

TRITHEMIUS, CUSANUS, AND THE WILL TO THE INFINITE:
A PRE-FAUSTIAN PARADIGM

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Of past figures whose reported exploits have moved from the historical arena to the arena of legend and even of myth, one of the more intriguing is a certain Doctor Faustus († ca. 1540). That metamorphosis from historical to legendary status, notably illustrated by the Lutheran-authored *Faustbuch* of 1587, had already begun during its subject's own lifetime. Initially construed as a demonically inspired sorcerer, Faustus subsequently passed through a series of further metamorphoses no longer holding to the relatively one-dimensional image earlier projected.

Already with Christopher Marlowe, who was given access to an English translation of the *Faustbuch*, the Faust legend had become transmogrified from a series of superficial cautionary tales about the dangers of magic into a deeper dramatic "tragedy" in which its central protagonist's occult interests were no longer so easily slighted. The simple religious conflict between the righteousness of faith and the unrighteousness of demonically incited sorcery had now become revamped into a conflict between two opposing versions of how one can best be put into touch with a realm of the spirit transcending the limitations of nature: one through demonic assistance and the other through Christian faith. Migrating to the age of the Enlightenment, with a writer like Lessing enhancing the tragical framework within which the Faust legend could flourish, it was most famously picked up by Goethe and transformed into a foremost prototype of the Romantic drive to transcend the finite limits laid down by the classical heritage.

Further passing into the modern age, it is above all the Marlowe and Goethe takes on the Faust legend that have had the most durable impact on the contemporary western mind. In this form the Faust image has been adapted to the ballet stage by Heinrich Heine and to the opera stage by Berlioz, Gounod and Boito; it represented for Kierkegaard a tormented "apostate of the spirit" epitomizing the existential disjunction between the finite and infinite domains; it has been utilized as a historical metaphor by Spengler and Toynbee, the former replacing the famous Dionysian-Apollonian antithesis with a Faustian-Apollonian antithesis and the latter associating Faust with the Yang side of what he conceived to be a Yin-Yang dynamic of history; it served Thomas Mann, in his novel *Doktor Faustus*, as an allegorical motif symbolizing a cor-

relation between genius and psychic alienation; and, as illustrated by a recent study applying the Faustian theme to a number of literary heroines, it has even impacted on the modern feminist movement. In sum, the image of Faust has evolved from one of a mere demon conjuror into a protean-like metaphor for a heroic-like drive to surpass the bounds of finite mediocrity¹.

Faustus and Trithemius

Faustus, as it happened, was not alone among Renaissance magicians to furnish the modern world with a striking Renaissance paradigm pitting an occult pursuit of the transrational infinite against the finite limits of human reason. He was notably anticipated by the Benedictine abbot Trithemius (1462-1516) of Sponheim and Würzburg², who, responding to a query by an acquaintance cognizant of his burgeoning reputation in the same area of arcane interests as attracted Faustus, offers us the first documented evidence of the historical personage behind the Faust legend in the form of a highly unflattering epistolary portrait of its subject. Having by chance spent a night at the same Gelnhausen inn as Faustus during the year 1506, Trithemius, in the relevant letter marking this fortuitous intersection of the two magi, portrayed his fellow itinerant in highly unflattering terms.

Puffing himself up as 'a fountain of necromantics' (*fons necromanticorum*) Trithemius charged, Faustus in truth was nothing but 'a vagabond, an utterer of vain repetitions, and a wandering monk' deserving, not of admiration, but of 'chastisement by whipping'. Boasting 'that if all the volumes of Plato and Aristotle, with all their philosophy, completely perished from the memory of man, he by his genius, as if he were another Ezra the Hebrew, could restore them with an even more superior elegance', Faustus, in Trithemius' opinion, 'being ignorant of all good letters, ought rather to be called a fool than a master'. To be sure, the main thrust of this portrayal is one that appears to present

¹ For general accounts of the historical Faustus see Butler, *Myth of the Magus*, 121-124, and Mahal, *Historische Faust*. Among the vast contemporary literature touching on the Faust legend see, e.g., Bianquis, *Faust à travers quatre siècles*; Palmer & More, *Sources of the Faust Tradition*; Butler, *Fortunes of Faust*; Kiesewetter, *Faust in der Geschichte*; Smeed, *Faust in Literature*; Baron, *Doctor Faustus*; Maus, *Faust: Eine Deutsche Legende*; Grimm & Hermand, *Our Faust?*; Boerner and Johnson, *Faust through Four Centuries*; and Druex, *Feminization of Dr. Faustus*.

² Establishing the general intellectual context for Trithemius' mystical and magical interests are Arnold, *Johannes Trithemius*, and Brann, *The Abbot Trithemius*. For elaboration of the shift from mystical to magical theology by Trithemius see Brann, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*. For briefer treatments of Trithemian magic see Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 86-90, and Couliano, *Eros and Magic*, 162-175.

Faustus more as a magical fraud than as the outright demon-conjuror that subsequently became the crux of his legend. Given the Devil's well-known reputation as deceiver, however, it is a portrayal that readily contributed to the more sinister Faustian reputation of later years. Going so far in his perversity as to blaspheme 'that the miracles of Christ our Saviour were not truly marvelous acts, and that he himself could perform, every day and wherever he wished, all the things which Christ performed', Trithemius intimated in his epistolary testament without expressly saying so, Faustus exercised remarkable powers of prestidigitation that at bottom owed, not to divine assistance as he would have us believe, but to assistance of the demons intent on counterfeiting the miracles of God³.

