

HERMETIC ART

Gnostic Alchemy of the Imagination

by A. C. Evans

They are the comic exaggerations of what elsewhere is expressed in elegy, namely, if you like, the Hermeticism of the spirit – Samuel Beckett (in a letter, 1936)

Art and Experience

There are two ways of understanding art. There is a traditional philosophy which, as Susan Sontag (1967) has shown, is based on a mimetic theory derived from the Greeks (mainly Plato). But there is also a second way - perhaps of greater antiquity and authenticity - which defines art in terms of experience rather than imitation (*mimesis*) or even communication.

As Sontag explains, Plato defined art in order to limit its significance. He categorized it as ‘an elaborate *tromp l’oeil* and therefore a lie.’ because, according to his philosophy, the world is also limited in significance being merely the transient reflection of pure ‘forms’ – the numinous Platonic Ideas. So, if art was to be merely mimetic or imitative – a representation of the world – then it is reduced in status to nothing but an ‘imitation of an imitation’. The reasons for the profound influence of the Platonic aesthetic and the reactionary utopian theory from which it derives are too complex to discuss here. Suffice it to say that the classical rationalism of the Greek philosophers, which later fused with the otherworldly doctrines of Christianity, was deeply opposed to the atavistic excesses of the preceding mythic-tribal cultures.

The experiential view of art is in opposition to this rational limitation of art as *mimesis*. It is not a question of what art means – it is a question of what it does. It is a view of art as a vehicle for the imaginative transmutation of the artist. It derives from the idea that the artist is an *adept*, an initiate, a creator, or, let us say, an alchemist skilled in the methods of purification and transformation – a quasi-divine manipulator of charged images and symbols.

In the hieratic epochs before the Greek exultation of reason, art was fused with ritual and magic. Poetry was a mode of ecstatic utterance, a technique of invocation for shaman-priests. Pictorial art was the externalization of thought-forms – a mechanism of reification. Art was the origin of talismanic and sympathetic magic. Like the so-called ‘divine’ word of creation visual images and verbal incantations were experienced as charged symbols - as transducers-transformers of psychic energy; a theurgic weapon in the armory of the magus – the *lapis philosophorum*. Modern hermetic art attempts to return to these ancient conceptions of the arts and the artist. It attempts, through all its forms (but especially through poetry and drama) to repossess the magical powers of the imagination stultified by millennia of rationalism.

Hermeticism and Art

Today the term ‘hermeticism’ relates to two distinct phenomena, which are nevertheless linked together in deep and subtle ways. In traditional usage the term refers to a complex of esoteric mystery teachings dating from the Hellenistic period. Hans Jonas (1958) refers to ‘the religion of the Thrice Greatest Hermes’, the legendary author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This collection of scriptures contains such works as *The Pimander*, a gnostic cosmogeny, the *Asclepius*, a text which influenced the development of Renaissance

aesthetic magic, and the famous *Tabula Smaragdina* (*Emerald Table*), a doctrine of nature later incorporated via Islamic sources into alchemical thought.

Throughout the ages the literature of the Western Hermetic Tradition has been associated with works of cryptic obscurity and enigmatic visual images. It is this ‘obscurity’ which has given rise to the common use of the word ‘hermetic’, as in the phrase ‘hermetically sealed’. Many Hermetic works - such as Bruno’s *De Umbris Idearum* (*On the Shadows of Forms*) of 1582 are of great imaginative power. And many alchemical illustrations such as those contained in Trismosin’s *Splendor Solis* (1582), or the drawings of the Rosicrucian Matthieu Merriam (for example his illustrations to Maier’s *Atalanta Fugiens*, 1618) are artworks in their own right. When considered in hindsight they can appear as antecedents of Surrealism and certain modern fantastic paintings (such as the works of Ernst Fuchs or H. R. Giger). The works of the Netherlandish painter known as Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) are outstanding examples of a refined late Gothic style, incorporating alchemico-hermetic visions and which continue to exert a fascination despite (or because of) their ‘hermetic’ obscurity. This is true of most works by Bosch but particularly paintings such as ‘The Garden of Earthly Delights’ and ‘The Temptation of Saint Anthony’ (Lisbon). Bosch’s paintings, which are infused with a millenarian pessimism, reflect an instinctive understanding of the role of the artist (or his alter ego, Saint Anthony) as a receiver of enigmatic visions and an explorer of the innermost recesses of the human mind. It is these qualities, above all, which recur with prominence in modernistic hermeticism.

