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Τακτικοῦ καθηγητοῦ
τῆς ἕδρας Βύρωνος τῆς Ἀγγλικῆς Φιλολογίας

THE PROGRESS OF HERMES

The curious figure which stands, in the seventeenth century philosophical Pantheon, by the side of Plato and Moses, has the head of a man and the body of an ibis. We see him only in profile; the full expression is hidden from us, but there is no doubt of the enigmatic smile. It may be a smile of amusement: he finds himself in strange company, and while Plato knows him by the name of Theuth, Moses frowns upon him under horned brows as the displacer of his cosmogony. But he is elder than they, or indeed than any of the sons of men, and betrays no unease at their presence. To the Egyptians he was familiar as Thoth, the god, giver of letters; his fame spread throughout the ancient world with the crumbling of the Roman empire; to the Middle Ages he was a magician, the lord of alchemy and astrology; to the seventeenth century he comes as physician, philosopher, saviour.

A saviour, above all, from the sense of frustration, almost of despair, into which 'the new philosophy' had thrust the most sensitive minds of the day. Faced with the growing tide of materialism and mechanistic thinking that followed on the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo and the reasonings of Bacon, men who had not yet lost the thirst for God found themselves in a dilemma. Under the impact of the new thought, much of the Biblical narrative had become incredible — the way back to implicit belief was barred; yet still, through the mists of error and fear, the light of faith beckoned to a life above the merely physical — it was impossible to follow the path of least resistance which led to the brute and the Macchiavelli. So there was, from the beginning of the century, the scanning of new horizons. And, inevitably, men's thoughts turned to the East.

They were looking towards the East in the seventeenth century much in the same way that some are looking today, and for much the same reasons. When one tradition or way of life fails, there comes the search for another. Men cannot live outside a pattern. It was in the early seventeenth century, in England at least, that the full implications of the Renaissance cataclysm were becoming apparent: the fine frenzy of the Elizabethan age was exhausted, and there was time to think, to brood, to be afraid. These discoveries, these fine inventions, this 'new philosophy', were all very well: undoubtedly people *knew* a good deal more than they had done, and life was much more of an adventure, and no-one guessed what was going to turn up tomorrow — but (and this was the question) were they as happy as they had been? did the possession of increased power make up for the loss of inner security?

What, in short, was it all about? Up to the Renaissance men had known, or thought they knew. But now that old stability, that old pattern, was broken. Man did not know what he was, or what was his place in the universe; he felt, in consequence, cold and afraid; and he set about building, with the materials at his disposal, another asylum to shelter and protect him.

There were many architects, of course, eagerly submitting plans and estimates. There was the Christian tradition itself, first in the field, the old firm, still undefeated though sadly diminished and disintegrated and unable any longer to appeal proudly to the Vincentian canon: *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*. There was Bacon and the new inductive synthesis. There was Herbert of Cherbury and the beginnings of Deism. There was, a little later, Hobbes and his Leviathan. And a host of others. The successul competitor was, as we know, Bacon: or rather, the heirs of Bacon — Locke and Newton, submitting a joint estimate together with the heirs of Lord Herbert — Bolingbroke and Shaftesbury. Their blueprint satisfied, and their original building remained standing, with some additions and improvements, down to the middle of the nineteenth century.

But our object, in this paper, is to look at one of the unsuccessful ventures. *Victrix causa diis placuit, sed victa Catoni.* There is pleasure, sometimes, in playing the little Cato and bending a benevolent eye on the lost cause, the fling that failed: which is often, incidentally, more interesting, if only in a 'period' way, than the winning entry. Sir Thomas Browne is a more congenial figure, after all, than Locke; and who reads Samuel Clarke in preference to Burton? So the *lux orientalis* presents a mellower glow than the *lumen siccum* of Bacon; and, in reading the Hermetica, we come to feel that we are greater than we know.

What a time they had, in the reigns of James and Charles, building their cosmologies! One has only to glance at a few of the titles of the books published during the reign of the Stuarts to feel the fervour and the optimism and the anxiety. Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), Stillingfleet's *Origines Sacræ* (1622), Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1680), Hale's *Primitive Origination of Mankind* (1677) Heylin's *Cosmography* (1684) and *Microcosmus* (1621), Jordan's *Creation of the World* (1611), Raleigh's *History of the World* (1614). And in our list we have included none of the countless pamphlets issued by the Familists, the Quakers, the Fifth Monarchy men and all the minor sects that infested the Stuart scene.

It will be observed however, in our select list, how important is the place given to the theme of *origins* — to cosmogony. This was natural, for the weak place in the Christian scheme was felt to be the place of the earth in the cosmos and of man on the earth: in short, the Mosaic account in Genesis. This was the spot at which the Copernican dart was most directly aimed. If this bastion fell, it was assumed, the authority of Scripture was gone for ever. One might as well give up the fight. Hence the fact, otherwise inexplicable, that works such as Purchas's *Pilgrims* and Browne's *Pseudodoxia* set off with an account of cosmic and human origins, though ostensibly concerned with world religions and vulgar errors respectively. We shall have to return to this point later.

