



Missouri State[™]
U N I V E R S I T Y

BearWorks

Articles by College of Arts and Letters Faculty

1-1-2011

Mapping the Renaissance Cosmos: A Prolegomenon to Robert Fludd's Utriusque Cosmi

James S. Baumlin
Missouri State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/articles-coal>

Recommended Citation

Baumlin, James S. "Mapping the Renaissance Cosmos: A Prolegomenon to Robert Fludd's Utriusque Cosmi." *Journal of the Johnson Library and Museum* 5 (2011)

This article or document was made available through BearWorks, the institutional repository of Missouri State University. The work contained in it may be protected by copyright and require permission of the copyright holder for reuse or redistribution.

For more information, please contact [BearWorks@library.missouristate.edu](mailto: BearWorks@library.missouristate.edu).

**MAPPING THE RENAISSANCE COSMOS:
A PROLEGOMENON TO ROBERT FLUDD'S *UTRIUSQUE COSMI***

A Lecture Presented at Johnson Library and Museum
by James S. Baumlin,
Professor of English at Missouri State University
18 November 2010

[NOTE: The following is in three sections. Readers of the present text who were in attendance at the lecture abovementioned may recall some pieces of the first section but not others; please accept this as a reflection of what I wished I had said. The second section gives a poetic reading that I had originally hurried through. The third section outlines a chapter of intellectual history that I hinted at and would have elaborated on, had I the time.—JSB]

I.

Let me begin by thanking Mr. Johnson, great patron of the book arts, for bringing us together this evening for food and fellowship and for giving me, personally, the opportunity to hold a book that I have admired for my entire scholarly career, though always at a distance. And now, here I stand, holding up one of the masterpieces of the late Renaissance: Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi, Majoris scilicet Minoris, metaphysica, physica, atque technica Historia* (1617-1621): that is, "The metaphysical, physical, and technical history of the Two Worlds, namely the Macrocosm and the Microcosm." Excepting a handful of scholars working in the fields of Renaissance Neoplatonism (one of whom was Mr. Johnson's grandfather, whose collection of *hermetica* is the crown jewel of this Library), few people in our own times will have read this book; so far as I know, it has been Englished once in its entirety, though the translation (by renowned hermetic scholar, Adam McLean) remains in typescript and is exceedingly rare—rarer, perhaps, than Fludd's original Latin. Fewer still will claim to have understood it fully, its subject being "occulted"—that is, deliberately "secreted" or hidden away—and its style deliberately obscure. (And yet, there's a paradox in all *esoterica*, this last word meaning "an insider's knowledge." If a book claims to tell the world's "secrets," then these weren't very "secret" to begin with, were they?) The *Utriusque Cosmi* was part of a larger intellectual project that Fludd (1574-1637) left unfinished with his passing. It was an ambitious project, an attempt at what today's physicists might call a "Grand Unified Theory" of the universe. That myth and symbol (rather than mathematics and quantum mechanics) distinguishes Fludd's Grand Unified Theory from our own can be laid, for the moment, aside.

Much like today's reigning model, Fludd's universe began with a "Big Bang," though in his case, the "Bang" was provided by God's *Fiat lux!*—His mighty declaration, "Let there be light!" The Judeo-Christian cosmos was a creation, thus, of language: God's *Word* created the *world*. It is upon this rather commonplace assumption that Renaissance hermeticism rested: to "crack the code," as it

were, of created nature, the hermetic philosopher needed to recover the “originary language” that had spoken-the-world-into-being. To speak that same Ur-language, to recover its most ancient hieroglyphics, would give the *magus* (or “wise man,” a term cognate with “magician”) power over material reality. Possessed of this “secreted” language, the hermetic philosopher wielded a word-magic that made him, in effect, a co-creator in God’s universe. It was a giddy and heretical enterprise. Fludd knew well enough the fates of fellow hermeticists. Denounced as a sorcerer and demon-worshipper, Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) lost his university post and would eventually recant his belief in magic; and yet this recantation came the very year his *De occulta philosophia* (1533) was published. Having previously circulated in manuscript, his *De occulta* is perhaps the most studied book of Western magic, a book most celebrated and yet most feared; and rightly so. Behold the copy in my hands, one belonging to the Johnson Library. It makes my palms sweat, knowing that it records the “secret” names of the principal angels and demons and the pictograms by which spirits could be conjured. I could cite the fates of other Continental hermeticists, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) for example, who burned at the stake for his *De Magia*. But Fludd kept safe in England; otherwise—who knows?—the Holy Office of the Inquisition might have arrived at his doorstep. For let there be no mistaking: Fludd’s attempt at synthesizing Hebraic, Christian, Hellenistic, and Hermetic-alchemical traditions was heterodox if not, indeed, heretical at its core. (Of course, one man’s heresy is another man’s *credo*: I should note that the following analysis judges Fludd’s beliefs against the Protestant-Christian orthodoxies *of his own age*, though these orthodoxies remain resilient in WASPish America today.)