Just as the antithetical mimetic theory of art gained ascendancy over post-mythic culture, when the hieratic gave way to rational classicism, so a new ‘hermetic’ school of poetry emerged during the European *fin-de-siecle* era (1870-1914) when the influence of the Platonic-Christian worldview (as enshrined in doctrines of Progress and Cartesian *mecanisme*) entered a crucial phase of decay. During this period, as in the Renaissance, art combined with esotericism and gave birth to a new gnosis or aesthetic *renovatio*. There are crucial differences, however. Our modern cultural crisis is more radical because it is a post-religious crisis – a naked crisis of ‘the real’ that deepens with every passing decade.

Christine Brooke-Rose:

That this century is undergoing a reality crisis has become a banality, easily and pragmatically shrugged off. Perhaps it is in fact undergoing a crisis of the imagination; a fatigue, a decadence.

It is typical of this cultural fatigue or ‘decadence’ that, unlike his Renaissance predecessor, the modern artist-poet no longer relies upon traditional symbols or familiar modes of discourse and signification (except to subvert them, as in some styles of ‘Postmodernism’). The obscurity (‘hermeticism’) of modern art arises, therefore not from its assimilation of certain occult theories (the doctrine of the androgyny, the idea of ‘correspondences’) but from an ultrapersonal subjectivity bordering in some cases upon a solipsistic despair – as for instance in certain works by Mallarme, Khnopff, Artaud and Beckett. The uninitiated reader/viewer finds modern artworks ‘obscure’ not (as is often asserted) because of some failure to communicate on the part of the artist but because the artist does not *intend* to communicate through works which are essentially private fetishes or personal sigils. Like a painting by Bosch they are often all the more effective for this very reason.

Nevertheless modern art and modern occultism remain complimentary tropisms: elements of a profound shift in modern sensibility. An understanding of magical terminology and ideas can help in appreciating modern art as an art of evocation, invocation and initiation – a new aesthetic gnosis – a revolutionary inner alchemy of imaginative transformation.

In modern literature the term 'hermetic' has been used to identify a particular style or school of poetry. It was first popularized in establishment circles by the Italian critic Francesco Flora in 1936 when he used it in relation to the work of poets like Arturo Onofri, Giuseppe Ungaretti and other Italians such as Luzi, Gatto and Sereni. For Flora *la poesia ermetica* was a style of subjective writing originated by the French Decadents and Symbolists of the *fin-de-siecle*: Rimbaud, Mallarme and Valery, and their precursors: Poe, Nerval and Charles Baudelaire.

According to J. A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1977) the characteristics of this hermetic poetry are 'obscurity', subjectivism and evocative power. It is obscure difficult poetry in which language and imagery are subjective and in which the 'music' and the suggestive power of the words are as of great an importance (if not greater) as the sense.

Cuddon also observes that this poetry often exploited 'occult symbolism'.

There was also a simultaneous development towards hermetic obscurity in the pictorial arts during the *fin-de-siecle* era. As literature moved closer to the absurd and the indeterminate, eroding the frontiers between poetry and prose and fact and fiction, transforming conventional syntax, so painting moved via Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism towards a final decomposition of meaning (Dadaism) and a total elimination of objective representation (Abstraction). This decomposition was accompanied by a plethora of schools and secessionist movements, each more outrageous and more 'modern' than the last: Decadence, Symbolism, Naturalism, Art Nouveau, Synthetism, Expressionism, Magic Realism, Futurism, Rayonism, Cubism, Orphism, Metaphysical Painting and Surrealism to name but a few. Many of the artists and writers in these movements incorporated occult ideas into their work – the painters, Gustave Moreau, Fernand Khnopff, Jean Delville and Frank Kupka, for example. But it is important to distinguish between the use of occult ideas as a theme and the conception of the artwork itself as having intrinsic magical properties.

The Experience of Limits

At the core of the artistic developments in the nineteenth century flowed a powerful all pervasive current of influence. Heretical, iconoclastic, radical and above all anti-classical, anti-rational, anti-mechanistic and anti-academic, this chain of development has recently been identified by critics like Julia Kristeva and Christine Brooke-Rose as the 'experience-of-limits' literature.