For the moment let us notice only that it was in *looking to the East* that religiously minded men saw the possibility of a vindication of the dignity of man. The Mosaic account seemed rather hopelessly compromised: it really didn't fit in with modern discoveries, and the current attempts to interpret it allegorically were either unsuccessful or else received no countenance from the leaders of religious thought, But in the East, it was thought, there existed a whole corpus of wisdom which could be brought into play in the struggle against materialism and cynicism. Here is Joseph Glanville, in *Lux Orientalis*.

> Wherefore from the *modern* disputants, let us look towards the *antient Sages*, those *eastern Sophi*, that have fill'd the world with the fame of their *wisdome;* And since our inquiries are *benighted* in the *west*, let us look towards the *East;* from whence 'tis likely the desired *light*

> may display it self, and chase away the *darknesse* that covers the *face* of those *theories*. Therefore it was the *opinion* of the *Indian Brachmans*, the *Persian Magi*, the *Aegyptian Gymnosophists*, the *Jewish Rabbins*, some of the *Græcian Philosophers*, and *Christian Fathers*, that the souls of men were created all at first ; and at several times and occasions upon forteiture of their better life and condition, drop't down into these *terrestrial* bodies [1].

If it seems strange that Glanville should range so far afield as the Indian Brachmans and the Persian Magi (an influence on European thought that we usually postpone to the late eighteenth century) we should do well to remember that Sir Kenelm Digby's *Private Memoirs* (written c. 1628) betray the same interest. The hero of the *Memoirs*, which are cast in romance form, is called Theagenes; and we are told how in the course of his travels he falls in with 'a Brachman of India'. This Brachman 'was one of those that the Indians held in great veneration for their professed sanctity and deep knowledge of the most hidden mysteries of theology and of nature'. The Brachman is in search of Western science, bnt he has not relinquished his traditional lore. He tells Theagenes 'that not chance but the heavens and stars govern the world, which are the only books of fate; whose secret characters and influence, but few, divinely inspired, can read in the true sense that their Creator gave them'.

Theagenes suggests that such a docrine overthrows the freedom of the will. The Brachman replies that the subject is a complicated one; 'but for your satisfaction, I will briefly run over some of the principal heads of it; from which you may of yourself draw many other conclusions'. The 'heads', which deserve our consideration, are as follows:

(1) God has framed the world 'in such an artificial order, that contrariety and disagreeing qualities is the only knot of this perfect concord; in the elements it is apparent, and in the virtual qualities of simples, where fire and water, poisons and antidotes, heat and cold, dryness and moisture, are always equally found'.

(2) All sublunary things serve as steps up to God.

(3) In human souls there exists 'an entire liberty together with a constrained necessity, which no way impeach or hinder one another; for to these [i.e. human souls] he gave a capacity of the greatest

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1. *Lux Orientalis*, Ch. III. In this passage Glanville is of course discussing, not the origin of the world, but the origin of the soul. His preoccupation with the theme of pre-existence links him to Henry More.

perfection... the power of uniting themselves by blessed vision to His eternal and infinite essence'; and in this highest faculty the soul has full liberty.

(4) God rarely intervenes immediately in his Universe but leaves 'the course of all things to that rule which in the beginning of things he prescribed; that is, that inferiors should be subaltern to and guided by their superiors; the heavens, then, and stars being so in respect of us, not only in place but in dignity, in duration, in quantity, in quality, and in purity of substance, it is agreeable to reason that they by their influence do govern this inferior world'.

But Theagenes is not satisfied. How is it, he asks, that such a *general* influence as the stars must be, can extend to 'so many particulars'? « 'It is the generality and vast comprehension', replied the Indian priest, 'of the cause that enfoldeth the great number of particular effects' ». Setting aside the prescience of God, and the influence of the heavens on the elements, on man's body, on the changes of seasons and on pestilences and famines, which is all too evident to sense to need discussion — setting aside these points, the Brachman argues as follows. Every effect implies a cause; accidents and future contingents are the effects of something; and this something cannot simply be the 'operations of elemental agents', which are 'necessary and constrained'. « What then can govern them? », asks the Brachman. He rejects 'blind chance', 'since it is evident with what exact order God hath disposed all things else, and therefore certainly would not leave man alone in so miserable a condition'. Angels and devils are also rejected as the required agency, 'since the first are expressly sent by God, and that only when they may be the means of some great and spiritual good to us; and the other do maliciously intrude themselves only when they have hope to work on misery and ruin: it remaineth then only that the heavens and stars must of necessity be allowed by us to be the causes of all contingent accidents, and the authors of our fortunes and actions, whereby the liberty of the will doth not immediately and expressly repugn and wrestle against the disposition of the heavens...'

The Brachman turns, finally, to the time-honoured argument: « Surely those glorious and vast bodies were not made and endued with a constant motion only for vain men to gaze upon? » And since 'by daily experience' we never scruple to admit the presaging power of comets, 'let us without difficulty acknowledge a nobler operation in those glorious bodies... and having admitted them for causes, you will grant that who hath the knowledge of their nature, can by calculating their motions for time to come, prognosticate their effects'.