Hermeticism, then: what is it? At the foundation of Neoplatonic thought lay the *corpus Hermeticum*, a body of pagan texts dubiously ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus (“Thrice-great” Hermes); these were once assumed to be contemporary with or even to predate Moses, though they derived from late Hellenistic times (second century CE). Believing these texts to contain “the wisdom of the ancients,” Neoplatonists like Fludd sought to baptize them, reconciling their paganisms with Scripture. But, as I shall suggest, two broad cultural movements militated against this enterprise: the ascendance of English Puritanism, whose antipathy to magic culminated in a hysteria of witch hunting; and, equally important to this lecture, the ascendance of scientific materialism. To the Puritan, the hermetic philosopher’s word-magic was mere demonism; to the “natural philosopher” or scientist, the hermeticist’s word-magic was merely delusional. Either way, Fludd’s Neoplatonism would not survive the seventeenth century. But I am getting ahead of myself. Before critiquing the worldview of Fludd’s *Utriusque Cosmi*, I should present its thesis in a nutshell.

And that’s about all the world or time that I have to give to Fludd’s cosmology; a mere nutshell-glance at its major premises and their historical-intellectual provenance. To this end, let us consider the book’s most famous engraving, *Integrae Naturae Speculum Artisque Imago* (“The ‘Mirror’ and

Image of all Nature and Art”), by John-Theodore de Bry (1560-1623), son of the great Belgian artist, Theodore de Bry (1528-1598); though both had a hand in the book’s illustrations, it was the son who saw the first edition (1617) through to publication. (See Figure 1.) But *Integrae Naturae* is no mere illustration. In Fludd’s age, such an engraving was intended as a “memory theater” that translated rational thought into a lively mental image; this complex image was then implanted *in the mind*, where it would exercise its commemorative, creative powers. To understand the engraving, thus, is to understand and imaginatively recreate the symbol-system underlying Fludd’s cosmology.



Fig. 1. *Integrae Naturae Speculum Artisque Imago*.

Rendered as the Tetragrammaton—the four Hebraic letters, JHWH, which stand in the place of His “unspeakable” (hence “secreted”) name—the creator God dwells in a cloud above the empyrean or highest reaches of heaven, habitation of the fiery Seraphim and Cherubim. The planets (and their Intelligences: angels and demons) inhabit the ethereal realm, while humankind inhabits the elemental world with animals, plants, minerals. Consisting of a series of concentric circles, the empyrean and ethereal realms remain perfect and unchanging, whereas the earthly, elemental realm—the place of our human habitation—is subject to generation and decay. This much of Fludd’s cosmology accords with Christian orthodoxy, which deemed the imperfections of our sublunary world a legacy of Original Sin. (With Adam and Eve, all of elemental nature fell.) Orthodox, too, is the geocentrism of Fludd’s *Integrae Naturae*, wherein the earth stands at rest while the moon, planets, and sun circle about, each keeping to its sphere. Above the planetary spheres is the *sidera* or seat of the “fixed stars,” themselves motionless. Thus much can be reconciled with Scripture; what remains is a series of visual symbolisms that carry the observer deeper and deeper into the heterodoxies of Renaissance hermeticism.