The irony in all of this, of course, is that Trithemius himself, whose objection to Faustus hinged, not on an objection to magic *per se* but only on a distinction he discerned between diabolically inspired sorcery and divinely inspired Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and Kabbalist magic, became subsequently linked by magic-detesting Christians to the self-described "fountain of necromantics", Faustus. Spearheaded by the widespread propagation of a letter by a 1503 guest of Trithemius at Sponheim, the Frenchman Carolus Bovillus, who, on being presented with a partially completed manuscript of the abbot's *Steganographia*, vehemently castigated its author as a demon-conjuror, the name of Trithemius readily became associated in the minds of many after the 1580's with that of the demon-conjuring subject of the *Faustbuch*. Serving to reinforce this commonplace linkage of the two names was an early merging of the two legends, Trithemian and Faustian, illustrated by a story of Faustus' raising of ancient personages from the nether regions in the court of Charles V paralleling a comparable necromantic feat attributed to Trithemius in the court of Charles' grandfather Maximilian. As one sixteenth century writer typified the later coalescence of the two legends with reference to this Faustian anecdote: 'Some men relate that this same act was performed by Johannes Trithemius'⁴.

³ Trithemius to Johannes Virdung de Hasfurt, Würzburg, 20 August 1507, *Epistolae familiares* II:48, in: *Opera historica* II, 559-60. Repr. in *De septem secundeis*, 140-141 (in Tille, *Faustsplitter*, no.1, 1-3) and in Rupprich, *Humanismus*, 184-185. For transl. into German, French, and English respectively see Kiesewetter, *Faust*, 4-6; Chacornac, *Trithème*, 59-61; and Palmer & More, *Sources*, 83-86. On this documented Trithemius-Faust encounter see Harming, 'Faust und die Renaissance-Magie', 56-79; Maus, *Faust*, 109-138; Arnold, *Trithemius*, 185; Brann, *The Abbot Trithemius*, 48, and id., *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, 64-65. and Baron, *Faustus*, 23-24.

⁴ Christoph Zeisseler, *Neu-eröffneter Historischer Schauplatz* (1595), excerpted in Tille, *Faustsplitter*, no.146, p. 149. For further references in this anthology illustrating the popular conflation of the Faustian and Trithemian magical legends see no. 12, 14-15; no. 31, 62-68; no.

What decisively distinguishes the Trithemian legend from its Faustian analogue is that, whereas Faustus did not leave behind so much as a word about the motivation for his magical interests, depending for that on others incorporating it into their own agendas, Trithemius bequeathed a formidable corpus of writings documenting his motivation. Whereas, as set forth, for example, in Marlowe's version of Faustus, magic represented an alternative to Christian theology as a means to achieving godlike power and knowledge, it was Trithemius' announced intention to reconcile magic with his orthodox Christian principles. Whereas the view encouraged by the pre-Enlightenment Faust legend, with St. Augustine a foremost religious authority, was to establish an impenetrable partition dividing a true Christian miracle from a mere magical marvel – the former presumed to originate in an infinitely removed realm of supernature and the latter in a finitely placed occult realm of nature readily accessible to the demons for the counterfeiting of miracles –, the view presented by Trithemius was of a conflation of miracle and magic in the tradition, not of magic-detesters like St. Augustine or, closer to his own time, St. Thomas Aquinas, but of a magic-prone German contemporary of St. Thomas, Albertus Magnus. Put another way, it was Trithemius' goal, more systematically reiterated by his famed disciple Agrippa of Nettesheim († 1535), to transform the Hermetic *magnum miraculum* into a *magnum miraculum Christianum*⁵.

The magical reputation of Trithemius at first glance appears to have burst onto the historical stage like a lightning bolt, signaled by a misappropriated 1499 letter to a friend announcing the birth of the art of steganography, a form of cryptography, reputedly invoking planetary angels for the conveyance of

51, 99-101; no. 59, 111-114; no. 62, 118-122; and no. 89, 173-178. Cf. Fritz, *Volksbuch vom Doktor Faust* III, 69-70. Drawing out the resemblances between the Faust and Trithemian legends are Maus, *Faust*, and Baron, 'Trithemius und Faustus', 39-57, and id., 'Precarious Legacy', 303-315.

⁵ On a 1509 meeting of Agrippa with Trithemius at Sponheim, followed up the following year with Agrippa's dedication to the abbot of the first version of his *De occulta philosophia*, see my *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, 152-157. For medieval antecedents to the occult programs envisaged by Trithemius and Agrippa alike, with principal emphasis by its contributors on late medieval expositions of the Solomonian *ars notoria*, see Fanger, *Conjuring Spirits*. What sharply distinguishes Trithemius' mystical-magical methodology from that of this tradition, however, highlighted by the abbot's express condemnation of the *ars notoria* in his *Antipalus maleficorum*, is his excision of purifying external rituals from its ascending stages. If the external rituals spelled out in the *Steganographia* appear to belie this, it should be noted that they are geared to acquire practical powers in the art of cryptic communication, not to move the soul of the operator to purer states of being. Nevertheless, it was precisely this ambiguous feature of Trithemius' leadoff treatise of magic, promising to furnish an occult shortcut to worldly knowledge in association with the drive to a beatific vision, to put his reputation in the same suspect ranks as the *ars notoria* in the minds of his demonological critics.

secret messages⁶. A careful analysis of Trithemius' pre-Steganographic sources, however, reveals that the ground for the abbot's detour into a suspect art of the arcana was not as sudden or unexpected as it appears, revealing as it does a trend in his thinking which places magic on a continuum with the mystical theology to which he so far had devoted his monastic career. His ultimate goal was identical to that stated by St. Augustine in the entreaty to God opening his *Confessions* that 'Thou hast made us for Thyself, our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee'. Where he took fundamental departure from Augustine was in his proposition that magic could act as an ancillary aid to mystical theology in achieving that goal. Whereas Augustine's dictum in another of his writings that 'man is a greater miracle than any marvel man performs'⁷ was grounded on the presumption of a radical miracle-magic dichotomy, Trithemius effectively recoalesced the mystical-magical division that Augustine had put asunder.