Writing about one of the most notorious exponents of this strand of literature - Louis Ferdinand Celine - Erica Ostrovsky (1967) has referred to a 'black current' of writing, 'filled with militant pessimism and violent derision, denoting a vision that is no less sombre than its poetic strength.'

Grouped under this heading of 'experience-of-limits' or 'black current' are a number of famous – or infamous – names: Poe, Sade, Kleist, De Quincey, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Huysmans, Laforgue, Kafka, Nerval, Jarry, Celine, Artaud, Bataille, and the Surrealist poets, chiefly Andre Breton. Today the tradition is manifest in the works of Samuel Beckett and William S. Burroughs.

The outstanding achievements of this modern tradition have been stylistic innovation and a bold exploration of the repressed, negative aspects of the human mind - regardless of consequences. Without exception each one has set out to 'enlarge the limits of the human signifiable' (Brooke-Rose), creating a form of writing both idiosyncratic and often inaccessible ('hermetic'). For example Celine's *Journey to the End of Night*, Beckett's *How It Is*, Rimbaud's *Season in Hell*, Artaud's *New Revelations of Being*, Mallarme's *Un Coup de Des*, Nerval's *Aurelia*, Lautremont's *Maldoror* and Jarry's *Faustroll*.

In a wider context one can point to a number of experimental styles derived from the 'experience of limits' tradition: the linguistic experimentation on of the decadents (Laforgue, Huysmans), the 'words-in-freedom' of the Italian and Russian Futurists and the 'pure psychic automatism' of the Surrealists. The hermetic 'obscurity' and the shocking content of most of these works almost always provoked moral panic in the uninitiated reader and outright hostility from the critical establishment. Like heretics, these artist-poets became *maudits* or pariahs, outcasts exiled, like occultists, to the margins of cultural acceptability. Like Mallariné' or Stefan George, they only wrote for small circles of initiates but functioned, nevertheless as intercessors between society and inscrutable forces of change.

If this modern hermeticism is a new form of inner alchemy, and then the creative process is a procedure of purification – further, it is a form of self-initiation. The pariah-artist (*maudit*) of the nineteenth century was the epitome of social alienation: a nihilist aesthete isolated by the obscurity of his works, enclosed, like Des Esseintes, the hero of the seminal novel *A Rebours* (1884) by J.-K. Huysmans, in a sanctum of art, an inner retreat where psychic forces – unleashed in a mana-effect by the melohypnosis of creativity – precipitate a crisis of individuation. This idea of a 'secluded retreat' was not just a literary fantasy. Many distinguished *fin-de-siecle* personalities retreated into a real-life 'thebaid', for example: W. B. Yeats in his watchtower, Strindberg in his 'Blue Tower', Fernand Khnopff in his self-designed house, Franz von Stuck in The Villa Stuck, Marcel Proust in his sick room. Taken to the limit this crisis of confinement became a magical ordeal – a confrontation with the experience of psychic death. This is the experience common to all esoteric traditions and variously known as the *Nox Profundis*, the Dark Night of the Soul, or in alchemical terms, the *Nigredo* (Blackening).

As C. G. Jung and others have shown, the alchemical process reflects 'archetypal' processes of psychic growth - 'individuation' or occult self- initiation. Hermetic art, while superficially referring to a cultural construct – Flora's *poesia ermetica* – is also grounded in the same psychic procedures. It follows that an examination of the works of a true hermetic artist like, say, Mallarme, should reveal the same 'archetypal' procedures of individuation as Jung's analysis of hermetic texts. Furthermore a wider historical perspective reveals that 'hermeticism' in various modes – Gnostic or aesthetic – emerges at particular times in cultural history. The reasons for this can also be understood in terms of individuation or initiation - collective evolution. The Hellenistic era, The Renaissance and the modern *fin-de-siecle* period were all epochs of profound change: epochs of cultural and social crisis.

Personal Hermeticism

The supreme master of *fin-de-siecle* Hermetic Symbolism was Stephane Mallarme (1842-1898), the greatest and most influential poet of the period.

