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FROM THE VISIONARIES (LES ILLUMINÉS)

TRANSLATED BY PETER VALENTE

REVOLUTIONARY MYSTICISM

When Catholicism decisively triumphed over paganism throughout Europe, and constructed from then on the feudal edifice that survived since the fifteenth century, that is to say, for the space of a thousand years, it could not suppress and destroy everywhere the spirit of ancient customs, or those philosophical ideas that had transformed the pagan principle at the time of Emperor Julian's response to polytheism.¹

It was not enough to have overthrown the last refuge of Greek philosophy and those earlier beliefs, by destroying the Alexandrian Serapeum², and dispersing and persecuting the Neoplatonists³, who had replaced the external worship of the gods with a spiritualist doctrine derived from the mysteries of Eleusis and the Egyptian initiations, the Church still had to maintain its victory in all localities impregnated with ancient superstitions and persecution was not so powerful as time and oblivion for this difficult result.

But if we concern ourselves with France alone, we recognize that the pagan worship has long survived the official conversions effected by the change of religion of the Merovingian kings⁴. The respect of the people for certain consecrated places, for the ruins of the temples and the debris of old statues, forced the Christian priests to build most of the churches on the site of ancient pagan shrines.

1 Julian organized elaborate rituals and attempted to promote Neoplatonism as a rival to Christianity. In general, under Julian's rule, Paganism was relatively tolerated.

2 A serapeum is a temple or other religious institution dedicated to the syncretic Hellenistic-Egyptian god Serapis, which combined aspects of Osiris and Apis in a humanized form that was accepted by the Ptolemaic Greeks of Alexandria.

3 Neoplatonism is a modern term (first coined in 1827) used to designate a tradition of philosophy that arose in the 3rd century AD and continued until shortly after Justinian I closed the Platonic Academy in Athens in AD 529. According to Plotinus, with whose work Nerval would be have been familiar, the three hypostases are The One, The Nous (intelligible world), and the Anima, or Psyche or Soul.

4 Clovis was the first king of the Franks to unify all of the Frankish tribes under a single ruler, having changed the form of leadership from a group of royal chieftains to rule by a single king and in so doing, he ensured that the kingship was passed down to his heirs. He is considered the founder of the Merovingian dynasty, which ruled the Franks for the next two centuries.

Wherever this precaution was neglected, particularly in solitary places, the old worship still continued, as at the abbey of Mount Saint Bernard, where, in the last century, we still honored the god Jou⁵ at the site of the ancient temple of Jupiter. Although the ancient goddess of the Parisians, Isis, had been replaced by St. Geneviève, as protector and patroness, there was still, in the eleventh century, an image of Isis, inadvertently preserved under the porch of Saint-Germain des Prés, devoutly honored by the wives of sailors, which forced the Archbishop of Paris to reduce it to dust, and cast it into the Seine. A statue of the same deity was still seen at Quenpilly, in Brittany, a few years ago, and received the tributes of the population. In an area of Alsace and of Franche-Comté, we have preserved the cult of the Mother goddess, whose figures on bas-reliefs and on several monuments are none other than the great goddesses Cybele, Ceres, and Vesta.

It would take too long to respond to the various superstitions that have assumed a thousand forms, depending on the time period. There were in the eighteenth century, clerics, such as the abbé de Villars⁶, Father Bougeant⁷, Dom Pernetty⁸, and others who argued that the

5 Jou is a shortened form of the name Jupiter.

6 The celebrated abbé de Villars (abbé N. de Mountfaucon de Villars) was a French clergyman born in 1635 in Alet, which is near Toulouse, in the south of France. He came to Paris in 1667, where he wrote a number of books, most of which have been forgotten or lost. He was assassinated in 1673 or (by some accounts) 1675 while on the road from Lyons to his native Languedoc. His book the *Count of Gabalis* (*Comte de Gabalis*) concerns an occultist who explains the mysteries of the world to the author. The *Comte De Gabalis* is considered a Sacred Text for Rosicrucians and spiritual adepts.

7 Guillaume-Hyacinthe Bougeant, known as le Père Bougeant (November 4, 1690, Quimper, Brittany—January 17, 1743, Paris) was a French Jesuit and historian. Bougeant entered the Society of Jesus in 1706, taught classics in the College of Caen and Nevers and lived for a number of years in Paris until his death. His *Philosophical Amusements on the Language of the Animals* (*Amusement philosophique sur le langage des bêtes*), published in 1737, attracted the censure of his superiors, leading to his brief exile from Paris. He is also the author of a theological treatise on the form of consecration of the Eucharist, and of a Catechism divided into three parts: historical, dogmatic, and practical.

