “create” a Master.

*Causative Theurgy and the Animation of Statues*

In clairvoyantly tracing the passage of divine power mediated by the Masters through the ceremonial of lodge and liturgy, and articulating it ratiocinatively as a form of circuitry (or what has occasionally been called a “plumbing theology”), Leadbeater had consciously subjugated the meta-empirical to the dictates of the empirical. Empiricism *qua* empiricism infers replicability, and Leadbeater’s analyses of ritual are thus a species of occult physics (fully akin to his previous studies in ‘Occult Chemistry’)<sup>99</sup> which promises predetermined outcomes if the ceremony is always performed correctly and under identical conditions. Having discerned the “scientific” basis of the Masters’ power, he logically inferred that he himself could replicate that power. In so doing he must be seen as perhaps the most significant and influential of a thoroughly new breed of twentieth century magicians—the *causative theurgists*.

The theurgic connotations of this process of “Master-making” are interestingly reminiscent of the famous “god-making” passages of the Hermetic *Asclepius*<sup>100</sup>. Trismegistus informs Asclepius of the Egyptian priests’ power to animate statues:

Just as the master and father—or god, to use his most august name—is maker of the heavenly gods, so it is mankind who fashions the temple gods who are content to be near humans. Not only is mankind glorified; he glorifies as well. He not only advances toward god; he also makes the gods strong. Are you surprised, Asclepius?<sup>101</sup>

Asclepius was not the only one surprised. Even the most sophisticated hermeneutical exegesis of the Renaissance Hermetists could not overcome the glaring contradiction between this passage and the Exodus injunction against the production of graven images<sup>102</sup>. Indeed, Hermes had been nothing if not declarative:

<sup>99</sup> For Leadbeater’s (and Annie Besant’s) clairvoyant examination of the period table of elements, and for other examples of his “Occult Chemistry”, see French, ‘Theosophical Masters’, vol. 1, ch. 17 *et passim*.

<sup>100</sup> *Asc.* 23–24, 37–39.

<sup>101</sup> *Asc.* 23.

<sup>102</sup> Recent studies have shown that the theurgic and “purely” contemplative strands in the *Hermetica* can happily live coevally. It is rarely acknowledged that in the *Asclepius*, Trismegistus vouchsafes *both* by means of his divine sanction: see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 142–153. The work of the Coptic Magical Texts Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Chris-

I mean statues ensouled and conscious, filled with spirit and doing great deeds; statues that foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams and by many other means; statues that make people ill and cure them, bringing them pain and pleasure as each deserves<sup>103</sup>.

It could certainly be argued that Leadbeater was attempting *via* theurgy to do the self-same thing to such ossified 'statues' (as he saw it) as the Christian Church and the Masonic Lodge. The Liberal Catholic Church and Co-Masonry were "animated" by calling down into them the power and presence of the Masters (the Lord Maitreya and the Master the Count, respectively), thus reconsecrating exoteric bodies, devoid of "a god", into esoteric ones, ensouled by a god/Master<sup>104</sup>.

Leadbeater's "Master-making", first of Krishnamurti and then of the initiates of his last and most decisively theurgic endeavour, the Egyptian Rite of the Ancient Mysteries<sup>105</sup>, is, however, a step removed from the *Asclepius*-like "ensouling" of the Liberal Catholic Church and Co-Masonry. By the time of the inauguration of the Egyptian Rite—following what is considered to be Krishnamurti's apostasy but was, rather, his reluctance to allow Leadbeater's Theosophical theurgy to operate on him—Leadbeater had arrogated unto himself all of the powers inhering in the Brotherhood. Having thus "become" a Master himself (that is, being "divinised", Theosophically), and having usurped the Masters' traditional privilege of being the sole agents of ingress to the Brotherhood, Leadbeater had no need to call upon exterior agency to

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tianity on 'Coptic Texts of Ritual Power' has observed that the religion *vs.* theurgy division is a modern anachronism: see, particularly, Meyer & Smith (eds.), *Ancient Christian Magic*. As an aside, it might be noted that the ability for esotericism to absorb both the theurgist and the contemplative is nowhere better displayed than in Theosophy's hallowing of Blavatsky *and* Leadbeater.

<sup>103</sup> *Asc.* 24.