From God’s hand, a pendant chain links the celestial woman’s image to the simian, which sits on (and thus belongs to) the earthly realm: by this interlinking, Fludd depicts the *Scala Naturae* or “Great Chain of Being.” A commonplace of medieval cosmology, the *Scala Naturae* derives from Aristotle (384-322 BCE), specifically his *De Generatione Animalium*. (I might add that the doctrine of concentric circles and “crystalline spheres,” which keep the planets within their assigned orbit, derives from Aristotle’s *De Caelo*.) Such symbolism affirms the *unity* of the cosmos, as well as the *hierarchy* that establishes the “place” of each creature within its rightful bounds. And though we moderns reserve the term, “creature,” for living beings, the word has a different inflection in Fludd’s cosmology, since all *natura* (that which is born, grows, decays and dies) is *creatura* (that which God has created). Fludd’s “Great Chain of Being” reaches from the basest *materia* (the various minerals and the “four elements” of earth, water, air, and fire) to plants, to animals, to that creature which is animal in body but angelic in form—the human creature—to the hosts of angels and archangels, all concatenated or “chained together” and suspended as “from the throne of God.”

Judeo-Christian notions of hierarchy assume that creatures are to keep within their appointed “spheres,” but here Fludd’s cosmos shows the telltale influence of Neoplatonism: the whole of material creation is in fact *inspired*, sensitive and responsive to the divine Love that seeks to draw all creation back into Itself, back into the Godhead from Which all nature proceeded and toward Which all nature yearns. Further, there is a principle *of growth* in Fludd’s hermetic cosmos: fed and inspired by planetary-solar-lunar influences, the basest of metals grow over time into their material perfection, which is gold. Alchemy, the study of refining base lead into purest gold, was the

highest of spiritual arts, which the hermetic philosopher sought to master through a lifetime of self-discipline. In pursuing this most esoteric of arts, the alchemist sought to “speed up” the transformation of metals, thereby joining God as nature’s co-creator. And the growing of gold had its spiritual correlative within the alchemist’s soul, which underwent a “refinement” of its own, becoming more angelic, leaning closer to its divine origin. This, indeed, is the first premise distinguishing Fludd’s worldview from our own: in the *Utriusque Cosmi*, matter and spirit differ in degree, not in kind. All matter contains spirit, and all spirit has a material influence and aspect.

A second premise of Fludd’s hermeticism proceeds from this first. There are in fact two “worlds,” equally spacious, though the human microcosm nestles within the macrocosm (this latter being the sum of created nature). “I am a little world made cunningly,” writes Fludd’s contemporary, John Donne (1572-1631), literalizing the title of Fludd’s *Utriusque Cosmi, Majoris scilicet Minoris*. (The book’s frontispiece interposes these two “worlds”: see Figure 2.) Everything in the “outer world”—the planets most powerfully, as they express their influences while transiting through the zodiac—has its correlative or “correspondence” in that “inner world,” which is the human creature. As the early hermeticist Paracelsus (1493-1541) writes in his *Opus Paramirum* (1531), “Just as the sun shines through a glass, [so] the sun and the moon and all planets, as well as all the stars and the whole chaos, are in man” (100).