We may pass over for the time being the ensuing conversation between Theagenes and the Brachman, on the subject of evil spirits, and simply pause to enquire why Sir Kenelm Digby felt it necessary to invoke the authority of the East and all the panoply of Brachmans and sages, in support of these time-honoured beliefs. The answer is, I think, that whereas in the Christian centuries such doctrines could be held lightly and, as it were, marginally, because the Catholic scheme of things was a solid reality, they had now become something at once more precious and more vulnerable: more precious, because for many they were all that was left, more vulnerable, because the scientific spirit was as hostile to these ideas as to the inerrancy of the Bible.

Support, therefore, from any quarter must be found at any cost[1]; and the East had from Plato's day the reputation for superhuman wisdom. Thus we find Thomas Burnet declaring that in the East there lingered on relics of primeval tradition.

> The Learning of the World may be divided into the Eastern Learning and the Western; and I look upon the Eastern as far more considerable for Philosophical Antiquities, and Philosophical Conclusions; I say *Conclusions*, for I do not believe either of them had any considerable Theory, or Contexture of Principles and Conclusions together: But 'tis certain, that in the East, from what Source soever it came, Humane or Divine, they had some extraordinary Doctrines and Notions disperst amongst them. Now as by the Western Learning we understand that of the *Greeks* and *Romans*; so by the Eastern, that which was amongst the *Aegyptians, Phoenicians, Chaldæans, Assyrians, Indians, Aethiopians,* and *Persians*; and of the Learning of these Nations, how little have we now left? except some Fragments and Citations in *Greek* Authors, what do we know of them? The modern *Brachmans*, and the *Persees* or *Pagan Persians*, have some broken remains of Traditions relating to the Origin and changes of the World[2].

Burnet's distinction between Western and Eastern wisdom might be paraphrased as the difference between a body of knowledge arrived at by reason — what he calls *theory* — and a body of doctrine arrived at by tradition from a primitive revelation. In making this point he puts his finger precisely on the question at issue between the 'new philosophy' and the old. Does wisdom come down from above, a

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1. Sir Thomas Browne on the necessity of believing in evil spirits might also be quoted in this connection.
2. T. Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, II, 9.

something given, or is it a 'theory' laboriously spun out of human heads?

'As for the Western Learning, we may remember what the *Aegyptian* Priest says to *Solon* in *Plato's Timæus, You Greeks are always Children,* and know nothing of Antiquity'. Burnet goes on to elaborate the common belief of his time (reproduced by Blake and Thomas Taylor at a later date) that all Western wisdom came from the East and was corrupted in the transmission; practically all parties were agreed on this thesis, with this difference that the orthodox Christian party asserted that Moses was the great original, while the esoteric thinkers gave the palm to Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, or whoever else took their fancy[1]. But the West *was* childish, they thought, in its preference for practical knowledge over revealed wisdom, its preoccupation with the toys of daily life in preference to the eternal good. Again, Burnet laments the great destruction of knowledge in the burning of the libraries of Alexandria and Constantinople and the Chinese 'Burning of the Books'; and thinks that much may yet remain unread in Eastern libraries.

> The Library of *Fez* is said to contain thirty two thousand Volumes in *Arabick*; and though the *Arabick* Learning was mostwhat *Western*, and therefore of less account, yet they did deal in *Eastern* Learning too; for *Avicenna* writ a Book with that Title, *Philosophia Orientalis*. There may be also in the *East* thousands of Manuscripts unknown to us, of greater value than most Books we have: And as to those subjects we are treating of, I should promise my self more light and confirmation from the *Syriack* Authors than from any others.

Both Burnet and Glanville, we note, take up a positive tone when speaking of the East; other writers appear more on the defensive. For such 'Orientalising' was a dangerous business, a weapon that cut both ways. Neither of the dominant parties liked it. It offended the orthodox Churchmen, because it seemed to be taking the palm away from Moses and the Scriptures; it offended the 'new philosophers', for it seemed to be setting up superstition in opposition to experimental truth. In defending religion against the scientists the sons of

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1. Theophilus Gale's *The Court of the Gentiles* (1677) was written to prove 'that the wisest of the Heathens stole their choisest Notions and Contemplations, both Philologie, and Philosophie, as well Natural and Moral, as Divine, from the sacred Oracles of the Jews'. Plato, of course, was merely « Moyses atticizans ».

Hermes found themselves in an ambiguous position between the fell incensed points of mighty opposites. Both they and the churchmen were for 'la primauté du spirituel', but differed widely in their judgment of how the defence should be undertaken. Independent spirits like Browne, Glanville, Burnet, stood for a tolerant attitude which would adopt the Eastern sages as allies; narrower thinkers such as Gale, Ross and Purchas thought they were doing Christianity a service and strengthening it in the fight against the infidels by showing that even pagan learning was a mere derivative from the Mosaic stock. Thus Theophilus Gale:

> My main and original designe is, to confirme the *Authoritie*, and demonstrate the *Perfection*, of the *Sacred Scriptures*. For this Position, *that the chief parts of human Literature had their derivation from the sacred Oracles*, being supposed, or proved, what credit and Authoritie wil hence redound to the same? how much wil their Divine *Majestie*, *Perfection*, and *Precellence* beyond al human books and Records, be enhansed hereby?