In his writings he laid bare that twilight zone of experience where language – stretched to breaking point – implodes to reveal a void of non-meaning. He formulated a coherent philosophy of paradox (described at length by R. G. Cohn) and created an idiosyncratic style to express the subtlest nuances of thought. In his personal life he became the epitome of the vatic poet or *voyant* – a seeker after 'Orphic explanations of the Earth' – an alchemist of language engaged in a rigorous procedure of purification – an intercessor between an initiated readership of fellow poets and 'the absolute' (*Neant/Azur*)

The Grand Oeuvre

Chisholm (1962) has pointed to a direct correlation between Mallarme's art and the aichemical process:

For Mallarme, objects are always... only starting points, baser metals that have to be transmuted into the pure gold of correspondences.

The term ‘correspondences’ refers here to the idea of poetic analogy introduced into French poetry by Baudelaire and derived from Boehme and Swedenborg.

Chisholm also writes:

For these magical transmutations of objects, as for his other transformations, Mallarme’s most important adjunct, his pierre philosophale, is the word.

These critical observations help us to categorize Mallarme’s Hermeticism from the viewpoint of magical-alchemical tradition. The *objective* of his art is TRANSFORMATION. The means of transformation is THE WORD. Words are a mode of signification, (as are IMAGES) which, like magical sigils or sacred fetish-objects, become for the poet, as for the sorcerer-magus-chemist, charged SYMBOLS with a power of EVOCATION. These powers of evocation are augmented by the doctrine of CORRESPONDENCES provoking the effect of Sympathetic Magic. The object of these transformative procedures may appear to be aspects of the external world – just as the ancient alchemists applied their ‘art’ to metallic elements. However, as modern research explains, this external operation complements an interior, or subjective, operation of potentially greater significance – the transformation of the operator himself. Thus, the aesthetic alchemy of hermetic poetry correlates closely with the ancient hermetic and magical traditions which all derive from natural inner processes of psychosomatic development variously called ‘individuation’ or Self-Initiation.

Modern hermetic art, however, exhibits certain unique characteristics. Firstly: self-reflexiveness. This refers to a tendency for modern artists to use art itself as their primary subject, a technique that greatly enhances the hermetic effect of obscurity. Secondly there is the tendency to avoid traditional symbolism and modes of discourse leading to further ‘obscurities’ achieved via private symbolism and extreme stylistic experimentation. (As, for instance, in the prose poetry of Samuel Beckett). An interesting case of similar processes at work in modern magic is the magical trance art of Austin Osman Spare whose mysterious writings and images derive much of their power from an intensely *private* occult system of sigilization.

While Mallarme indeed pictured himself working upon a ‘grand oeuvre’ in the tradition of the alchemists (‘our ancestors’) he took the trouble to gently dissociate himself from contemporary occultism (he referred to the *pauvre kabbalistes*). The reason for this was twofold: firstly because, in the fin-de-siecle era there was a genuine divergence between artistic avantgardism and occult revivalism. The poets were confronting dissolution of meaning and tradition at the forefront of cultural development whereas the occultists were primarily re-vamping alleged ‘ancient’ traditions. Secondly because – as Chisholm also points out – while Mallarme can, in some respects, be considered an *idealiste*, (as Decadence and Symbolism may be defined as facets of a counter-movement against middle of the road naturalist realism) he was also, in a deep and subtle sense, a materialist. Like the proto-scientific alchemists he grounded his transmutations ‘in the domain of physical realities... He is preoccupied by the essence of things; but an essence has to have an object, has to be the essence of *something*.’ (Chisholm). This ‘materialism’ is connected to an intrinsic element of the creative imagination, which insists upon interpreting erstwhile abstractions (e.g. symbols, words) as literal experiential realities. O’Keefe (1982) has identified this ‘literalness of the imagination’ as an essential characteristic of magic.

In the *fin-de-siecle* era there was confusion between this idealism and materialism just as there was confusion between pure hermeticism based upon private symbols and the usage of traditional archetypal symbolism

derived from myth and legend (as for instance in the paintings of Gustave Moreau which Huysmans nevertheless perceived as examples of modernism). By the 1920s the Surrealists were making clear distinctions between 'mystical' (idealist) categorizations of art and 'materialist' approaches, capitalizing upon systems of thought like Psychoanalysis and Marxist dialectical materialism which were not available to the *fin-de-siecle* poets. This accounts for the impossibility of incorporating Surrealism into an occultist framework. Modern occultism does not draw clear distinctions between 'mysticism' (idealism) and magic (materialism).