<sup>104</sup> There is no intention here to suggest that Leadbeater was making direct or indirect reference to the *Asclepius* in his activities. In fact there seems little reason to believe he was familiar with the text—even allowing for its wide currency in esoteric circles. Rather, the intention is to suggest something of a typological dynamic of Hermeticism which might have carried down into Leadbeater's conceptions *via* his reliance on Blavatsky (and through her, other streams of esotericism), or which may be in some way symptomatic of theurgical thinking as a whole. This last possibility lies well beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>105</sup> Following Krishnamurti's apostasy, Leadbeater activated a charter for the (para-Masonic) Rite of Memphis, given to him in 1925 by Reginald Macbean. He set about the construction of a specifically Leadbeaterian Theosophical Freemasonry which was clearly designed to provide what no other Theosophical endeavour had ever felt confident to claim: guaranteed membership of the Great White Brotherhood. In so doing, as the present author has elsewhere argued, the Egyptian Rite is the culmination of 50 years of Theosophy. It might be noted that, although the Egyptian Rite remains one of the most closely guarded secrets of the (Adyar) Theosophical Society, it has been substantially reduced in scope, and no longer promises theurgically-generated 'Master-ship'. For details of the Rite see French, 'Theosophical Masters', vol. 1, 382ff.



ensoul organisations or persons. His power was no longer contingent, it was essential, actual, and generative. As a self-appointed Hermes he could now do the god-making himself<sup>106</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup> There are not insignificant parallels between Leadbeater's "creation" of Masters (*via* the Egyptian Rite, *inter alia*) and the creation of souls as formulated by various Renaissance Hermetic magi, notably Lodovico Lazzarelli. Hanegraaff's expostulation of Lazzarelli's belief (based in part on the latter's experience of Giovanni 'Mercurio' da Correggio (?1451-?), the self-identified "Hermetic Christ") in the supremacy of Christian Hermeticism over pagan Hermetism is of crucial significance for an appreciation of the development of a truly pious Christian theurgy in the Renaissance. Now reconciled with the Father, through the atonement sponsored by the cross, the Christian magus could undergo a *theosis* which (he believed) was unavailable to the pagan Hermetists who had had the misfortune to live *ante gracia*: see Hanegraaff, 'Sympathy', *passim*; cf. also Vickers, 'Analogy versus Identity', 118-119; Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*. As Hanegraaff noted: 'All things considered, there is nothing too surprising about the fact that Lazzarelli's teaching culminates in the making of souls ... Indeed, a God who cannot make things can hardly be called a God. What else could a process of spiritual "divinization" be expected to culminate in, if not in the most difficult of all accomplishments: the creation of souls?' (Hanegraaff, 'Sympathy', 31). The sympathy between Lazzarelli's pious theurgy (as presented by Hanegraaff) and Leadbeater's is striking, which makes one wonder about the notion of dispensation and its relationship to theurgic *theoria* and *praxis*. Leadbeater certainly believed that he had been granted a spiritual and spiritual-scientific insight far greater than his theurgical forebears, an insight which allowed him much greater "magical power" than they possessed. Interestingly, one suspects he would have claimed that by being "caught" in one religion (i.e., Christianity) and having lived before the scientific age, Lazzarelli could not possibly have experienced the level of divinisation that he, Leadbeater, had achieved. Such a view would be predicated on the almost Positivistic assumption that the Age of Scientific Magic would far exceed the achievements of the Age of Religious Magic. Significantly, both views (i.e., those of Leadbeater and Lazzarelli) introduce a temporalised modalism into the technology of magic; that is, they both presuppose that the (religious and/or scientific) epistemologies of their own day allow for a unique and superior gnosis and *theosis*—and thus a more empowered theurgy. This in some fashion suggests that successive dominant epistemological paradigms sponsor successive dominant theurgies—which underscores one of the central theses of the present author's doctoral research; i.e., that the occultistic movements of the nineteenth century, of which Theosophy is arguably the most significant, were not "flights from (Enlightenment) reason", but were closely and necessarily engaged with their times, for *it was from the dominant paradigm that they gained their vocabulary, their rhetoric and, crucially, their very magic*.

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*Le "Maître Mercuriel", ou le don d'Hermès à la Société Théosophique.*

H. P. Blavatsky (1831-1891) et C. W. Leadbeater (1854-1934) furent successivement deux théoriciens de la Société Théosophique. La révélation qu'ils ont élaborée et exposée reposait sur

l'existence et la bienveillance d'une Fraternité de Maîtres avec lesquels ils se disaient en contact. Les Maîtres sont présentés comme des hommes parfaits, possesseurs de dons physiques et spirituels supra-normaux, dont la tâche est de guider l'humanité en l'élevant, lui faisant suivre une trajectoire menant à l'ultime divinisation.