Gale is particularly bitter against Hermes, as we shall see later; one important reason for his antagonism is the consideration that an interest in things Egyptian is likely to rouse grave doubts as to the veracity of Bible chronology.

> The great *pretenders* to ancient *Annals* and *Records* were the *Egyptians*, who framed a monstrous *Register* or Account of *Dynastes*; even such, as if true, would have extended beyond *Adam*...

A shrillness of indignation breaks through there. But all is well, he says; Bochart has ingeniously shown that some of the Egyptian kings reigned concurrently and not successively.

More harm than good was done to the cause of what, for convenience, we may call Hermeticism[1], by such enthusiasts as Jaques Gaffarel, whose *Curiosités Inouyes* (1629) earned him the condemnation of the Sorbonne and expulsion from his post as Richelieu's librarian. Gaffarel's book, often mentioned scornfully by Henry More in his *Mystery of Godliness*, and dubiously by Browne in *Pseudodoxia*[2], was 'Englished by Edmund Chilmead, Mr of Arts, and Chaplaine of

1. I use this term here to cover the various attitudes of those who were 'looking to the East' at this period.

2. Chapter XIV, added to 1650 edition, and Book VII, Chapter IV. Gaffarel's 'starry book of heaven' finds its place too in one of the planetary tropes of the *Garden of Cyrus*, Chapter III, second paragraph.

Christ-Church Oxon.' in 1650. It gained an immediate reputation. Gaffarel is all for the Ancients against the Moderns, almost in the style of Alexander Ross[1]; but *his* ancients are not Plato and Aristotle but Hermes and Zoroaster.

> There is nothing is the whole businesse of Learning, which astonishes mee more, then to see, how many of the most Excellent Wits of this our Age, make it their businesse, to find fault with the Ancients, and to load them with injurious speeches: as if this evill custom had now grown into a Maxime with them, that one can never passe for an Able man, nor appeare to be Any Body, without reprehending those which have gone before us and from whose Learned writings we have derived the most Curious, and Choyse Points of Knowledge that we have. The *Persians*, or, if you please, the *Babylonians*, that bordered upon the River Euphrates, were the First, as Rabbins report, that found out the secret power of Figures. The wonders that have been effected by them, have been acknowledged by all the Ancients, and approved of throughout all Aegypt: in so much that, those, who were the first that have written of them, have maintained, that there was not any thing of more Excellency, and Admiration, within the compasse of the whole Universe.

Gaffarel defends the Persians against charges of star-worship, image-worship and sorcery. It is a false report, for instance, that

> They killed a man, that was the first borne, and wrung off his Head; and having imbaulmed it, they placed it upon a plate of gold, on which was first written the name of the unclean Spirit, that they would call upon: and so, hanging it up against a wall, and placing Lampes, and Torches about it, they worshipped it. A very subtle Invention, this; but something a dismall one!

A dismal one indeed: and Gaffarel's evident and childish interest in horrors and the marvellous went far to discredit the movement with which he was associated.

What is common, we see, to all these writers (and Browne is no exception), is a feeling that the ancients have been slighted, that there is a variety of knowledge unknown to the moderns, a wisdom that has been lost and must somehow be recovered. With the destruction of the mediæval order, which, adequately or inadequately, enshrined that wisdom, the question of recovery became urgent; for what was at stake was nothing less than the preservation of man. It is not enough to turn back to the Greeks — 'the Giddy-headed

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1. *Arcana Microcosmi* (1652), *The Epistle Dedicatory*.

Greekes who turned all manner of things into Fables; and who thought, they should never be taken for men of worth, unless they invented, and published to the world, these their Fooleries; which have since wrought us this Unhappinesse, that we have but a Darke, Confused Notion, of the Wisedome of the Ancients'. Gaffarel's accusation is the same as Blake's: the Greeks perverted a traditional wisdom into moral allegory, exteriorised insights and so brought about a dualism from which Western man has never recovered. No: the search must go further than the Greeks, must delve into the origins of thought; and these origins, it was believed, were to be found only in the East. The question was, how far east had one to go?

Gaffarel, as we saw, plumped for the Persians, Digby for the Brahmins, Burnet is eclectic. Sir Thomas Browne, who will be throughout this study our representative thinker, was satisfied with Egypt. Persia, it is true, held some attraction for him; speaking of chess, in *The Garden of Cyrus,* he longs for the 'true and ancient description, farre different from ours, or the *Chet mat* of the *Persians,* which might continue some elegant remarkables, as being an invention as High as *Hermes* the Secretary of *Osyris,* figuring the whole world, the motion of the Planets, with Eclipses of sunne and Moon'. But on the whole he remains faithful to his serpent of old Nile. References to Hermes, the pyramids, hieroglyphics, 'the mysterious crosses of *Aegypt,* with circles on their heads, in the breast of *Serapis*', and 'the Aegyptian Embalmers', strew his pages.