In a short article called Magic (1893) Mallarme identified '*une parite secrete*' between alchemy, sorcery and art (poetry). In general terms he imagined the creative process as an act of distillation and compression a slow purification of 'the words of the tribe', as he wrote in 'The Tomb of Edgar Poe'. This purification would enable the creation of the *grand oeuvre*, the ultimate book (sometimes called *Le Livre*) conceived as a network of cosmic analogy: a book containing the sum of his co-ordinated attempts to transmute everyday realities into their higher correspondences, just as the alchemists had sought the philosopher's stone which would enable them to transmute baser metals into gold. (Chisholm)

This cosmic book – fragments of which were (perhaps) embodied in some of Mallarme's own writings discussed below – was to be an 'Orphic explanation of the Earth' symbolized by an akashic aura enveloping the planet with the 'unwonted mystery of a vast brilliance'. Mallarme often used the image of a constellation of stars signify this Book which was not immortal but a perishable human projection.

Manifesto Of The Hermetic: 'Prose Pour Des Esseintes' (1885)

If there could be such a thing as a manifesto of hermetic poetry then this crucial work would be it. *Prose* was a basic statement about the poetic experience of visionary perception, the phenomenon Mircea Eliade has called 'hierophanization'. Its iconography derived from the archetypes of the voyage, the island and the *soror mystica* (female companion). Symbols familiar to students of the hermetic tradition but occurring in the poem naturally and in no way rendering it less 'obscure' to Mallarme's contemporary readership.

The poet, accompanied by a mysterious female penetrates an island which is also a magic garden. Mallarme populated this magical garden with irises, lilies, gladiolae and fantastic flowers of his own creation called *Iridees*. Here the poet experiences an epiphanic moment, a hierophanization of the senses and perceives the flowers as numinous symbols – living, vibrating surrounded by an aura or 'lacuna': *...each one was adorned with a lucid lacuna, which separated it from the garden.*

These iridescent objects are an epiphany of living energy patterns called into being by the poet who through his art has unraveled the secret of their magic names.

Mallarme indicated that he was more than cautious towards such phenomena (the birth of the *lapis?*), knowing the fate of his predecessors Baudelaire, Nerval and Poe whose lives had been disrupted by the obsessive influences of such 'mystic' energies. At this point the female companion (his *anima*) intervenes and, by a smile, exercises a restraining influence. The poet hesitates and realizes just in time that his 'craft' must be strengthened by a remorseless process of refinement before his will can respond to these primal visions.

In *Prose* Mallarme/defines the work of the hermetic artist as 'a work of patience' ('the work of my patience, Atlases, herbals, and rituals'). The beauty of the magic island cannot be assimilated by incoherent frenzy, a view which contrasts sharply with traditional romantic ideas of art. For Mallarme the *iridees* or occult flowers were symbols of his *lapis philosophorum*: the creative, vibratory word - the poem itself. As R. G. Cohn

observes, he knew that the *lapis* was an ‘excessive and dangerous vision’ rising atavistically from the collective unconscious. Mallarme hinted at this in the following lines:

*Hyperbole! de sa memoire
Triomphalement ne sais-tu
Te lever, aujourd’hui grimoire
Dana un livre de fer vetu*

*(Hyperbole! from my memory
Triumphantly can’t you
Rise today old gramarye
Cloaked in a book of iron.)*

Students of the esoteric tradition will appreciate the implications of the word ‘grimoire’ in this context - under certain circumstances the *lapis* becomes demonic. Its creation is an ordeal - a descent into the dark night of the soul. Indeed in Mallarme’s magic island is a tomb inscribed with the single word *Pulchérie* (Beauty) hidden behind the ‘too great’ gladiolus. Much of Mallarme’s work revolved around the idea of death. The motif was a preoccupation of his mentor Edgar Allan Poe who derived his doctrine of aestheticism from the idea that absolute beauty can only be fully grasped beyond the grave.