To illustrate the strategy enlisted by Trithemius in effecting this elevated goal of magic, we will now highlight two separate but interconnected stages of his theological thinking. The first stage constitutes a fusion of traditional mystical theology with monastic humanism, the prominent feature of which is the tracing of the origins of Christian spirituality to pre-Christian Jewish and Gentile sources, and the second stage, the fusion of specifically pre-Christian Jewish and Gentile occult theory with conventional Christian mystical theory. In this manner, we will see, Trithemius was able to rationalize a transformation of mystical into magical theology, the object of which, in anticipation of the later Faust legend, he took to be a mystical-magical traversal of the ontological and epistemological disjunction separating the finite from the infinite realms. What distinguished the Trithemian rendering of that infinite quest from its Faustian analogue in all its subsequent versions lay in its means, not in its end, with the heroic power necessary to its fulfillment claimed to be provided, not by Satan, but by God, and its finalized fruit, not condemnation of the magical artificer's defiled soul in the pit of Hell, but the eternal salvation of his alchemically purified soul imaging the undefiled purity of God.

⁶ For the background of this epistolary announcement of Trithemius' turn to magic, intended for the eyes alone of the Ghent Carmelite Arnold Bostius but, owing to his death prior to its arrival, inadvertently made accessible to far less sympathetic respondents, see my *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, 7, 85-87.

⁷ St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* X, 12.

Cusanus and Trithemius

In 1497, and thus only two years before his magical interests became a public spectacle, Trithemius provided a succinct summary of his mystical theory, under the title *De operatione divina*, in the form of an oration before the annual chapter of the Bursfeld congregation meeting at Erfurt. Declared Trithemius therein, in language to be reiterated many times in his subsequent contributions to the theory of Christian magic: 'The more secret matters of divine love are not to be revealed to the ordinary public, since he alone is able to understand them whom the illuminations of love have readied by means of rigorous [spiritual] exercises'⁸. In this way Trithemius compactly integrated in a single sentence traditional illuminist theory, a doctrine of spiritual exercises, and a caveat of esoteric confidentiality, each component which was to prove as pertinent to his unconventional magical as to his conventional mystical thinking. In elaboration of this triadic guideline Trithemius spelled out for his audience a series of ten "miraculous" operations of divine love enabling the soul to purify itself of its worldly contaminations. A summary of these stages runs as follows.

By the first operation, contrition, we are informed by Trithemius that 'just as fire devours wood and chaff, likewise does the love of God consume all sin, its contrary, from the heart of the lover'; by the second operation, that the fire of divine love 'cooks all the carnal affections and subjugates them to the spirit'; by the third operation, that the lover 'despises all corporeal things and loves nothing whatsoever in this world'; by the fourth operation, that love 'engenders a marvelous compunction and devotion in its host', the result being that 'the mind becomes so elevated above worldly things that there is unlocked and disclosed to it the secrets of heavenly things'; and by the fifth operation, that by bringing the intellect into subjection to an inflamed will 'divine love illuminates the intellect of its possessor with a marvelous majesty' – an observation prompting the crucial aviso from the speaker that 'if you do not first love God, you know nothing' (*si Deum non diligis, nihil intelligis*). By the sixth operation of divine love in turn Trithemius instructed his Bursfeld audience that the mind of the lover 'is liquefied in the likeness of wax'; by the seventh operation, that the liquefied soul, having thereby been carried outside the body in a state of ecstasy, is made contemptuous of physical death; by the eighth operation, that the enraptured soul is conveyed into the realm of the angelic hierarchy; by the ninth operation, that the soul of the divine lover is transported to the very threshold of Heaven, depicted by Trithemius as 'the

⁸ Trithemius, 'Orationes VI: De Operatione divini amoris', in: *Opera pia*, 891.

abyss of divine contemplation, where it is marvelously transmuted (*mirabiliter transmutatur*) from the state of a deficient creature to one participating in divinity'; and, by the tenth and concluding operation, that the enraptured soul is enabled to pass over the threshold of the heavenly temple to its interior, where 'it is soon led to the bosom of the most beloved Jesus, and honored in immortal glory'⁹.

Through a comparable progression of amorous operations Trithemius envisaged a magical ascent to God corresponding to the mystical ascent presented in his *De operatione divina*. In this progression we can discern five critical points at which he was able to plug his magical into his mystical program. First of all Trithemius cautioned in his mysticism as in his magic an imperative of esoteric confidentiality. Secondly, by utilizing the cathartic image of fire as a transmutative agent he opened the way for alchemy to enter his mystical framework. Thirdly, in his mysticism as in his magic Trithemius presumed that a soul sufficiently purified is enabled to break free of its demonic encumbrances and enter, via the angelic hierarchy, into intimacy with God. Fourthly, by establishing near the apex of his spiritual progression a dark 'abyss of divine contemplation' where, as maintained in ancient times by pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (6th cent.) and recently reiterated in the mathematical language of Pythagoras by the erudite church cardinal Nicholas Cusanus (1401-1464), positive becomes transformed into negative theology, he left the way open for the magicians of his day to identify their occult principles with those of the mystics. Fifthly, in his magic as in his mysticism Trithemius sought a higher form of spiritual illumination prefiguring what Frances Yates has termed, in its late Renaissance expression, the "Rosicrucian Enlightenment"¹⁰.