Abeunt omnia in mysterium. Browne does not use the phrase anywhere in his writings, as far as I am aware; but it might well be the device on his shield, or even the epitaph on his monument. It expresses, very concisely, the centrifugal nature of his thought. At the centre, plain to be seen, the core of white light — Vulgar Errors refuted, reason triumphant — and then around it, whirling into the darkness like a Catherine wheel, the coloured streamers of his thought flaring and flickering. Yet in that core of white light itself there is a still more central darkness which is unseen: 'I am in the dark to all the world, and my nearest friends behold me but in a cloud'. This central darkness responds to the surrounding darkness, reaches out to it, to the vast territory of mystery surrounding the light. Let us remember what Browne himself tells us in *Religio Medici* of his 'two philosophies'. 'I have... one common and authentick Philosophy I learned in the Schools, whereby I discourse and satisfy the reason of other men ; another more reserved, and drawn from experience, whereby I content mine own'. The first philosophy is reflected in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica,* in his letters to Edward and to the Royal Society. The other philosophy is reserved for his private meditations or for correspondence with such men as Ashmole and Lilly.

If we call the surrounding darkness that fascinated Browne an Egyptian darkness we shall be making a play on words which yet has a real sense. For Egypt was his symbol for mystery. In the Hermetic writings[1] Egypt is the copy (imago) of Heaven, the spot upon which are projected all the heavenly operations. Whether Browne was familiar with these works or not (and there is every reason to suppose he was) what is certain is that Egypt had this fascination for him: the fascination of something at once unknown and familiar. Even his 'two philosophies' is paralleled in the *Asclepius,* where Hermes describes to his disciple how there *is* a true philosophy, pure and undefiled, which consists in the intuitive knowledge of God, and how this philosophy is corrupted by mixture with 'various unintelligible sciences, arithmetic, music and geometrie'[2].

Again, there was the historical connection between Egypt and his own religion: this meant much to Browne both as fact and as symbol. The Israelites had dwelt in and come out of Egypt; it was debated whether Moses owed his wisdom to the Egyptians, or whether Egyptian learning derived from Moses. The child Jesus had been carried by his Mother into Egypt to escape Herod; he had sojourned there, in a protecting darkness, until the danger was past. Egypt, 'which we esteem the ancientest Nation in the world', is thus the symbol of the matrix; the land of hieroglyphics herself a great hieroglyph. The mother of arts and sciences, the Nile is the symbol of her fertility[3]. Above all, she is the land of the magical arts. Chiromancy, for one: 'the Egyptians, who were neerer addicted to those

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1. Cf. *Asclepius* 24 : an ignoras, o Asclepi, quod Aegyptus imago sit caeli aut, quod est uerius, translatio aut descensio omnium, quae gubernantur atque exercentur in caelo?

2. These sciences are not in themselves evil, if properly interpreted. Thus music — and it is Browne's own point of view — 'musicen uero nosse nihil aliud est, nisi cunctarum omnium rerum ordinem scire quaeque sit diuina ratio sortita : ordo enim rerum singularum in unum omnium artifici ratione conlatus concentum quendam melo diuino dulcissimum uerissimumque conficiet'. *Asclepius* 13.

3. Cf. *Pseudodoxia Epidemica,* Book VI Chap. VIII, 'Of the River *Nilus*'.

abstruse and mystical sciences, had a knowledge therein'; and the use of talismans: 'the Egyptians thereby expressed the processes and motion of the spirit of the world, and the diffusion thereof upon the Celestiall and Elementall nature: implyed by a circle and right-lined intersection. A secret in their Telesmes and magical Characters among them'.

But most of all, Egypt linked up with Browne's imperial theme of death. The pyramids were emblems of human vanity, embalming was a pathetic memento of human affection. 'Aegyptian ingenuity was more unsatisfied, contriving their bodies in sweet consistencies, to attend the return of their souls. But all was vanity, feeding the winde, and folly. The Aegyptian Mummies, which *Cambyses* or time hath spared, avarice now consumeth. Mummia is become Merchandise *Mizraim* cures wounds, and *Pharaoh* is sold for balsoms'. The Egyptians would not burn their dead, fearing that too little was left behind; 'and therefore by precious Embalments, depositure in dry earths, or handsome inclosure in glasses[1], contrived the notablest wayes of integrall conservation'. From Browne's remarks, scattered throughout his writings, on the pyramids, it becomes clear that he thought of them as places of interment, though sometimes we have hints of the belief commented on by Festugiere: 'Selon le croyance des Arabes, Hermès... bâtit les pyramides pour y déposer tous les secrets des sciences avant que le monde ne fût détruit par le cataclysme'. The pyramidal structure reappears in *The Garden of Cyrus* as a species of universal hieroglyphic or archetype, 'things entring upon the intellect by a Pyramid from without, and thence into the memory by another from within, the common decussation being in the understandiug... And if Aegyptian Philosophy may obtain, the scale of influences was thus disposed, and the geniall spirits of both worlds do trace their way in ascending and descending Pyramids, mystically apprehended in the letter X, and the open Bill and straddling Legges of a Stork, which was imitated by that Character'.