It is important to remember that this poem was dedicated to des Esseintes, the ultra-aesthete - hero of Huysmans’ *A Rebours*. Des Esseintes was inspired by Baudelaire’s injunction to seek ‘the new’ and was thus a fictional embodiment of the heretical imperative at the heart of modern art – the compulsion to push to the limits of human experience, to ‘enlarge the limits of the human signifiable’ (Brooke-Rose/Kristeva). But, in following this command to the letter, by secluding himself in his refined Thebaid on the outskirts of Paris and subjecting himself to a violent experiment in reversion, Des Esseintes destroys himself. Like the poet depicted in Rimbaud’s ‘Drunken Boat’ he finds that he must return to normality – or die.

In *Prose* Mallarme presented his reaction to the problem posed by Huysmans in *A Rebours*. His answer to Des Esseintes’ terrible predicament was to direct attention to the ‘work of patience’ - the lesson of total aesthetic asceticism, total dedication to the project of hermetic purification, the slow purification of ‘the word’ and dialectically, the will-imagination of the artist strengthened in the flames of the creative process.

In *A Rebours* des Esseintes faced death (or total psychosomatic collapse). He reached the brink of the Void and fell back. Battered and crushed in spirit he turns to God. Mallarmé, on the other hand evolved a response to nihilism, which counterbalanced this religious relapse. In *Prose* he acknowledged that aestheticism leads to psychic death but intimated that death is an ordeal. Death can be overcome with discipline – with the work of ‘patience’, the ‘science’ of ‘atlases, herbals and rituals’.

Cohn reminds us that Mallarme conceived his art as a total experience, an exercise both spiritual and profane, a Gnostic replacement for the ‘vestigial Christian myth’.

Katabasis: The ‘Sonnet on X’ (c1866)

According to Cohn this was Mallarme’s ‘first truly hermetic poem’. It was begun during a crisis known as *Les Nuits de Tournon* (c1866) during which the poet formulated his vocation and rejected his belief in God. The poem is untitled and is referred to as the ‘Sonnet on X’ because it is composed using rhymes ending with the letter.

Like many other poems by Mallarmé this sonnet is devoted to the process of poetic creation. The second quatrain depicts the setting: an interior (perhaps inspired by a Redon drawing), an abandoned room. There are vague shapes of furniture and an overwhelming sense of absence, abolition or desertion. The dominant motif is a peculiar object, a shell-like container or 'ptyx' described as 'an abolished trinket of sonorous emptiness.' A phrase in parenthesis reads:

*...for the Master has gone to gather tears
in the Styx with this single object on which
nothingness prides itself.*

The Master-Poet has vacated his room, his inner sanctum (the essential *fin-de-siecle* Thebaid) by some act of ecsomatic trans location.

The symbol of the cross (or 'X') was of central importance in Mallarmé's aesthetic of Gnostic paradox. It represented dual polarity and indicated the structure of the universe/mind drawing upon a typically 'hermetic' idea - the intersection of opposites (analysis/synthesis, positive/negative, male/female) schematically fixed in terms of the vertical/horizontal axes. Obviously these ideas are closely related to the Cabalistic Tetragrammaton - and we know that Mallarmé was familiar to some extent with the writings of Eliphas Levi Zahed. Students of Jungian theory will appreciate the significance of the cross as a symbol of the self and the linkage of quaternities with mandala symbolism.

Significantly Kenneth Grant (1977) identifies the cross as a symbol of both the true self and of the idea of Projection into Otherness. It is possible to trace these themes back to ancient death- doctrines such as those enshrined in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. This cross symbolism reinforces the themes of initiation and crisis - the temporal setting of the poem is midnight, the temporal equivalent of the cross, the time when the spheres of being and nonbeing intersect - a time of change and anguish: the Dark Night of the Soul.

The empty room (*salon vide*) is the typical room of the nihilist aesthete who has pursued his quest for the 'experience of limits' to the point of psychic death - and beyond. The room is empty because the 'experience of limits' reveals an absence of meaning. This abyss or void of non-signification (like the Mallarmean *Neant*) is revealed during the agonies of a self-induced 'dark night' or *Nigredo* experience. The opening image of the poem depicts a lamp-bearer, an embodiment of the existential anguish (*angoisse*) of the pariah poet exiled on the margin of cultural acceptance but who, by his very existence, mediates between the uninitiated and the abyss.