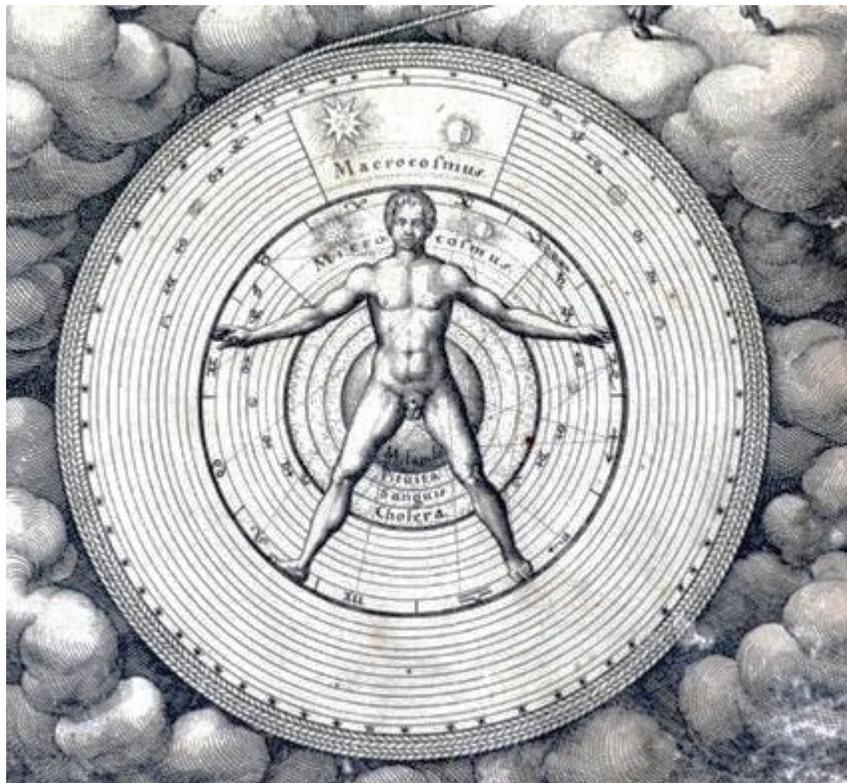


Fig. 2. The Human Microcosm within the Macrocosm.

If alchemy reigns over Fludd's first hermetic premise, astrology rules over this second. To each planet is assigned a part of the microcosm (which it influences for good or ill), as well as a predominant human emotion or "humor." And, just as each planet exercises its influence over specific elements and earthly minerals, so each imparts its unique, humanly-curative properties to specific plants, from which either "simples" or "compounds" (that is, various mixtures of herbal essences) may be distilled. (Much like the alchemist worked to refine baser minerals, so the herbalist—practicing a form of "natural magic"—worked to extract the unique "virtues" from plants.) I should point out that Fludd studied "medical astrology" while at Oxford: by casting a patient's horoscope or astrological birth chart, he would determine the zodiacal influences that "ruled over" that individual's physiology and personality, contributing mightily to his or her fate. He would then study the patient's symptoms in light of these influences, prescribing which medicines would affect cures in which parts of the body. (Aries, for example, governed the head and face; Taurus the neck; Gemini the shoulder and arms; Cancer the breast; and so on.) Equally important, he would use astrology to determine the right time of day, month, season to administer treatments, since these could work (or "take") only when specific planets were aligned and expressing their powers in full. (It's hard for us moderns to imagine, but the great Galileo was himself a professor of "medical astrology." The fact that modern astronomy evolved from Galilean planet-gazing was purely accidental.)

If the first premise of Fludd's hermeticism leads to alchemy and the second to astrology, a third leads to Neoplatonism *per se*. Deriving from the late Hellenistic philosopher, Plotinus (204-270 CE), the Neoplatonic cosmos contradicts Judeo-Christian orthodoxy in describing the material world as *an emanation from the substance of God*. (This is, historically, a Gnostic heresy, one declaring that God created the world *de deo*, rather than *ex nihilo*.) But what, we must ask, is that divine essence, from which the world emanated? *It is light*, which grosser matter embodied and served to contain. Whereas Fludd's God is Himself pure light, all of creation is an intermingling of *lux* and *materia* (this latter being of various essences and elements, depending on each creature's place within the "Great Chain.") The closer a creature dwells to God, the more light it possesses and the more ethereal its essence; the further from God, the less is its light and the grosser its substance. In the lowest depths, God's light is engulfed in matter, shadowed though not wholly expunged; in the highest empyrean, all is resplendent. If you study the engraving, *Integrae Naturae*, you'll notice that rays emanate from ethereal nature—in effect, from everything lying "above the moon." This, I believe, gives visual depiction not simply to the resonating influences of the macrocosm upon the microcosm, but also to the indwelling light that brightens as one approaches the Godhead, yet dims as one reaches downward into the earthly center of Fludd's cosmos. Note that the sun (*sol* in Latin) is placed at mid-point in this rather cozy cosmos: whereas our modern universe expands into infinity, Fludd's pre-

modern cosmos was finite and humanly fathomable (if not navigable) in its dimensions. (I don't remember where I've read estimates of size, though 25,000 miles sounds about right. I'm speaking of distance from the earthly center to the *sidera* or "fixed stars." Surely a winged Seraph could traverse it in an earthly day, with one or two planetary rest stops. And as to the stars, there were then—and there still are—only a few thousand visible to the naked eye: it would take the telescope to prove what TV-scientist Carl Sagan used to croon with a Bing Crosby-like bubba-bubba-bu: that "there are BIL-lions and BIL-lions of STARRRS in this EV-er ex-PAND-ing YU-niverse." As I sit typing, I can imagine Sagan's voice wafting over the PBS airwaves: though in smaller ways, he was as quaint a fabulist as Fludd, weaving mystery and wonder into his history of the cosmos.)