Enough has been said to show Browne's absorbing interest in Egypt and we have hardly touched as yet upon his attitude to Hermes. That this interest was a growing one is demonstrated by a study

1. Probably a reference to Greaves, *Pyramidographia* (1646), on the coffin of Joseph: 'They put his blessed body, after they had washed it, into a coffin of glass, and buried it in the channel of the river *Nilus*, saith *Emir Cond a Persian*'. *Pyramidographia* was among Brown's preferred reading.

and the Egyptians. No one, indeed, among the seventeenth century thinkers, makes larger claims for the Egyptians than Cudworth. They gave religion to the Greeks; they were the wisest of men; in Solomon's time, '*Egypt* was the chief School of Literature in the whole World'; they were learned both in history and in theology. The pages that follow in Book I Chapter IV of the *Intellectual System* are devoted to a searching analysis of the wisdom of the Egyptians; and in particular to a critique of the Hermetic writings, which we must leave for consideration to a further chapter. Let us only, for the moment, look at Cudworth as an Easterniser: the views of so respectable and central a thinker may harmonise with, or prove a corrective to, the idiosyncrasies of a Browne or a Digby.

His attack, let us always remember, is directed against the atheist — that is, against the materialist. 'Their Minds are Partly *Petrified* and *Benummed* into a kind of *Sottish* and *Stupid Insensibility,* so that they are not able to discern things that are most Evident; and partly *Depudorated* or become so void of Shame, as that though they do perceive, yet they will Obstinately and Impudently deny the plainest things that are, as this, that there is *any Idea* answering to the *word God,* besides the *Phantasm* of the *Sound*'. Hard words: but justified, Cudworth says, by an examination of the facts. The followers of Hobbes are wilfully blind. They refuse to see what even the Pagans saw: the Providence of God, and the Creation of the World by 'One Self-existent Deity'. It is true that the Egyptians pushed the date of the world's creation further back than they ought (this old difficulty crops up again and again), yet they 'seem to have had a constant Perswasion of the Beginning of it, and the Firmest of all other Nations: they (as *Kircher* tells us) therefore picturing *Horus* or *the World,* as a *Young man Beardless,* not only to signifie its constant youthful and flourishing Vigour, but also the Youngness and Newness of its Duration'. And the Egyptians were far superior to the pre-Socratic philosophers of Greece in that they never 'conceived it to be made by Chance without a God, as *Anaximander, Democritus* and *Epicurus* afterwards did'.

The theme of the *two philosophies,* exoteric and esoteric, which we have already met with in Brown, is repeated in Cudworth in signigicant reference to the Egyptians. 'Besides their Physiology, and the Pure and Mix'd Mathematicks (Arithmetick, Geometry and Astronomy) they had another higher kind of Philosophy also, concerning *Incorporeal Substances*... they were the first Asserters of the *Immor-*

right reason does determine and allow, but that... there is a perpetual peace and agreement betwixt truth and truth, be they of what nature or kind so ever; and that they are blind superstitionists or superficial philosophasters that imagine any such digladiation betwixt true philosophy and real Christianity [1].

We have seen that it was above all at the Mosaic account of the Creation that the sceptical darts of the New Philosophy were directed. More was aware of this and saw in the Kabbala a valuable ally, which supported while extending the scope of the Genesis account. 'The Jewish *Cabbala*', he says in his *Conjectura Cabbalistica* (1662), 'is conceived to be a traditional doctrine or exposition of the Pentateuch, which *Moses* received from the mouth of God while he was on the Mount with him'. He goes on to divide the Kabbala into three sections: Literal, Philosophical, and Mystical. The passage that follows [2] well illustrates the curious mixture of scientific and mystical ideas in the seventeenth century mind:

But in the behalf of these *Cabbalistical* Conclusions I will only note thus much. That they are such, that supposing them true, (which I shall no longer assert, then till such time as some able *Philosopher* or *Theologer* shall convince me of their falshood) there is nothing of any grand consideration in *Theology* or *Nature* that will not easily be extricated by this *Hypothesis*, an eminent part whereof is the *Motion of the Earth* and the *Præexistence of Souls*. The evidence of the former of which Truths is such, that it has wone the assent of the most famous *Mathematicians* of our later Ages; and the reasonablenesse of the latter is no lesse: there having never been any Philosopher that held the Soul of Man immortal but he held that it did also præexist.

More is not alone in thus turning to the East for supply for spiritual as well as scientific needs: the resurrection of an old hypothesis, metempsychosis, is on the same level as the assertion of a new hypothesis, the motlon of the earth. Thus men found in Eastern lore food for more than one part of their natures. For that man is the great amphibium was not Browne's doctrine alone; the whole age was Janus-faced. Scientific reasonings jostle on the same page with spiritual aspirations; the frivolities of superstition stand cheek by jowl with the profoundest philosophical ideas. Thus we find More himself, advanced thinker though he was in many ways, going on to explain

1. *The Apology of Dr. Henry More*, qu. P. R. Anderson, *Science in Defense of Liberal Religion*, New York, 1933.