8 Antoine-Joseph Pernetty, known as Dom Pernetty (February 23, 1716, Roanne – October, 16, 1796, Avignon) was a French writer. At various times he was a Benedictine, and a librarian of Frederic the Great of Prussia. Together with the Polish Count Tadeusz Grabianka, also influenced by the Christian mysticism of Swedenborg, he founded in 1760 the secret society of the 'Rite hermétique' or Illuminati of Avignon.

gods of antiquity were not demons, such as had been the claim of severe casuists⁹, and in fact were not even damned. They relegated them to the class of elemental spirits, who, not having taken part in the great struggle which had originally taken place between angels and demons, ought not to have been cursed or destroyed by Divine Justice, and had been able to enjoy a certain power over the elements and over men until the arrival of Christ. The abbé de Villars gave evidence for miracles that even the Bible itself acknowledges as having been produced by the god of the Ammonites¹⁰, the Philistines¹¹, or others, for the benefit of their people, and that often fulfilled the prophecies of the spirits of Typhon¹². Among these, he placed the oracles of the Sibyls, which were favorable to Christ, and the last oracles of the Apollo at Delphi, which were cited by the Church Fathers as proof of the mission of the Son of man.

According to this system, the entire ancient hierarchy of pagan gods would have found its place in the thousand attributions that Catholicism assigned to the inferior functions, to be carried out in matter and space, and would have become what has been called the spirits or genii, which are divided into four classes, according to the number of elements: Sylphs for air, Salamanders for fire, Ondines for water and the Gnomes for Earth.

9 Casuistry is a method that uses reasoning to solve moral problems by extracting or extending theoretical rules from particular instances and applying these rules to new situations. Casuistry dates from Aristotle (384–322 BC), yet the high point of casuistry was from 1550 to 1650, when the Society of Jesus used this case-based reasoning, particularly in administering the Sacrament of Penance (or “confession”). The term casuistry quickly became pejorative after Blaise Pascal’s attack on the misuse of casuistry. In *The Provincial Letters (Les Provinciales)* (1656–7) he scolded the Jesuits for using casuistic reasoning during confession to appease wealthy Church donors, while punishing poor penitents.

10 There are numerous Canaanite gods usually associated with Moloch, the god associated with child sacrifice. One of these, Malkam, which signifies “great king,” is the god of the Ammonites and Phoenicians.

11 In the Hebrew Bible, Dagon, is referred to as the national god of the Philistines. They attributed their victories in war to him and offered sacrifices. This suggests that he played a part in doctrines about death and the afterlife. Usually portrayed as half fish and half human, Dagon is also seen as a god of agriculture.

12 Typhon was traditionally identified with the Egyptian Set, who was also known to the Greeks as Typhon. In the Orphic tradition, just as Set is responsible for the murder of Osiris, Typhon leads the Titans when they attack and kill Dionysus, who also became identified with the earlier Osiris.

With regard to the question of this one detail, there arose between the abbé de Villars and Father Bougeant, a Jesuit, a split that has long occupied the greatest minds of the last century. The latter was strongly opposed to the transformation of the ancient gods into elemental genii, and claimed, furthermore, that they could not be destroyed, since they had the quality of pure spirits, and since they were intended to provide animals with souls, which were renewed in passing from one body to the other, according to their affinities. In this system, the gods animated useful and beneficial beasts and the demons ferocious and impure beasts. Thereupon, the good Father Bougeant cited the opinion of the Egyptians concerning the gods and that of the Gospel concerning the demons. These arguments could be exposed in full during the eighteenth century without there being accusations of heresy.

It is quite clear that these were only inferior deities, such as fauns, Zephyrs, Nereids, Oreads¹³, Satyrs, Cyclops, etc. As for the gods and demigods, they were supposed to have departed from the earth, it being too dangerous, after the establishment of the absolute reign of Christ, and to have been relegated to the stars, just as in the Middle Ages, when we relegated a rebellious prince, after his submission, either to the city or to a place of exile. This view prevailed, particularly during the Middle Ages, among the most celebrated cabalists, and especially among astrologers, alchemists and physicians. This explains most of the conspiracies concerning astral invocations, horoscopes, talismans, medications or consecrated substances, operations related to certain gestures, or the conjunction of planets. It is enough to open a book on the occult sciences for clear evidence of this.

13 In Greek mythology, an Oread or Orestiad was a type of nymph that lived in mountains, valleys, and ravines. They were associated with Artemis, since the goddess, when she went out hunting, preferred mountains and rocky precipices.

PRECURSORS

If one were to give a full explanation of the doctrines that are outlined above, then one would understand the reasons why, alongside the teachings of the Orthodox Church, these ideas have grown continuously into a school, half religious and half philosophical, no doubt fertile in heresies, yet often accepted or tolerated by the Catholic clergy, and why it maintained a certain air of mysticism and supernaturalism, which is necessary for dreamy and delicate imaginations, like those populations more disposed than others to spiritualist ideas.

The converted Jews were the first who attempted, around the eleventh century, to infuse Catholicism with some of the assumptions that were based on a certain interpretation of the Bible, going as far back as the doctrines of the Essenes and the Gnostics.

It is from this time that the word cabal often comes up in theological discussions. There it mixes naturally with such things as the Platonic forms of the Alexandrian school, the ideas of which were already reproduced in the doctrines of the Church Fathers.

Christianity's prolonged contact with the East, during the Crusades, brought over another large number of similar ideas which, moreover, found themselves easily supported by the local traditions and superstitions of the European nations.