Impacting on both strands of Trithemius' theology alike, mystical and magical, was his discernment, in express agreement with Cusanus, that 'between finite and infinite, between creature and Creator, between men and God there is absolutely no proportion'¹¹. Put another way, the finite-infinite discontinuity conditioning Trithemius' mystical theology, by underscoring an occult realm inaccessible to reason but accessible to an inflamed will, also conditioned Trithemius' magical theology. Even as Cusanus himself stopped short at translating his mystical principles into magical ones, he nevertheless, by upholding a transrational way over the dark abyss separating God from man,

⁹ Trithemius, 'Orationes VI: De Operatione divini amoris', in: *Opera pia*, 888-899.

¹⁰ Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*.

¹¹ Trithemius, 'Oratio ... de vera conversione mentis ad deum', in: *Opera pia*, 903. On the Cusanus-Trithemius connection see Arnold, *Trithemius*, 5 et passim, and my two Trithemius studies: *The Abbot Trithemius*, esp. 195-201, and *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, 131-132.

helped pave the way for a Christian magus like Trithemius in taking that further step. The key to this shift from mystical to magical theology in Trithemius, with the additional assistance of Hermetic and Kabbalist sources to reinforce his Pythagorean and Neoplatonic ones, lay in his identification of mystical illuminations received by the spiritually purified with occult illuminations said to be accessible to a privileged few esoterically prepared to receive them.

To properly appreciate the prominent role Cusanus – dubbed by Trithemius *comosellanus meus* by virtue of their sharing the Mosel valley as their birthplace – played in the abbot's occult thought processes, we can do no better than to consult a letter introducing an oration, titled *De visione Dei* (1453), addressed by Cusanus to a group of Benedictine monks housed on the shores of the Tegernsee. Promising to reveal to his monastic listeners 'an easy path unto mystical theology' Cusanus further explained that he would thereby lay out for them the way to their reception of 'the marvels of revelation which are beyond all sight of our eyes, our reason, and our understanding'. More specifically, he pledged, 'I will endeavor by a very simple and commonplace method to lead you by experience into the divine darkness; wherein while ye abide ye shall perceive present with you the light inaccessible'¹² Through words like these Cusanus indicated his adherence not only to a concept of spiritual advancement superior to that of traditional scholastic logic with its dependence on human reason. He also indicated his adherence to a distinction within mystical theology itself, adopted from pseudo-Dionysius, between two separate stages of advancement. The first stage, to which he referred all external religious rites, consists of affirmative or cataphatic theology (*kataphatike*), and the second stage, to which he referred the incomprehensible and ineffable truths of Christian faith, negative or apophatic theology (*aphophatike*)¹³.

What is clear from other writings flowing from Cusanus' pen, most notably his earlier groundbreaking *De docta ignorantia* (1440), is that his view of the aspiring will so central to his mystical theory does not simply dispense with the human intellect. It subordinates the intellect, the *sine qua non* of philosophical investigation, to a higher urge of the soul to become one with God free of sensual and rational encumbrances. While expressly taking his philosophical departure from Pythagoras and Plato, the joint effect of which was to furnish

¹² Cusanus, *Vision of God*, 1-2. On Cusanus' philosophical outlook see esp. Cassirer, *Individual and Cosmos*. Highlighting Cusanus' mysticism in relation to his philosophy is Watts, *Cusanus*, with this tract the focus of ch. 5, 153-188.

¹³ For this crucial mystical distinction see, in addition to Watts, *Cusanus*, 48 ff., her essay 'Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite', the latter distinguishing Cusanus' version of apophatic theology from later magical versions subscribed to by such theorists of the occult as Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and, by implication, Trithemius.

him with the mathematical methodology upon which he based his reasoning, Cusanus ended in substituting for a vision of hierarchical ascent from the known to the unknown, still a feature of the Dionysian vision, a sharply anti-hierarchical opposition between a finitely circumscribable world accessible to reason and the infinitely uncircumscribable realm of God inaccessible to reason but accessible to a purified will. A working corollary further deduced by Cusanus from his mathematical methodology is that all oppositions detected in the rational sphere of existence are ultimately reconciled in the infinitely superrational sphere as a *coincidentia oppositorum* – a coinciding of seeming contrarities.

One significant theological repercussion of Cusanus' revolution in philosophy, which found in Martin Luther one of its more notable exemplars¹⁴, lay in its encouragement of a conjunction of fideism with skepticism, the underlying presupposition of which is that the infinite realm of God closed off to the categories of human reason – the so-called *Deus Absconditus* or "Hidden God" – is nevertheless reachable by a soul that has been sufficiently purged of its terrestrial contaminations. Another repercussion, as characteristic of an ongoing adherence of Christians to Catholic monastic as to Protestant anti-monastic ideals, lay in its applicability to a doctrine of spiritual exercises purporting to transport a soul methodically disencumbered of its corporeal limitations to a place where the eye of the mind is no longer compelled, as St. Paul (I Cor. 13:12) put it, to look at God through a glass darkly, but rather is now capacitated to gaze on God eye to eye. Yet another repercussion of Cusanus' philosophical insights, less widely appreciated by Reformation scholars than the previous two, lay in their possible transference to the field of magic. While it is true that Cusanus himself indicated no such magical implication of his philosophical insights – indeed, on his own part actively discouraging tendencies during his time to confuse sacramental rituals blessed by the church with magic¹⁵ –, he left open the possibility for others to do so, with Trithemius a foremost case in point. Much as Cusanus acted as a prime influence on Trithemius' mystical theology, so did he act as a prime influence on Trithemius' magical theology. Two principal features of Cusanus' Platonically conditioned theology aptly served Trithemius to this end: the first, inherited through the legacy of pseudo-Dionysius, was negative theology, and the second, inherited through the Pythagorean legacy, mystical numerology.