In Fludd's hermetic universe, the sun's role cannot be overstated. Light-giving, it serves as a sort of divine executor, pouring life-force down upon earthly, elemental nature, much as God's spirit-light is poured into the soul. Indeed, more than the midpoint of Fludd's cosmic map, the sun marks the harmonic balance between divine and human, light and life, spirit and substance. For Fludd, the sun becomes nothing less than the ethereal container of divine influence, serving as God's own visible seat or "tabernacle." But it's neither God's hand nor the sun's benign influence that dominates Fludd's *Integrae Naturae*. In the *Timaeus*, Plato (429-347 BCE) writes of the "world soul" or *Anima Mundi*: "we may consequently state that this world is indeed a living being endowed with a soul and intelligence . . . a single visible living entity containing all other living entities, which by their nature are all related" (29-30). Whereas creation *de deo* marks Fludd's first heresy, this second piece of paganism, though age-old, was an affront to Protestant-Christian orthodoxy, which granted an immortal soul to humankind alone. (The Renaissance was at least willing to grant that men *and women* had immortal souls; throughout the Middle Ages, it remained unsettled whether women, too, were possessed of them.) But Fludd's macrocosm had its soul, as well; it had to have one, since the microcosm had its own soul, and the correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm were perfectly mirrored.

If God is masculine in aspect, the *Anima Mundi* is feminine; their qualities are thus complementary, though feminine *Anima* stands hierarchically beneath God's masculine *Spiritus*. Receptive to ethereal forces, She disseminates these within elemental nature: from her right breast emanates the daylight powers of golden sun, while from her left emanates the softer, subtler powers of silver-moon. It is Her soul-presence that awakens the earth from wintery dormancy, restoring life in spring. So much for *Anima Mundi*, wedded to God by an ethereal chain; what of the simian to whom She is Herself chained? Here I shall go out on a limb and give a reading that either places me among Fludd's *cognoscenti* or declares me a scholar-fool. Holding a compass and dabbling in geometry (that is, in measuring the earthly, elemental world which is its habitation), the simian depicts humankind as an "ape" or *imitator* of nature. The iconography is straightforward, really. The

Renaissance saw apes as a gross parody of the human form and, while lacking creative thought themselves, they could at least imitate human gestures, giving a pretense of wisdom. So it is with humanity: in our mortal, bodily aspects, the human creature is no better than an ape. Wedded to *Anima*, our soul-life is affirmed and the spirit-light awakened within us; without this soul-connection, we can “measure” earth but never transcend it. As Mediatrix between the elemental and ethereal realms, Anima links humanity to God. From the standpoint of *the microcosm*, Fludd’s *Integrae Naturae* depicts the various strands composing “that subtle knot, which makes us man” (64): So writes Donne in his poem, “The Ecstasy.” Look at Fludd’s frontispiece engraving (Figure 2) and you’ll see “Vitruvian Man” in his glory; look at *Integrae Naturae* (Figure 1) and you’ll see an “anatomy” of the human microcosm, dissected symbolically and mapped across the hermetic cosmos.

II.

For all its heterodoxies, hermeticism was well established within intellectual circles of the time. Though writing before the publication of *Utriusque Cosmi*, Donne’s poem, “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” incorporates many of Fludd’s themes and much of his vocabulary. The poet heaps scorn on “sublunary lovers’ loves,” who live through bodily senses only, neglecting soul. Being himself a spiritual alchemist, the poet’s is a “refined” love, cleansed of earthly dross. The lovers’ bodies might be separated physically, but their souls are paradoxically two-and-one, interconnected by an occult “correspondence” that allows the lady-beloved to exercise her benign influence upon the poet, much like the moon draws the earth’s tides upward, toward itself. (Needless to say, the Renaissance had no notion of gravitational forces: the tidal motions were a sort of love-yearning that the moon awakened in water, just as the sun awakened and drew toward itself the element of fire.) Hermetic circles and alchemical gold and the geometer’s drafting compass all recur in Donne’s poem, all in affirmation of cosmic unity—a unity that defeats lovers’ departures and absences and even death itself. Do look for these in the poem, to which we now turn:

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
 And whisper to their souls to go,
 Whilst some of their sad friends do say,
 “Now his breath goes,” and some say, “No.”
 So let us melt, and make no noise,
 No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move ;
 ‘Twere profanation of our joys
 To tell the laity our love.