Le présent article a pour objet de montrer que ces Maîtres (et le système cosmo-historique de la S. T.) sont un exemple tout à fait représentatif de l'Hermétisme du dix-neuvième siècle. Des travaux antérieurs sur la Théosophie ont souligné le caractère oriental de son imagerie, assimilant ainsi le Maître théosophique au gourou ou au sage oriental. Or, la thèse de l'auteur est plutôt que le Maître fut une réponse blavatskienne aux discours sécularisants de son époque, et qu'il a des antécédents évidents dans des constructions de systèmes de type occidental. Blavatsky a cherché à promouvoir un *tertium quid* susceptible de tracer une voie entre d'une part le dogmatisme religieux des Eglises, tombé (selon elle) en discrédit, et d'autre part le déterminisme aveugle de la philosophie positiviste et du matérialisme scientifique. Pour réaliser ses objectifs, elle s'est tournée vers le corpus de l'ésotérisme occidental, où elle a trouvé le médiateur idéal en la figure d'Hermès.

Hermès fournissait un prototype sémiotiquement riche du Maître théosophique. En transposant sur le Maître l'ontologie ambiguë d'Hermès, Blavatsky fut en mesure de placer sa Grande Loge Blanche à l'interface de la réalité et de la fiction, de la foi et de la raison. Ce mouvement stratégique eut pour effet de placer le Maître au cœur même du milieu de l'ésotérisme de la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, milieu résolument occultiste ; et du même coup, cela permit à Blavatsky d'adopter pour elle-même la rhétorique tant de l'Eglise que du monde académique. Le modèle hermésien (sous la figure d'Hermès Trismégiste) fournit aussi à la Théosophie ses deux *leitmotifs* essentiels, à savoir l'image d'une montée/descente, et une macro-cyclogologie cosmique. L'élévation d'Hermès Trismégiste à la Vision Déifiante, et la descente qu'il effectue ensuite pour communiquer les secrets de sa *theosis*, trouvent leur reflet exact dans la glorification et la bienveillance quasi-messianique des Maîtres. De plus, la temporalité cyclique de maints traités hermétiques devint la base sur laquelle Blavatsky appuya son système—tout en réseaux récurrents — de Séries et de Races-Racines, ce qui lui permit de rejeter la Genèse de l'A.T., d'incorporer une temporalité hindoue (et le réincarnationnisme karmique), ainsi que de postuler une théologie optimiste et complexe.

Bien qu'il ne possédât pas l'érudition de Blavatsky, Leadbeater était un vulgarisateur de talent, et il s'employa sérieusement à fournir le "Catéchisme à deux sous" de la "Summa Theologica" blavatskienne. Il modifia radicalement les composantes conceptuelles de la synthèse blavatskienne, au profit d'un modèle à caractère davantage spirite et théurgique. Il n'avait que peu d'intérêt pour ce que l'Hermétisme avait légué. Pourtant, la manière dont il s'employa à défendre l'idée que le jeune Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) était le "Véhicule" de la Venue de l'Educateur du Monde, a des connotations qui rappellent résolument l'*Asclepius*. L'auteur prétend que l'opinion courante concernant ce célèbre épisode et tout à fait fausse; si Leadbeater à voulu promouvoir Krishnamurti à ce rang, cela ne devrait pas être interprété comme un épisode spécifique de cette Théosophie, mais plutôt comme une forme de "Fabrication d'un Maître", laquelle rappelle les passages de l'*Asclepius* relatifs à ce qu'on appelle la "fabrication des dieux".

Pour ce qui concerne l'ontologie physique des Maîtres, les études consacrées à la Théosophie ont été jusqu'ici caractérisées par un fossé très net entre, d'une part, une interprétation religioniste, et d'autre part une interprétation réductionniste. Mis à part le fait que le chercheur ne dispose d'aucun appareil méthodologique pour trancher sur cette question, il est clair qu'un tel infructueux débat n'a fait qu'obscurcir les aspects les plus intéressants du *theologoumenon* qui est au cœur de la Théosophie. L'auteur souhaite (et il espère que le présent article y contribuera) qu'au lieu de semblables traitements stériles, ce champ de recherche fasse l'objet d'une reconquête susceptible de conférer à la Théosophie la place qui est la sienne à l'intérieur de l'histoire des idées ésotériques.