¹⁴ See, e.g. Cranz, 'Cusanus, Luther, and the Mystical Tradition'. For the nominalist background of this mystical trend see the previous papers in Trinkaus & Oberman, *Pursuit of Holiness*, by Heiko Oberman, William J. Courtenay, and Steven Ozment.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Scribner, *Popular Culture*, 31, 42.

In anticipation of a key Trithemian theme, Cusanus proclaimed in his *De docta ignorantia* that 'we walk through likenesses and enigmas'. But whereas Cusanus followed up this observation with the epistemological corollary, the central thesis of his *De conjectura*, that we know truth 'only through metaphor and through symbols designated by ourselves'¹⁶, Trithemius gave that Cusan insight an occult turn that, despite an Hermetic component of his own thinking that contributed to the cardinal's revolutionary philosophical vision, can scarcely be said to have been contemplated by Cusanus himself¹⁷. As zealous to lead his monks, as put by Cusanus in the epistolary introduction to his *De visione Dei*, 'into the divine darkness, wherein while ye abide ye shall receive present with you the light inaccessible', Trithemius identified the infinitely occult realm spoken of by Cusanus, which the Cardinal claimed to be communicable solely through enigmas, similes, and metaphors, with the occult realm of the magicians.

If the 1497 *De operatione divina* can be said to have furnished a foothold to Trithemian magic, an oration of the previous year aimed at clarifying the principal diabolically engineered obstacles to monastic observance would appear to make that foothold still more secure. Cautioning his monastic listeners that 'he who, being rude and blinded by the passions of the vices and deprived of the light of the scriptures, presumes to pass over into the dense mist of divine contemplation will be led into disaster', Trithemius instructed them that 'Dionysius, teaching Timothy concerning mystical theology, prohibited him from permitting the secret knowledge of contemplation (*contemplandi secretam scientiam*) to enter the ears of rude men'¹⁸. Here is a guideline of the abbot's mystical theology, reinforced by his reading of Cusanus, that could also consistently be carried over into his theory of magic, furnishing him as it did with a convenient esoteric cover by consigning the critics of his occult studies to the ranks of the same 'rude and blinded' who were unprepared for spiritual advancement through the conventional techniques of mystical theology.

Given the above considerations, we should not be surprised to discover that Trithemius' magical theology, following the same guidelines as the mystical

¹⁶ Quoted in Watts, *Cusanus*, 26.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 247: 'The famous saying that God is "a sphere of which the centre is everywhere and the circumference nowhere" is, in fact, first found in a pseudo-Hermetic treatise of the twelfth century, and was transferred by Cusanus to the universe, as a reflection of God, in a manner which is Hermetic in spirit'. For this reason we need to distinguish a mystical legacy of Hermeticism, to which Cusanus subscribed, from the mystical-magical legacy of Hermeticism with which Trithemius identified himself. Extensively treating the latter, occultist version of Renaissance Hermeticism are two collections of essays: Vickers, *Occult and Scientific Mentalities*, and Merkel & Debus, *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*.

¹⁸ Trithemius, 'Oratio ... de duodecim excidiis observantiae regularis', in: *Opera pia*, 881.

theology preceding and conditioning it, displayed a demonological underbelly to complement its positive call to spiritual enlightenment. A completed *Antipalus maleficorum*, the outline for a planned encyclopedia of demons, and several of his replies to the *Octo quaestiones* addressed to the Emperor Maximilian assured that Trithemius' name would figure as prominently in the anti-magical as pro-magical literature of his successors, with their vinculum consisting of his conviction that his good, divinely sanctioned magic stands at the opposite spiritual pole from the wicked sorcerous magic instructed and facilitated by the demons. The affirmative, as distinct from demologically admonitory, side of Trithemius' magical program consists of a synthesis of Hermetic natural magic and alchemy, Pythagorean numerology, astrology, and Kabbalist word and angel magic, the combined force of which is to propel the soul of the magical adept upward, by esoteric means, from the finitely demon-infested material world to the infinitely removed supermaterial world ruled over by God and His ministering angels. Each of these constituents of Trithemius' magical amalgam can be tied down by many references in his occult writings, of which the following can be taken as representative.

Trithemius' Occult Program

'It is the opinion of our most erudite men', Trithemius maintained in the introduction to his *Steganographia*, 'that the ancient sapientis whom we call by the Greek name "philosophers", if they happened to discover any arcana either of nature or of art, concealed them by various modes and figures so that they would not fall into the clutches of depraved men'¹⁹. Indeed, it was with a professed intent of furnishing a linguistic aid to concealment that Trithemius had invented the steganographical art in the first place. Moreover, it was not only the safekeeping of his magical secrets from the perils of human depravation that lay at the heart of Trithemius' cryptographical contrivances. Even more imperative from his standpoint was the guarding of those secrets from encroachment by demonic malefactors that he saw as abetting human depravation. Capsulizing the primary incentive behind Trithemius' demonological writings is the warning inserted into an early monastic treatise that 'it is the part of demons to insinuate evils, and it is our part to refuse consent, because the more rigorously we resist their assaults, the more surely we overcome them'²⁰. It followed for Trithemius in his theological speculations that a com-

¹⁹ Trithemius, *Steganographia*, pref., sig.): (2^r.

