Spotlight on Medieval Mysticism

Hermes, Suso, Lull, and Lichtenberger

at

DR. JÖRN GÜNTEGER · RARE BOOKS AG
Manuskripte und seltene Bücher
Basel / Stalden
Hermes Trismegistus, *De Potestate et Sapientia Dei*. Translated from Greek into Latin by Marsilio Ficino. Treviso, Gerardus de Lisa de Flandria, 18 December 1471. 1st edition, 204 x 132 mm, 56 leaves

Hermeticism is a religious, philosophical, and esoteric tradition that is primarily based on writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.

Under the title *De potestate et sapientia Dei*, this book, printed in 1471, is the very rare, first edition of the Hermetic works I-XIV rediscovered only some fifteen years earlier.

Also called *Pimander* after the first treatise, the texts reveal divine mysteries attributed to Thoth, the philosopher-king and priest of ancient Egypt. This god of wisdom and patron of astrology and alchemy, who is called ‘thrice greatest’, was thought to have been a contemporary of Moses.
In the *Corpus Hermeticum* – dialogues mixing Platonism with Gnostic, Hebraic, Mithraic, and ancient Egyptian traditions – philosophy is put to the service of religious concepts.

*Pimander,* the first Hermetic treatise, tells the story of the Creation similar to that in Genesis, but in the form of a dialogue between Hermes and Pimander, the divine. Hermes in his sleep asks to know God and suddenly sees in Pimander a great light, then darkness.

To live according to the mystery of God, Pimander tells Hermes he must live a pure and holy life, and ‘at death, the immortal element of man will ascend and return to the sphere of God whence it came …’
The texts found favour in humanist circles and soon exerted great influence. Considered to be the earliest work of ‘Perennial Philosophy’, the *Corpus Hermeticum* became a core book in collections of Renaissance thought – being the ‘primordial fount of Wisdom’.

Only in the 17th century, the great philosopher Hermes was found to be legendary. Later it was discovered that the texts, written in Greek, originated in Egypt, presumably in Alexandria in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.
Heinrich Seuse (Latin: Suso; c. 1295-1366) was one of the greatest figures in German mysticism.

He studied in Strasbourg and Cologne, where he was deeply influenced by teachings of the celebrated mystic Meister Eckhart.

Around 1361-1363, Suso compiled and revised his four major German writings into one volume, the Exemplar, as in this codex.

Included are Suso’s Vita, his authentic autobiography – Das Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit. Booklet of Eternal Wisdom: the most beautiful book of German mysticism. – Das Büchlein der Wahrheit. Booklet of truth, his earliest work. – Briefbüchlein, selected letters sent to Elsbeth Stagel and other nuns.

Henricus Suso, Das Buch ... genannt der Seüsse. – Hendrik Herp (d. 1477), Von der Bruderschaft der ewigen Weisheit – [Rulman Merswin, d. 1382], Buch von den neun Felsen. Augsburg: Anton Sorg, 19 April 1482.
Der Sunnen bild ist so fein – Er übertrift der stern schein.

Printed in 1482, this is the 1st and only 15th century edition, illustrated with 20 woodcuts (4 of which historiated initials) by the Augsburg Kreuzfahrt Meister in contemporary colouring. Only 4 copies are known in this colouring, added in the printing office.

Suso’s ideas are summarized in the form of a conversation with his devout follower, the nun Elsbeth Stagel. In this, he tries to define God for her, using the language and imagery of Pseudo-Dionysius:

One of the names of God is ‘good’, the divine darkness is ‘itself the clearest of all light’, and ‘God is both outside as in all things’, but God is also ‘Eternal Wisdom’, which speaks to his disciples.

At left: Both God (with the globe of the world) and Suso hold scrolls, encouraging the love for Eternal Wisdom.

Suso, servant of Eternal Wisdom, embraces Eternal Wisdom. Eternal Wisdom embraces the soul of the servant.

The wreath of roses was an element of medieval courtship. Usually, women gave it to their lovers. Suso takes on the role of both the male and the female, as he wears a wreath and also offers one.

Suso considered Wisdom to be the divine bride of the soul. His search for Wisdom was like searching for the embrace of the bride. He articulated in ascetic language the lessons of Wisdom and the way in which man could come to them.

Knowledge of the divine is thus found through knowledge of the human passion and suffering of Christ.
Christ crucified on a rose tree, while a young Christ below holds a rose. Suso describes the symbolism of roses: white roses signify purity, while red roses stand for Christ’s patience. A garland of roses is also a symbol of multiple sufferings.

These texts exude a strong desire for love and put the beloved soul in the centre. The divine inspiration emanates from a ‘she’, who is Eternal Wisdom, and lifts people above ‘the self’.

One can learn the inner-self in meditation and spiritual conversation. One can also learn to systematically work on building that self and strengthen it.

Wisdom is Christ. The divine being, the origin of all good, is Eternal Wisdom.
Vision of the crucified Christ as a seraphim with six wings. The tree of vines refers to Christ’s sacrifice.

“I am the vine: you the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing. …My commandment is that you love one another. You are my friends…If you keep in my commandments, you will abide in my love.”
(John 15:1-8)

Suso kneeling before his vision of the crucified Christ: he has the sacred monogram IHS engraved on his chest.
Die ewig weijsshait. In meinem götlichen schirm willich sy haben die meine namen IHU in irer begird wollen tragen.

The young men at the bottom of the image are looking at and praying to the sacred monogram floating in front of them. The kneeling monk (Suso) has already taken the name to heart, literally, as it appears on his chest.