During his crisis of 1866 Mallarmé had perceived and assimilated the idea that reality is a void and wrote in a letter the formula: '*rien qui est la verite*' (the nothingness which is truth). Against this 'suicidal absurdism' (Cohn) Mallarmé placed a 'glorious dream' (*glorieux mensonge*): art devoid of communicative meaning but containing a power of transformation - transformation of the poet, and, through him, of the world itself.

The Gnostic Dimension

Hans Jonas (1958) has explained a number of similarities between the post-classical Hellenistic era (when the original Hermetic writings were produced) and the Modern period. Both periods are characterized by a sense of crisis and a nihilistic evaporation of values, and both periods gave rise to doctrines of self-redemption through knowledge. Other commentators like O'Keefe (1982) have defined the Gnostic cosmologies of the Hellenistic era as religious or magical projections symbolizing the oppressive hegemony of social structures which are, in essence, political power-structures. This aspect of Gnostic-Hermetic thought generated an antinomian, revolutionary tendency which is also prevalent in avant-garde Modernism,

specifically in the defiant separation of art from morality practiced by Aesthetes and Decadents or the strident anti-establishment and anti-religious attitudes of the Dadaists and the Surrealists.

But there are crucial differences between the ideas of the original Gnostics and those of the proponents of the new Hermeticism of modernity. For, although the original Gnostics condemned the created universe as a prison, much as Baudelaire was to view nineteenth century France as ‘a hospital in which the sick are all obsessed with a desire for a change of bed.’, their cosmology still retained the idea of divinity, however alien or remote – the *Deus Absconditus*.

The task confronting the modern Gnostic is more extreme, more daunting still, for he is faced with a universe of complete ambiguity and utter meaninglessness. Furthermore he inhabits a culture in the throws of convulsive change manifest in the eclipse of scientific determinism, the recognition of the unconscious mind, the (so-called) demythologization of religion, the collapse of classicism and positivism and the emergence of a fearful new cosmology. This new cosmology which has replaced the old ‘sacred canopy’ of traditional belief shows a universe of bleak solitude (no friendly extra- terrestrials), ambivalence, indeterminacy, relativism and existential ‘angst’ generated by the ‘absurd’ and the blurring of the subject-object relationship. There are no absolute values other than those we chose to project into the Void of unknowing Chaos.

This, in brief, is the wider context in which a new Hermeticism must be understood. This new Hermeticism, this alchemy of the imagination was forged in the fires of alienation by artist-pariahs or *poet maudits* working in the ‘experience of limits’ tradition. They resurrected the magical idea of The Word (*oralchimie du verbe*). They reestablished the word-image as a creative force born of the disintegration of traditional artistic methodology and conventional discourse. From Impressionism to Cubism, from Baudelaire to Mallarme and from Huysmans and Artaud to Beckett the writers and artists of the ‘experience of limits’ tradition formulated a difficult but ultimately positive response to the ‘dark night of the soul’, the collective *Nigredo*, which continues to envelope Western society.

The ‘experience of limits’ requires experience of The Self – even, possibly, the re-creation of the self, the generation of a new mode of the ‘androgynous monster’ or REBIS of alchemy. In its wake it brings a new art of pure evocatory magic and personal transformation. And in the wake of this new art comes a new *magia innaturalis*, a new magic devoid of the traditional clutter of dead symbols, the necrotic residua of decaying culture. In the melohypnosis of artistic creation the adept works with private symbols which undermine meaning and derail reason. He creates new archetypes through which he plumbs the arcane deeps of both the Void within and the Void without.

According to the master hermeticist, Stephane Mallarme, the imagination must be augmented by an arduous process of inner purification and ever-subtle refinement. The ‘science’ (gnosis/knowledge/art) of patience and endurance leads, via experience of a magical death-ordeal (*katabasis*), to acceptance of a radical disengagement from the world. Further it brings an understanding of a new nihilistic, dynamic vision, a vision of the ‘real’ as ‘fiction’ – the void within merges with the void without.

Bibliographical Note

The stanza from 'Prose Pour Des Esseintes' is from a translation in Cohn (1965)
The stanza from 'The Sonnet on X' is from a translation by Hartley in Mallarme (1965)

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