²⁰ Trithemius, *De tentationibus monachorum* I: 4, in: *Opera pia*, 668. For elaboration of this theme in the abbot see my *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, ch. 3, 33-84.

parable resistance needed to be exerted against the sorcerous arts of the demons, a motive of his demonological concerns made explicit with the words in the preface to the second of his cryptographical handbooks, the *Polygraphia*: 'Lest the arcana of owls be revealed in any way to the demons, these mysteries are concealed under enigmas'²¹.

With Cusanus among his revered authorities to lend theoretical support to his occult vision, Trithemius grafted to his mystical apparatus for reaching from the finite to the infinite realms – now presumed to be free of demonic intrusion – a magical apparatus geared to reaching the identical goal through esoteric means. As the abbot made this Cusan input into his magical speculations clear in his *Polygraphia*: 'In the same way as a finite and circumscribable number is reducible by progression into infinity, in the same way is the introduction of this art extendible into the endless reaches of this world'; by this means, he exulted, to the finite minds of men 'we show a way to the infinite' (*finitis modum dedimus ad infinita*)²². If, by words like these, Trithemius can be said to have found himself on a mystical continuum with Cusanus, by the same token he can be said, with Cusan help, to have helped prepare the ground for the magical legend of Faustus, who, as the story went, had sought to transcend the finite limits of human endeavor with demonic assistance.

Mindful that his occult program could be easily construed by the uninitiated in terms not very different from the censorious ones he directed at Faustus, Trithemius was forthright in distinguishing his beneficent magic from the maleficent sorcery of the demons. To this end, with the help of the Italian magus and polylinguist Pico della Mirandola, he insisted in his autobiographical *Nepiachus* that there had errantly been included among the condemned demonic arts the art of natural magic – *magia naturalis* – which, he averred, 'teaches us how to perform marvelous works by mediating natural virtues'²³. Such licit natural magic, Trithemius assured another correspondent, 'not only performs visible effects, but also marvelously illuminates the intellect of the man skilled in it with knowledge of the Deity and furnishes invisible fruits to the soul'²⁴. With recourse to a philosophical simile directly referable to Cusanus, Trithemius, in a summary to one of his correspondents of 'three principles of natural magic without which no marvelous effect can be performed', de-

²¹ Trithemius, *Polygraphia*, pref., 27.

²² Trithemius, *Polygraphia* III, 302-303, 462.

²³ Trithemius, *Nepiachus*, in: *Corpus historicum* II, col. 1830. On the crucial mediating role of his own preceptor in magic, one Libanius Gallus, in putting Trithemius into touch with Pico's ideas, see my *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, 111-112.

²⁴ Trithemius to Joachim of Brandenburg, Sponheim, 26 June 1503, *Epistolae*, in: *De septem secundis*, 105.

clared in reference to the second principle that it occupies 'the center of natural magic, whose undivided circumference can be depicted as a circle of such immensity that it extends into infinity'²⁵. That the driving force behind such *magia naturalis* owes at bottom, not to human effort but to a divine revelation, was further brought out by Trithemius in his proclamation to this same correspondent: 'Just as Holy Scripture testifies concerning the inward knowledge of God, that is, that no one understands it who does not receive it, likewise no one is able to initiate us in these mysteries unless he has received, by a divine gift, the incomparable light of understanding' (*lumen singulare intelligendi*)²⁶.

With greater specificity as to what he meant by 'mediating natural virtues', Trithemius distinguished two permissible occult arts from false look-alikes: the first, true astrology (*astrologia vera*) which, in contrast to the vulgar form denying free will, is claimed to put the freely willing soul of the adept into contact with the planetary sphere governed by the angels, and the second, true alchemy (*alchymia vera*), the primary object of which, far from seeking the transmutation of base into precious metals as in the vulgar form, is declared to produce a purification of the adept's soul. Taking his basic departure in the latter regard from the Hermetic Emerald Tablet, Trithemius, in an exposition of its thirteen principles to a correspondent, expressly coalesced his alchemical and astrological precepts with Pythagorean numerological ones. For the mind to achieve a perfect understanding in 'this rare and very admirable philosophy', Trithemius counseled in this regard, 'the ternary must be completely reduced to unity, for though unity is not a number, every number arises out of it', a principle which he summarized, following a device often applied to the name of the "thrice great" Emerald Table author Trismegistus, by a play on his own name. 'I, Trithemius', he informed his correspondent, 'am not comprised of three minds but, exulting in the ternary, endure within one integrated mind that gives birth to a marvelous offspring (*qui parit mirabilem foetum*)'. Carrying the the same principle into the planetary realm, Trithemius further advised the same correspondent that 'the celestial harmony to which we must raise our eyes is not material but spiritual consonance, in which number, order, and measure converge, via the ternary, in the One'²⁷.

When Trithemius called on Cusanus to lend support to this view, proclaiming in his *Polygraphia*, for example, that 'we will employ the circle in great

²⁵ Trithemius to Count Johannes of Westerburg, Sponheim, 10 May 1503, *Epistolae*, in: *De septem secundeis*, 95.

²⁶ Trithemius to Count Johannes of Westerburg, Sponheim, 10 May 1503, *Epistolae*, in: *De septem secundeis*, 87-88.