An angel presents two women holding symbols of roses and Scripture.

God’s love is to be shared by all. Among the Gottesfreunde /Friends of God, Suso established a society called the Brotherhood of the Eternal Wisdom.
Especially Suso’s texts on Eternal Wisdom have been widely read as *Horologium*, or a Clockwork of Eternal Wisdom, in the Hours of Eternal Wisdom or in the Hundred articles of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. These texts are often included in Dutch Books of Hours as composed by the Dutch reformer Geert Grote.

Duyst van Voorhout Book of Hours, manuscript written in Dutch and illuminated in Delft, c. 1450-1460. 160 x 112 mm, 210 leaves, vellum. With 14 full-page miniatures, 5 initials, and various decorative borders. Presumably made for Adriana Duyst van Voorhout as a gift from her parents.
Suso pointed out that the love of Wisdom could be renewed through simple daily exercises. Every day one had to read the Hours of Eternal Wisdom, as a first step up the ladder. Wisdom teaches everyone who wishes to find the right path to choose eternal, divine wisdom as his bride.

Suso’s *Hundred Articles* or *Meditations* consist of prayers for the days of the week, directed by a demanding routine of standing, kneeling, and lying down. Such texts were more popular in monastic circles than among laics.

Delft manuscripts were written by members of various religious institutions, not only by men, but also by women. In these circles, Books of Hours were given a distinct following order of prayers, new texts were added, and various styles of miniature painting and decoration were applied. This, together with devotions to specific saints, made Delft books particularly attractive and outstanding.

We also know that there was direct contact between Delft and the Gottesfreunde in Alsace. Suso’s *Van der Ewiger Wijsheit* and Rulman Merswin’s *Neun Felsen Buch* were among the study books in St. Barbara’s.
The Catalan mystic and poet Ramon Llull (1232-1316) experienced mystical visions of Christ on the Cross. This ‘doctor illuminatus’ saw the Universe reflecting the Divine, and conceived a method to reduce all knowledge to its basic principles.

In his *Arbor scientiae* (*The Tree of Knowledge*), he uses logic and complex mechanical techniques involving symbolic notation and combinatory diagrams to relate all forms of knowledge. As a universal system and compendium of knowledge, the *Ars Lulliana* remained influential until charges of confusing faith with reason led to the condemnation of Llull’s teachings in 1376.
Although Llull’s first objective was to reveal the ‘truth of Christianity’ to nonbelievers, the _Arbor scientiae_ provided a single methodological basis to classify all ‘branches’ of knowledge – from theology to the natural and human sciences. Llull’s writings helped to develop the Catalan language and widely influenced mysticism.

Woodcuts depicting allegorical trees introduce the chapters. Each large tree is placed in the centre, its roots and branches spread out symmetrically. Two figures are pictured next to the tree, sometimes labelled as Raymond and monk, recalling a typical master-disciple iconography in a didactic work. Parts of the trees (trunk, branches, flowers, fruits) bear scrolls, and the end of their roots are marked by circles, providing space for inscriptions.

The _Arbor Vegetalis_ introduces the second chapter.

The trees constitute a symbolic structure to explain the principles, relations, and levels of reality of each category of knowledge. The categories include, for example, elements, senses, imagination, humanity, morality, law, church, astronomy, and spiritual subjects such as angels, paradise and hell, the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and theology.

The shapes of the trees differ mainly in the number of boughs, appropriate to the category they represent.

Another distinguished shape is a tree with the trunk split into two, each with seven branches, and the figure of Jesus Christ appearing between them in the upper crown. This illustration appears first as arbor moralis, opening a treatise in two parts on the virtues and vices.

The author inspired by the Holy Ghost on the verso of the title page as a kind of frontispiece: the half-page size woodcut shows a portrait of Ramon Llull standing and holding a book as he looks up to the dove of the Holy Ghost in the upper right corner. It was already used as the title woodcut in the *Apostrophe Raymundi*, which was printed one year before and is bound at the end of the present copy.


299 x 213 mm. I: 182 leaves. With 18 woodcuts. II: 12 leaves, with title woodcut. With extensive 16th-century manuscript annotations presumably from Mallorca, where the book belonged to the Collegium Monte Sion, founded in 1530.
Court astrologer to Emperor Frederick III in the 1470s and a prophet (c. 1440–1503), Lichtenberger became known for this work *Prognosticatio*. His predictions were based particularly on the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn that happened under the sign of Scorpio (related to Mars) in November 1484 when he was parish priest in a village in his native Palatine region. After an introduction on astrology and prophecy, the work treats, in three parts, the fate of the Church, the Empire, and the laity. It concerns German politics, clerical reforms, the threat of the Turks, and failures of morality. There are predictions up to the year 1576.

Elements of alchemy as well as prophecies were included. Predictions alternate with juridical theory and discussions of the impact of the stars on human destinies.

The illustrations to the prophecies were meant to impress the reader. They depict several prophetical figures who received divine inspiration: Ptolemy, Aristotle, the Cumaean Sibyl, St. Bridget, and Reinhard the Lollard. The text was highly influential and gained widespread popularity.

Lichtenberger’s name, however, did not appear on the title-page until 1525.
Prognostic traditions and late medieval prophetic texts profited from the new medium of print. These works were bestsellers for many printers. In early modern culture, printed prophecies were used by many, each for their own purposes. Today they provide unique insights in social and printing history.
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