5



Fig. 3. Alchemical Gold, Astrological *Sol*.

Macrocosmically, we know that circles conscribe planetary motion, and that the planets—like the poet-lover’s soul, like the second compass foot—always “end” their motions where they had “begun.” The beloved’s influence upon the poet-lover is Neoplatonic, then, in that it “draws” the poet back yearningly, much as the Godhead draws created nature back into itself. More subtly, Donne’s compass-image conjures by inscribing the alchemist’s mystic symbol for gold (Rudnytsky 193).

This same pictogram is also, unsurprisingly, the astrological symbol for *sol* or sun—the sun being God’s ethereal “correspondence” with (and influence upon) elemental gold; and gold, in turn, becomes symbolic of the lovers’ firm, “refined” love. By means of spiritual alchemy, the poet fashions a golden circle as a kind of wedding band for his beloved, whose “firmness” makes his own circuit or “circle just, / And makes [him] end,” where he had “begun.” A further analogy resides in this purest of elements, which goldsmiths could beat thinner than tissue paper—so thin, indeed, that the poet imagines its transparency. Beaten and drawn to invisibility and yet unbroken, such an element keeps the lovers themselves in physical connection. And, as its sun-given (hence, God-given) qualities are purity, permanence, and perfection, so the gold that reaches across distances ensures the fidelity and perdurance of the lovers’ love. It is a spiritual-chemical love that the poet has conjured by means of the macro-/microcosm analogy and the occult influences of spiritual-chemical gold.

But there’s a problem here. While Donne demonstrates the currency of hermetic thought in early seventeenth-century culture, he does nothing to demonstrate its truth-claims. Is “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” an act of conjuration, of occult hieroglyphics and word-magic generally? Or is it mere poetry, not to be believed? Do *we* believe it, we moderns? However monumental, Fludd’s *Utriusque Cosmi* arrived a generation (or two) too late. Shall we call it the highpoint, or rather the swansong, of hermetic tradition?

III.

Paradise Lost is not the less an eternal monument because it is a monument to dead ideas.

—Walter Raleigh, *Milton* (88)

What the English critic, Walter Raleigh, wrote of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) may be said of Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi*, as well. (Indeed, Milton is arguably the last Renaissance poet whose work was influenced directly—if partially—by Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi*.) With encyclopedic fullness, both works depict an entire universe, mapping it in detail and recounting its divine origins, the interconnections among its parts, its secret workings, and its celestial, angelic, human, animal, elemental, and demonic inhabitants. Both play on the relations between macro- and microcosm. And each had become *in its own time* a “monument to dead ideas.” The curious fact is that, even as these authors were composing, the worldviews upon which their cosmologies were based had already begun crumbling away. Years before Fludd was preparing his *Utriusque Cosmi* for publication, Sir Francis Bacon had published his *Advancement of Learning* (1605), which sought to overthrow the “old” with a “new philosophy”—a “natural” philosophy, so-called for its turning away from Scriptural or spiritual “revelation” as its “way of knowing.” Naturalist observation, rather, would replace Scripture and the older classical authorities (Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, *et al.*). Bacon's “natural philosopher,” as he became known in the seventeenth century, would grow in time into today's scientist.

One way of telling the history of Fludd's age is to describe its epistemological shift (that is, the shift in its “way of knowing”) from “occult mentalities” like alchemy, astrology, “natural magic,” and hermeticism generally to the “scientific mentality” that came to define the eighteenth century—the so-called Age of Enlightenment. Similarly in 1667, the year of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Thomas Sprat was publishing his *History of the Royal Society*—the organization's full title being “The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge.” Here too, the word “natural” declares a worldview grounded in scientific materialism rather than in occult resemblances. It's not too bold to note that seventeenth-century England produced two of the most influential publications; standing as bookends to the century, each rests upon a distinctive worldview. And each, in its way, contradicted Fludd's hermetic premises. The first is the “Authorized Version” of Scripture—the so-called “King James Bible” (1611). The second is Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1687), whose theory of gravity and laws of motion provided the basis of modern mechanistic science.