2. From *The Defence of the Three-fold Cabbala*, Preface.

the day-by-day creation by means of the Pythagorean doctrine of numbers. For the Fifth Day, for example:

> *Philo* does not here omit that obvious consideration of the *Five senses* in *Animals*. But it is a strange coincidence, if it was not intended, that living creatures should be said to be made in the *Fifth* and *Sixth* day, those Numbers according to the *Pythagorical mysterie* being so fitly significant of the nature of them. For *Five* is acknowledged by them to be *Male* and *Female*, consisting of *Three* and *Two*, the two first *Masculine* and *Feminine* numbers: It is also an Emblem of *Generation*, for the number *Five* drawn into *Five* brings about *Five* again, as you see in *Five times Five*, which is *Twenty Five*. So an Eagle ingendring with an Eagle brings forth an Eagle, and a Dolphin ingendring with a Dolphin, a Dolphin ; and so in the rest [1].

A passage which might have found its place in *The Garden of Cyrus*; but it is this kind of thing which explains why such men as More and Browne were not exactly *personæ gratæ* to the Royal Society, and why their efforts, however learned and ingenious, had absolutely no effect in stemming the flood of materialism.

Of course we can see what is aimed at: the construction of an *inclusive* order, one which reaching down from the stars to the herb and the stone would also embrace the soul of man and the whole of human destiny. This was the ancient Neo-Platonic vision, implicit in both the Kabbala and the Hermetica, which saw the cosmos as a series of correspondences. It is the basis of the vitalistic viewpoint, the universe conceived as an organism and not as a machine. It was this vision that Browne and More, Gaffarel and (in one of his moods) Digby were seeking to safeguard. This too explains the dominance of the macrocosm-microcosm image, about which we shall have much to say later. What must be noted at this point is that such a world-picture was in complete opposition to the view of Bacon, Hobbes and Newton, which was to triumph at the end of the century. But not without a struggle: Newton's own interest in alchemy and mysticism serves to suggest how touch and go, perhaps, the whole course of events was. If the vitalists had been a little less fantastic... if the materialists dad been a little more open-minded!

Let us remember that both parties were after the same thing: a more credible account of the universe than the literal Bible picture. The image of Jehovah, directly intervening in the affairs of the world and subverting the laws of Nature, was obnoxious to Cudworth as to

1. H. More, *op.cit.* Chapter I.

Locke. What was God's way with the Universe? that was the question for the Hermetists. What was the way of the Universe, God or no God? was the question for the Empiricists. Both refused to appeal directly to final causes; but whereas the latter oversimplified by denying (ultimately) their existence, the former refused to be stampeded into atheism. What if the question is more subtle than we think? they said; what if God, instead of acting upon the Universe from outside, had given it a Governour, had delegated his power to an inferior but still a spiritual agency, which might be called the Soul of the World?

So we find in Cudworth the idea of a Plastic Nature or Archeus, a demiurgic force working within the processes of Nature, moulding all things to the likeness of a divine archetype.

> *Nature* is not the *Divine Art Archetypal,* but only *Ectypal,* it is a living Stamp or Signature of the Divine Wisdom, which though it act exactly according to its *Archctype,* yet it doth not at all Comprehend nor Understand the Reason of what it self doth[1].

The concept of a Plastic Nature avoids the dilemma that either (I) God works continuously and miraculously in the universe or that (II) the universe is a 'fortuitous mechanism'. The first alternative 'seems neither decorous in respect of God, nor Congruous to Reason'; moreover, the observed workings of the universe — 'the Slow and Gradual Process of things in *Nature,* as also... those Errours and Bungles, that are Committed, when the *Matter* proves Inept and Contumacious, which argue the Agent not to be *Irresistible*' — militate against its acceptance. On the other hand, to agree that the universe is a fortuitous mechanism leads straight to atheism; nor can it be made to fit the facts, for there are 'many *Phænomena* [i.e. those respecting life and consciousness] both above the *Mechanick Powers,* and *Contrary* to the *Laws* thereof'. The 'appearances' can be 'saved', however, if we agree that a Plastic Nature exists, under God's Providence, entrusted with the 'drudgery' of the universe, yet ever subject to a higher power which may directly overrule it or supply, from time to time, its defects. Thus miracles are by no means ruled out, but relegated to special occasions.

It is typical of the Eastward-looking tendency of the age that in supporting his hypothesis Cudworth appeals not only to the classical philosophers, both pre-Socratic and post-Socratic, but also to Zoroaster

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1. Cudworth, *True Intellectual System,* Book I, Chap. III, II.

and the Egyptians. No one, indeed, among the seventeenth century thinkers, makes larger claims for the Egyptians than Cudworth. They gave religion to the Greeks; they were the wisest of men; in Solomon's time, '*Egypt* was the chief School of Literature in the whole World'; they were learned both in history and in theology. The pages that follow in Book I Chapter IV of the *Intellectual System* are devoted to a searching analysis of the wisdom of the Egyptians; and in particular to a critique of the Hermetic writings, which we must leave for consideration to a further chapter. Let us only, for the moment, look at Cudworth as an Easterniser: the views of so respectable and central a thinker may harmonise with, or prove a corrective to, the idiosyncrasies of a Browne or a Digby.