²⁷ Trithemius to Germanus de Ganay, Speyer, 24 August 1505, *Epistolae familiares* I:34, in: *Opera historica*, 471-472. For a fuller exposition of this reasoning see my *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, esp. 112-130.

things (*in maximis*) and the line or the point in the least things (*in minimis*)²⁸, he intended more than to give his imprimatur to Cusanus' doctrine of infinitely reconciled opposites. He also upheld the divinely infused power of magic to assist the soul in making transition from the finite world of apparent opposites to the infinite realm in which opposites are dissolved into a state of indivisible unity. Cusanus' conception of a god-like human mind, the conjectured ideas of which correspond to the real world created by God, was transformed by Trithemius, with Pico della Mirandola among his express authorities, into the Hermetic *magnum miraculum* whose goal is not, as is vulgarly believed, the transmutation of material lead into gold, but rather the alchemical-like transmutation of his own soul into a purified state "in the image of God". In corresponding fashion Trithemius effectively transformed the mystical vision of God and His angelic hierarchy, promised by Cusanus as the consummated fruit of learned ignorance, into a mystical-magical vision of God, a magical correlate to the beatific vision of traditional Christian mysticism.

Consummating Trithemius' magical progression from the finite to the infinite was what he termed 'the Kabbalistic method of the arcana'²⁹. Three principal features of Kabbalah spoke in Trithemius' mind for its appropriateness in this regard. The first feature lies in the presumption that miraculous powers reside in the words employed in the act of prayer, the equivalent, as it were, of a divinely sanctioned form of incantation; the second feature, in the presumption, underlying his astrologically conceived *De septem secundis* as well as his *Steganographia*, that prayerful incantations legitimately invoke angelic assistance for achieving proximity to God, in which capacity Kabbalah furnished Hebrew names for the angelic hierarchy in conjunction with the Greek ones furnished by pseudo-Dionysius; and the third feature, in the possibility, through the practice of so-called *gematria*, of occultly converting Hebrew letters into numbers, thereby permitting the transference of Pythagorean numerological methods into the celestial and supercelestial spheres. As in the corresponding cases of astrology and alchemy, Trithemius proposed a reciprocal relationship between Kabbalah and cryptography, with Kabbalah providing some of his cryptic notations (in this regard he viewed Kabbalah itself as a kind of ancient prefigurement of his covert methods) and cryptography joining with Kabbalah in helping to transport the soul of the adept from the finite to the infinite spheres.

²⁸ Trithemius, *Polygraphia*, "pinax sive index", 33-34.

²⁹ Trithemius, *Polygraphia* IV, 509. For the Jewish mystical traditions behind this notion see esp. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*. On the early Renaissance Christianization of Kabbalah – or Cabala in its more commonplace spelling in the west – see my *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, esp. 29-31, and 266-67 nt 52 and 56.

With the additional help of an Hebraic text largely lying outside the mystical and philosophical purview of Cusanus, accordingly, Trithemius beheld in words more than mere instruments of human convention. Words represented for Trithemius, with a Christianized Kabbalah to back him up, God-given verbal signs to assist the soul in moving from the finite to the infinite realms. Or putting the same idea in the language of mystical theology, Trithemius presumed the powers of magic to be capable of moving the human mind from the dark realm of sense-based reason to an illuminated realm ruled by what Kabbalah paradoxically terms, in agreement with pseudo-Dionysius and Cusanus, "the Concealed God" (*Ensoph*).

Trithemius, then, fell into common cause with Cusanus (underscoring the superiority of mystical to scholastic-based theology dependent on Aristotelian logic) in his conviction that God's nature is not only incomprehensible to the finitely rational mind, but is also inexpressible through ordinary language. But where Trithemius took sharp departure from Cusanus was in his added belief, encouraged by his reading of Kabbalah, that the essential ineffability of God, far from obviating the efficacy of words, called for the substitution of conventional language with a cryptic language able to bridge the absolute disparity between the finite and the infinite. In this form language constituted for Trithemius, as it were, the equivalent of a divinely sanctioned form of incantation. Such prayerful incantations, Trithemius concluded, legitimately invoke angelic assistance for achieving proximity to God. It is not by chance that he conceived of these Hebrew-named angels or "secondary intelligences", which he envisaged as ruling over the planetary spheres following a model bequeathed to him by the astrologically conditioned thirteenth century Paduan physician Pietro d'Abano, as also capable of mediating secret messages³⁰.

Conclusion

To summarize: Trithemius, in anticipation of the Faust legend, enlisted magic as a means of moving the mind from the realm of the finite to that of the infi-

³⁰ Regarding D'Abano's vision of planetary history underlying this astrological-angelical construct, see my *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, 134. Dionysius' nine-layer angelic hierarchy, from top to bottom, consists of the Seraphs, Cherubs, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. Trithemius' corresponding seven-layer planetary hierarchy consists of Orifiel in the sphere of Saturn, Anael in the sphere of Venus, Zachariel in the sphere of Jupiter, Raphael in the sphere of Mercury, Samael in the sphere of Mars, Gabriel in the sphere of the moon, and Michael in the sphere of the sun. In addition Trithemius envisaged as operating under the auspices of the above planetary angels 31 regional or district spirits and 24 temporal spirits.

nite. What sharply set Trithemius apart from Faustus was his bequeathal to posterity of a sizeable corpus of occult writings in which he extensively spelled out the elevated purpose of his magic. In his pursuit of the infinite Trithemius openly favored the will over the intellect, a bias conditioning his mystical theology before it was restated as a basic guideline of its derivative magical theology. While freely admitting to its practical application, Trithemius conceived of his magical specialty, cryptography, as at bottom a *spiritual* instrument intended to assist the soul of the adept on the way to Heaven.