Among the ideas entombed in Milton's epic is the Edenic unity of divine and human language. “My tongue obey'd and readily could name / Whate'er I saw” (*PL* 8.271-73), Adam says to the archangel Raphael. As the animals passed by, Adam “nam'd them, . . . and understood / Their Nature, with such knowledge God endued / [His] sudden apprehension” (*PL* 8.352-54). Though the poet makes it clear that God, and *not* the words *per se*, gave immediate knowledge of created nature, Milton affirms the prelapsarian confluence of naming and knowing, which Hermemecists would further mystify in making Adamic speech a naming-*as*-knowing. Margreta de Grazia describes this

latter tradition.¹ From the twelfth through the seventeenth century, “divinity was conceived as having expressed itself in three ‘books’: the Book of the World or Nature, Scriptures or Holy Writ, and the divine imprint on every human heart or soul” (319), all three sharing the same language. The capacity for speech “constituted man’s likeness” to God; and since this language, “traditionally agreed to be Hebrew, was the formal cause of creation, it bore an innate relation to what it named” (324). Whereas Adamic language fell with Babel, the Christian Incarnation (followed by Pentecost) served as a “means of restoring the resemblance between divine and human speech” (325).

Comforting Adam, Milton’s archangel Michael prophesies this gracious restoration: God “to his own a Comforter will send, / . . . who shall dwell / His Spirit within them,”

. . . and the Law of Faith
. . . upon their hearts shall write,
To guide them in all truth, and also arm
With spiritual Armor, able to resist
Satan’s assaults, and quench his fiery darts
(*PL* 12.486-92)

“For the Spirit,” Michael continues, “shall them with wondrous gifts endue / To speak all Tongues, and do all Miracles, / As did their Lord before them” (*PL* 12.497, 499-502). Through Pentecost, then,

the confusion of tongues (the penalty of Babel) would be counteracted. If man could speak in the spirit of Christ, he would again share God’s language Until the seventeenth century, language could still connect man to God either by recalling original vocabulary and syntax or by incorporating the spirit of God’s Word made flesh. (325)

It was this re-wedding of divinely-created *res* and human-divine *verbum* that inspired the hermetic philosopher’s gestures at word-magic; for “magicians . . . strove to retrieve Adam’s language in order to exercise control over nature” (324).

In a sermon “Preached upon Trinity-Sunday,” Donne affirms the human/divine unity of the rhetoric just outlined, wherein a restored human language “incorporat[es] the spirit of God’s Word made flesh.” “God made us with his word,” Donne declares, “and with our words we make God so

¹ Unless otherwise noted, quotations below are taken from de Grazia’s “Secularization of Language in the Seventeenth Century” (1980).

farre, as that we make up the mystical body of Christ Jesus with our prayers, . . . and we make the natural body of Christ Jesus applicable to our souls, by the words of Consecration in the Sacrament, and our souls apprehensive, and capable of that body, by the word Preached” (*Sermons* 3:259). The theology of language here described is incarnationist and Anglo-Catholic by implication; still, the seventeenth century witnessed a steady “deverbalization of God’s message” (328).

Writing after 1660 (that is, after Restoration of the English monarchy, which had been disrupted by civil war), philosophers secularized the “book of Nature,” ultimately divorcing God’s language from humankind’s. But this divorcement would become final only after the medieval cosmology had broken down fully, allowing the new, “scientific mentality” to take firm hold. “And the new Philosophy calls all in doubt” (205), Donne writes in his *First Anniversary* (1611), presaging the passing of this centuries-old world view. Privileging naturalist observation as its “way of knowing,” this “new Philosophy” would shatter the symbolic unity of macrocosm and human microcosm, mocking the hermeticism that had sought for (and thought it had found) God’s “signature” inscribed throughout created nature: whereas the cosmic realms (empyrean, celestial, elemental) had once been interconnected by a web of occult resemblances, “’Tis all in pieces,” Donne muses, “all coherence gone” (*First Anniversary* 213). Having denied the divine *signatura rerum*—the notion that God’s “signature” was inscribed throughout created nature—the “new Philosophy” declared a further divorcement between words and their referents. No longer could language wield power over matter. As Thomas Hobbes writes in his *Computation or Logic* (1655), “though some names . . . were taught by God himself,” “yet they were by him arbitrarily imposed” (*English Works* 1: 16).