His attack, let us always remember, is directed against the atheist — that is, against the materialist. 'Their Minds are Partly *Petrified* and *Benummed* into a kind of *Sottish* and *Stupid Insensibility*, so that they are not able to discern things that are most Evident; and partly *Depudorated* or become so void of Shame, as that though they do perceive, yet they will Obstinately and Impudently deny the plainest things that are, as this, that there is *any Idea* answering to the *word God*, besides the *Phantasm* of the *Sound*'. Hard words: but justified, Cudworth says, by an examination of the facts. The followers of Hobbes are wilfully blind. They refuse to see what even the Pagans saw: the Providence of God, and the Creation of the World by 'One Self-existent Deity'. It is true that the Egyptians pushed the date of the world's creation further back than they ought (this old difficulty crops up again and again), yet they 'seem to have had a constant Perswasion of the Beginning of it, and the Firmest of all other Nations: they (as *Kircher* tells us) therefore picturing *Horus* or *the World*, as a *Young man Beardless*, not only to signifie its constant youthful and flourishing Vigour, but also the Youngness and Newness of its Duration'. And the Egyptians were far superior to the pre-Socratic philosophers of Greece in that they never 'conceived it to be made by Chance without a God, as *Anaximander, Democritus* and *Epicurus* afterwards did'.

The theme of the *two philosophies*, exoteric and esoteric, which we have already met with in Brown, is repeated in Cudworth in signigicant reference to the Egyptians. 'Besides their Physiology, and the Pure and Mix'd Mathematicks (Arithmetick, Geometry and Astronomy) they had another higher kind of Philosophy also, concerning *Incorporeal Substances*... they were the first Asserters of the *Immor-*

tality of Souls, their *Preexistence* and *Transmigration*, from whence their *Incorporeity* is necessarily inferred'. Yes, here the Egyptians have it even over Moses and the Biblical canon; and in the ensuing passage Cudworth makes the inevitable extension to the Indian 'Brachmans':

> And the Egyptian Doctrine is represented after the same manner by *Porphyrius* in *Stobæus*, as also in the *Hermetick* or *Trismegistick* Writings. Moreover *Chalcidius* reports, that *Hermes Trismegist*, when he was about to die, made an Oration to this purpose, *That he had here lived in this Earthly Body, but an Exile and Stranger, and was now returning home to his own Country, so that his Death ought not to be lamented, this Life rather to be accompted Death.* Which Perswasion the Indian *Brachmans* also were embued withal, whether they recieved it from the Egyptians (as they did some other things) or no.

The last clause may amuse us; it is an indicatiou of Cudworth's desire *not to go too far East;* but the whole passage leads on to, is the signal for, a veritable corruscation of Hermetic lore.

To what does all this lead up? it may well be asked; and the foregoing display of obscure learning, of tomes long forgotten and names no longer remembered, will be little worth unless a connection can be made between the living and the dead: unless fresh voices take up and echo a message from the past which is real and living today. It is the theme of the present study that a Great Tradition exists which found its greatest voice, in England, in William Blake; that all this turning to the East was, in the upshot, a turning of Man to himself, a self-exploration inspired, but not dominated, by ancient sources. And this is made clear by Oswald Croll in what was perhaps his greatest work, 'The Discovering the Great and Deep Mysteries of Nature'[1]. The most excellent philosophy, he says, 'is that which enlighteneth the mind to the right knowledge of it selfe; so to be ignorant of that knowledge is the greatest shame and most pestilent disease of the mind. Ignorance, saith *Trismegistus* to his Son *Tat*, is the greatest Enemy and principall Tormentor in every Man'. Ignorance, we note, and not sin; we are moving in the realm. not of religion, but of metaphysic, and of a metaphysic which corresponds to the universal tradition.

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1. See below, chapter.
2. Translated H. Pinnel, 1657.

> Because man hath the true and Reall possession of all things and Natures in himselfe, as also the speciall and perfect Image even of the Creator of all things ; Therefore the knowledge of all things and natures, and of the Creator him selfe (wherein alone true Wisdome and Blessednesse consisteth) must take its rise from the knowledge of a mans selfe : So that Man, when he doth rightly understand himself, may in himselfe, as in a kind of Deified glasse, behold and understand all things.

This is perfectly orthodox, if by orthodoxy we imply a reference to the original sources and formularies of wisdom ; it is not orthodox, alas, if we mean by orthodoxy concurrence with the spirit of a church at any given moment of its existence. The original meaning dwindles as the tradition extends itself into this department and that of human life ; the unique, the extraordinary disappears, the all-too-human takes its place, and those who seek to return to the source of revelation are outlawed. So Crollius turns to Hermes rather than to St John :

> To be short, the knowledge of God is the Treasury of the whole world wherein all things are laid up, so that without this knowledge no man can come to eternall life : For Faith, Hope and Love, follow knowledge, Adhæsion or cleaving to followeth Love, Union follows Adhæsion, in Union is Blessednesse and Wisdome. This Regeneration that holy man *Hermes* and others of clean hearts and godly lives before the Word was incarnate being enlightened by the holy Spirit, though they concealed it among other Secrets, they knew it better then many of us who call our selves Christians, and had rather seem to know God then love him.

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