

Gary Lachman, *The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus: From Ancient Egypt to the Modern World*, Edinburgh, Floris Books, 2011, pp. 247. ISBN 978-086315-798-1 (Paperback). £16.99

Gary Lachman, a former member of rock group Blondie, has written numerous books on Western Esotericism and the occult including: *Jung the Mystic: The Esoteric Dimensions of Carl Jung's Life and Teachings*; *The Dedalus Book of the Occult: A Dark Muse*; and *Politics and the Occult: The Left, the Right, and the Radically Unseen*. He has also written on other esoteric teachers such as Rudolf Steiner, G.I. Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky.

Hermes Trismegistus (Hermes the thrice-great) is an influential figure in the history of Western Esotericism playing an important role in the development of ideas about magic, alchemy and astrology. Many believed him to be a contemporary of Moses who prefigured Christ. Hermes has been written about previously by other scholars of esotericism, such as Antoine Faivre in *The Eternal Hermes* and Garth Fowden in *The Egyptian Hermes*. Lachman's presentation differs from these works in two ways: his scope is grander and maps out Hermes' influence from the ancient period to the modern occult revival, and at the same time suggests that a common theme throughout is the role played by what R.M Bucke called 'cosmic consciousness'.

The bulk of *The Quest for Hermes* is concerned with tracing the history of Hermes Trismegistus' influence from its origins in the ancient world via the Mediaeval and Renaissance periods up to the modern occult revival of the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Lachman describes how the mythical gods Hermes and Thoth became the composite figure of Hermes Trismegistus. These characters were traditionally associated with speech, language, writing, magic, cosmology, and the afterlife. The texts associated with the name of Hermes Trismegistus are known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and were held in high esteem up until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Humanist scholar Isaac Casaubon dated them to late antiquity. These texts are now available in English translation by Salaman et al (1999) as *The Way of Hermes* and some also appear in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* edited by Robinson (1977). Lachman follows the chain of the *prisca theologia*, or Perennial Philosophy, from ancient Egypt through to Marsilio Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in 1463. He describes the way in which the Hermetica were interpreted by key thinkers such as Pico della Mirandola, who synthesised Hermetism with Christian Kabbalah; Giordano Bruno, who attempted to create a heliocentric religious revolution; and Paracelsus, who developed his own form of Natural Philosophy. Lachman then moves on to discuss the Art of Memory, and the last of the renaissance thinkers like Robert Fludd, who wrote of a living cosmology ensouled by the anima Mundi; and the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher who attempted to interpret Egyptian hieroglyphics prior to the discovery of the Rosetta Stone by Champollion.

Throughout this esoteric journey Lachman builds up a thesis, based largely on the ideas of Jean Gebser, suggesting that there has been an evolutionary shift in consciousness from an animistic way of experiencing the world to today's non-animistic perspective. The former is non-logical, acausal, and governed by an holistic, experiential connectivity, whilst the latter is logical, causal, and governed by reductive, conceptual grouping. He suggests that what the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and other esoteric thinkers, were talking about was something similar to what Richard

Maurice Bucke called 'cosmic consciousness'. This experience, says Lachman, is a mode of being in the world that was superseded by the enlightenment and scientific revolution. Experiencing cosmic consciousness leads to 'gnosis, a sudden, direct, and transformative knowledge of reality'. He attempts to relate this thesis to recent findings from neuroscience and suggests that future evolution necessitates a return to this more naturalistic mode of consciousness but synthesised with the benefits of our scientific worldview. Lachman sees this process as an evolutionary spiral and says that the 'Original creation myths, and Ra's defeat of Apophis, can be seen as an account of the rise of self-consciousness out of the darkness of the unconscious'. In fact, he suggests that the famous Emerald Tablet, containing the important esoteric concept 'as above, so below' actually refers to consciousness itself.

Unfortunately, as the book has such a wide historical scope, Lachman doesn't have the space to discuss some of the deeper aspects of his experiential hypothesis. It would have been interesting to see how Lachman deals with the complexities of performing a comparative study of subjective experience across such wide ranging historical, cultural, and geographical periods. The experiential similarities that Lachman finds are: the necessity of a calm, peaceful, quiet state of mind; the feeling of being raised to a great height and given a boundless view; the powerful sense of knowing; and ineffability and joy. However, how confident can we be that the experience referred to in the *Corpus Hermeticum* is actually the same type of experience reported by the Renaissance magi, Bucke, William James, Ouspensky or Swedenborg? Other ideas that Lachman invokes in his thesis may sit more comfortably with holistic thinkers than with a modern scientific audience, for example: that evolution is a teleological process, that consciousness can evolve over such a short time span, and the controversial idea that 'ontology recapitulates phylogeny'.

In summary, this book provides a very readable introduction to the history of Western Esotericism. However, the most exciting aspect of the book is Lachman's thesis that Hermeticism is grounded in a common spiritual or religious experience and that this experience can be grounded in recent neuropsychological research. This fascinating hypothesis invites further and more detailed investigation.

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