Much as St. Augustine had consigned his soul to perpetual restlessness until it rested in God, so did Trithemius. But whereas Augustine had vehemently condemned magic as a demonically sponsored constituent of the material world from which he was endeavoring to escape, Trithemius considered magic a legitimate auxiliary of the soul's drive to transcend the demon-infested material world. Testifying to a truly Faustlike disposition was Trithemius' confession in his *Nephiachus* that 'my love for study and for books has been immoderate', and, still more startlingly that 'what in the world is knowable, I have always desired to know'³¹. In stark contrast to the comparable curiosity of Faustus as related in the *Faustbuch*, in Marlowe, and even in Goethe, however, Trithemius declared his curiosity in things of the arcana to be a divinely rather than diabolically inspired means for charting the way from the finite to the infinite realms.

Focusing on Cusanus, Ernst Cassirer has written: 'The eye, as a sense organ, is neither satiated nor limited by anything visible, for the eye can never have too much of seeing; likewise intellectual vision is never satisfied with a view of the truth. In this thought, perhaps, the basic Faustian attitude of the Renaissance received its clearest philosophical expression and its deepest philosophical justification'. Elaborating on this insight, Cassirer further observes that 'the striving for the infinite, the inability to stop at anything given or attained is neither a fault nor a shortcoming of the mind; rather it is the seal of its divine origin and of its indestructibility'³². Declaring this "Faustian will to the infinite" to have been adumbrated in such Italian precursors of Faustus as Marsilio Ficino and Leonardo da Vinci, Cassirer could just as well, if he had chosen, have referred it to Trithemius. Along similar lines, the Freudian Norman O. Brown's discovery in the legend of Faustus 'the incarnation of our restless discontent'³³ could equally have been referred to the historically documented figure of Trithemius.

³¹ *Nephiachus*, in *Corpus historicum* II, col. 1829.

³² Cassirer, *Individual and the Cosmos*, 69.

³³ Brown, *Life against Death*, 51.

With Cusanus before him to help point the way, Trithemius can be called upon to instruct posterity, along the same "Faustian" terms as employed by Cassirer and Brown, that the will to the infinite, in Augustine's memorable words, 'cannot rest until it rests in Thee'. As poignantly illustrated by Carolus Bovillus, one also expressly indebted to Cusanus but acridly turning that debt against the abbot in a vehement assault on his magic³⁴, Cusanus' instruction in learned ignorance could readily be enlisted in stark opposition to the pursuance of occult studies. Conversely, however, most famously represented in the late Renaissance by Giordano Bruno but also less famously represented earlier by Trithemius, Cusanus' instruction in *docta ignorantia* could just as readily be adapted to a systematic conversion of mystical into magical theology. Trithemius' declaration, earlier quoted, that he alone is able to grasp 'the more secret matters of divine love ... whom the illuminations of love have readied' can be said to exhibit closer affiliation to Bruno's magically infused "heroic frenzies" than to Cusanus' own stilling of the passions through learned ignorance³⁵. While sharing with Cusanus a view of a dark abyss separating man from God intrinsically untraversable by the finitely limited rational faculty, Trithemius did not thereby fall back, as did Cusanus himself, on a resignation to mystical quietism. His adoption of negative theology was but a prelude to a strenuous mystical-magical program through which a soul, following the necessary purgative process, is made capable of transcending all finitely rational comparisons and thereby made worthy of entering into the realm of the divinely infinite where all opposites are at last reconciled.

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³⁴ On the Bovillus-Cusanus connection, encouraged by Bovillus' preceptor Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, see Cassirer, *Individual and Cosmos*, 88-92.

³⁵ Concerning Cusanus' subsequent influence on Bruno, with the will to the infinite again turned to the service of magic, see my *Debate over the Origin of Genius*, esp. 317-320. Cf. Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 247. For a list of criticisms relating to the so-called "Yates thesis", which assigns the Renaissance Hermetic revival exemplified by Bruno a formative role in the making of the scientific revolution, see my *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, 255-256 nt 2.

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Trithemius, Cusanus und der Wille zum Unendlichen: Ein "vor-faustisches" Paradigma

Noch früher als die magische Faustlegende war eine andere im Umlauf, die Figur des Trithemius, eines Zeitgenossen Fausts, der älter als letzterer war. Beiden Lebensgängen liegt das Streben zugrunde, die Beschränkungen der Grenzen der Natur zu überwinden. Bei Faust geschieht das angeblich durch unerlaubte, von Dämonen gelehrte zauberische Verfahren, bei Trithemius hingegen durch okkulte, dennoch zulässige, weil durch Gott geoffenbarte Verfahren. Die faustische und die trithemische Legenden stehen in scharfem Gegensatz zueinander. Was die Motive um Faust betrifft, so verfügen wir nämlich über keine geschriebene Zeugnisse aus Faust's eigener Hand, sondern lediglich über Spiegelbilder dieser Motive in Schriften von anderen, verschiedenartig eingestellten Personen, bei Trithemius hingegen über ein fest dokumentiertes Corpus seiner Schriften. Ein Scheideweg der trithemischen "okkulten" Spekulationen ist auch zu verzeichnen, nämlich eine Wendung von der mystischen zur magischen Theologie. Zweck dieser Studie ist es, zu zeigen, wie das Denken von Nicholas Cusanus die Rolle einer Schlüsselkomponente in der Entwicklung von Trithemius' Denken gespielt hat. Zwar war Cusanus selber jeglichem Versuch ausgesprochen abhold, Magie in die Kirchenrituale einzuführen. Aber die sein Denken färbende "theologia negativa", welche die Beschränkungen der menschlichen Vernunft als Zugangsmittel in die dunklen Geheimnisse Gottes betonte, erwies sich dem "okkulten" Programm von Trithemius als höchst anwendbar. Dadurch wurde nämlich der Magie die Fähigkeit verliehen, die ontologische und epistemologische Kluft zwischen den endlichen und den unendlichen Bereichen zu überbrücken.

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