John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) exemplifies the age’s irreversible turn to nominalism: “the same liberty also, that Adam had of affixing any new Name to any Idea; the same has anyone still” (202). Where hermetic philosophers had searched for the Adamic Ur-language, the Restoration reformers of science reinterpreted (in effect, rewrote) the origins of human speech, making it “more the slipshod invention of illiterate man than the gift of omniscient God” (326). By century’s end, “man’s form of expression and God’s” was seen to differ “not only qualitatively but generically” (329):

It was not merely that fallen man after Babel spoke an adulterated and confused version of God’s Word. Man’s language was other than God’s. . . . Without any prerogative to reproduce or translate God’s Word as imprinted in nature, in the Scriptures, and in the heart, words were of limited use and value. (329)

In *Rhetoric, Magic, and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (2009), Ryan J. Stark gives the “just conclusion” to de Grazia’s history:

Working against the assumptions of the occult Renaissance cosmos, new philosophers advance a non-magical philosophy of rhetoric commensurate with the ethos of modern experimentalism, and this new style, or, more precisely, this new philosophy of style, marks the origins of modern English rhetoric. (46)

Triumphing over the “occult Renaissance cosmos,” the “new philosophers” put paid to the word-magic undergirding Renaissance hermeticism.

Near the beginning of this lecture, I alluded to two cultural forces militating against hermeticism. I have just given one; I shall end with a brief glance at the second. In his *Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism* (1904), Max Weber describes *die Entzäuberung* or “disenchantment” as “that great historic process” in the development of Western religious culture, one marked by the “elimination of magic from the world” (105). Repudiating “all magical means to salvation as superstition” (Weber 105), the English Puritan rejected the Roman priest and spiritual alchemist alike, equating their verbal rituals with sorcery. In *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), Keith Thomas reinforces the Weberian thesis: in re-educating their parishioners, reformed ministers taught that “practical difficulties could only be solved by a combination of self-help and prayer The strong emphasis upon the virtues of hard work . . . helped to create a frame of mind which spurned the cheap solutions offered by magic” (278). Embodying the new work ethic, the Puritan replaced witchcraft with handicraft, seeking for signs of election in his secular “calling” or *vocatus*.

Such, I should add, leads to the world we have ourselves inherited. Having divorced matter from spirit (and, in some intellectual circles, we’ve denied the spirit completely, reducing all to materialism), we have no recourse but to privilege science over symbolism. And, having denied word-magic, we have reconciled ourselves to a postlapsarian state, earning bread by the sweat of our brows. We can major in any number of university disciplines, but “medical astrology,” spiritual alchemy, and hermetic *praxis* are no longer listed in the course catalogue.

WORKS CITED

- Agrippa, Heinrich Cornelius. *De Occulta Philosophia*. Cologne: 1533. Rpt. Paris: 1567.
- de Grazia, Margreta. “The Secularization of Language in the Seventeenth Century.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 41 (1980); 319-29.
- Donne, John. *The Complete English Poems*. Ed. A. J. Smith. New York: St. Martins, 1971.

- _____. *The Sermons of John Donne*. 10 vols. Ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson. Berkeley: U of California P, 1953-1961.
- Fludd, Robert. *Utriusque Cosmi, Majoris scilicet Minoris, metaphysica, physica, atque technica Historia*. Frankfurt: 1621.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*. 11 vols. Ed. William Molesworth. London: Bohn, 1837-45.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Kenneth P. Winkler. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996.
- Paracelsus. *Essential Readings*. Ed. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. Berkeley: North Atlantic, 1999.
- Plato. *Timaeus*. Trans. Thomas Taylor. New York: Pantheon, 1944.
- Raleigh, Sir Walter. *Milton*. London: Edwin Arnold, 1900.
- Rudnytsky, Peter L. "The Sight of God?: Donne's Poetics of Transcendence." *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 24 (1982): 185-207.
- Sprat, Thomas. *History of the Royal Society*. Ed. Jackson I. Cope and Harold Whitmore Jones. St. Louis: Washington University Studies, 1958.
- Stark, Ryan J. *Rhetoric, Magic, and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*. Washington, D.C.: the Catholic U of America P, 2009.
- Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Belief in Sixteenth and Seventeenth England*. New York: Scribner's, 1971.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons. New York: Scribner's, 1958.