The Templars were among those Crusaders who endeavored to achieve the broadest possible alliance between these Eastern ideas and those of Roman Christianity.

In the desire to establish a link between their order and the Syrian people they were responsible for governing, they laid the foundations for a new kind of doctrine that was engaged with all the religions practiced by the Levantines, without abandoning in essence the Catholic synthesis, but by often making it bend to the requirements of their position.

These were the foundations of Freemasonry, which were connected to similar institutions established by various sects of Muslims and which still survive persecution, especially in the Hauran, in Lebanon and in Kurdistan.

The strangest and most exaggerated phenomenon of these Eastern associations was the

famous Order of the Assassins. The nation of the Druze¹⁴ and that of the Ansari¹⁵ are the ones today who have guarded the last remnants of it.

The Knights Templar were soon accused of having established one of the most formidable heresies that Christianity had ever witnessed. Persecuted and finally destroyed in all the European countries, through the combined efforts of the papacy and the monarchies, they had on their side the intelligent classes and the many distinguished minds who were against the abuses of the feudal lords; they were what we would call today the Opposition.

From their ashes scattered to the wind there was born a mystical and philosophical institution which greatly influenced that first moral and religious revolution, that for the people of the North was called the Reformation, and for those in the South of France La Philosophie.¹⁶

These reforms were still, moreover, concerned with the salvation of Christianity as a religion; Occultism, however, gradually became its enemy, and, aiming especially at people who remained Catholic, soon established clear divisions, gulfs between unbelievers and believers.

However, there are many who are not satisfied with pure materialism, but who, without rejecting the religious tradition, prefer maintaining towards it a certain freedom of discussion and interpretation. It was they who founded the first Masonic societies, which soon gave shape to the popular corporations and what are still today called trade guilds.

The Masonic order established its highest institutions in Scotland, and it was as a result of the relations of France with this country, from the time of Marie Stuart to Louis XIV, that

14 The Druze are an esoteric and ethno-religious faith that incorporates aspects of Ismailism, Judaism, Christianity, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Pythagoreanism, Hinduism, and other philosophies and beliefs. From this they created a secretive theology. They are known to give esoteric interpretations of religious scriptures.

15 The Ansari are a people residing in the mountainous regions near Antioch, and in other places in Northern Syria. Like the Druze, their religious rites are based on the occult mysteries of initiation. The incredible and semi-fabulous story of their origin is beyond the scope of a simple footnote.

16 "La Philosophie" refers to the Knights Templar and their system of Occultism. It also refers to the philosopher's stone of alchemy. I have kept the original French in this case since the full implications of Nerval's use of the word here are beyond the scope of a simple footnote.

we witnessed the establishment of strong footholds in our own mystical institutions which prepared us for the Rosicrucians.

Meanwhile, Italy had seen the establishment, beginning in the sixteenth century, of a long series of fearless thinkers, among whom were Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Meursius¹⁷, Nicolas of Cusa, Jordano Bruno and other great minds favored by the tolerance of the Medici, and who are sometimes called the Neoplatonists of Florence.

The capture of Constantinople, exiling many illustrious scholars who were then welcomed in Italy, also exercised a great influence on that philosophical movement which brought back the ideas of the Alexandrians, and led to the renewal of the study of Plotinus, Proclus, Porphyry, and Ptolemy, those first opponents of nascent Catholicism.

It should be noted here that the most learned physicians and naturalists of the Middle Ages, such as Paracelsus, Albert the Great, Jerome Cardan¹⁸, Roger Bacon and others, were more or less attached to these doctrines, which gave a new formula to what one called the occult, that is to say, astrology, cabala, palmistry, alchemy, physiognomy, etc.

It was from these various elements and partly from the Hebrew science, that spread more freely from the time of the Renaissance, that was formed the various mystical schools we saw develop in the late seventeenth century.

First the Rosicrucians, whose indiscreet disciple was the abbé de Villars, who later, it is alleged, was a victim.

17 Johannes Meursius (van Meurs) (February 9, 1579, Loosduinen, near the Hague – September 20, 1639, Sorø), was a Dutch classical scholar and antiquarian.

18 Gerolamo (or Girolamo, or Geronimo) Cardano (September, 24, 1501 – 21 September 21, 1576) was an Italian Renaissance mathematician, physician, astrologer, philosopher and gambler. He wrote more than 200 works on medicine, mathematics, physics, philosophy, religion, and music. His gambling led him to formulate elementary rules in probability, making him one of the founders of the field. In France, he was called Jerome.

Then Convulsionaries¹⁹ and certain sects of Jansenism; by 1770, the Martinists²⁰, Swedenborgians, and finally the Order of the Illuminati, whose doctrine, first established in Germany by Weisshaupt, soon spread to France, where it merged with the Masonic institution.

19 The Convulsionaries (Convulsionnaires) were a group of 18th-century French religious pilgrims who exhibited convulsions and later constituted a religious sect and a political movement.

20 Martinism is a form of Christian mysticism and esoteric Christianity concerned with the fall of the first man, his state of extreme despair and distance from his divine source, and the process of his return, called “Reintegration” or “Illumination.”