

**OCCULT PHILOSOPHY AND THE PHILOSOPHY
OF LANGUAGE IN RENAISSANCE EUROPE AND
ELISABETHAN ENGLAND***

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When one thinks of language in Renaissance Europe or Elisabethan England, from the 15th-16th centuries to early 17th century, one must obviously consider that Latin was steadily being surpassed by every vernacular local language in all fields of social, cultural and religious life, and therefore was losing its grasp on the universal appeal it had long kept within the most important circles of political, judicious and intellectual circles of western societies. In Northern countries, moreover, Protestant Reformation led the way to most significant changes in the former pattern of relationships between the individual and the divine, as far as social and religious principles and responsibilities were concerned, for it produced remarkable translations of the sacred texts, namely the Bible, thus introducing the use of vernacular languages in all religious practices, both public services and home prayers.

Apart from that, two main levels of understanding and approaching language have to be considered: the one that takes language as a semiotic system of some kind, with specific features and purposes; the other that views language mainly as a practice, a 'use'. In both levels language is regarded as a possible object of study and teaching. The first approach is

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theoretical, philosophic, the second is pragmatic. Theories or philosophies of language of Renaissance Europe, however, very often lead their analyses on linguistic data to concepts and principles that curiously mingle with some ancient occultist views of natural philosophy, in deep connection to alchemic traditions, specially in what regards the close relationship of Language and Nature¹. In fact, within the rational cosmology dominated by logic that Renaissance somehow adjusted and rebuilt from a certain medieval order, language was seen as part of the universal 'mathesis' — as Leibniz, would name it, further on into the 17th and early 18th century. In other words, language was believed to have a logical structure of its own and to consist of a system of signs with identical — in terms of analogical — functions and values as mathematical and logical signs. All semantics were founded upon that kind of *ratio* and that, once applied to the knowledge of language, it extended both to the knowledge of the world and to its fully adequate representation and communication.

Nervertheless, as already mentioned above, one cannot forget the thin edge of merging concepts and practices that at this time hardly distinguished philosophy, science and alchemy. All projects were to proceed along separate paths from the 18th century onwards, but that wasn't the case yet, and the restrictions made to natural science and philosophy at this time came above all from suspicions of witchcraft on religious and moral grounds and had little or nothing to do with scientific or non-scientific issues.

Now, the pragmatic level of language that observes its 'use'. To know and to teach language at a pragmatic level meant at this time to develop efficient methods both of studding and teaching it. Eventually, the whole didactic process involved turned out to be in intimate consonance with the actual conditions of a world in full economic growth, greatly due to the maritime expansion of countries like Portugal, England and Holland, pushing the way to a thorough reevaluation of medieval speculations on language backed up by a closer approach to Greco-Roman linguistic theories. Erasmus was a great propulsor of this didactic view on language and set himself the task of producing many teaching manuals — for Latin — in the form of practical dialogues: *Coloquia*. It was Erasmus who actually set out the basis for the empirical-pragmatical conception of language which defended use and formal structures against rational thought in the study of language. Grammar was therefore based almost strictly

¹ See J. A. Mourão, «O Discurso Alquímico: Um Imanentismo Transcendente?», in *Discursos e Práticas Alquímicas*, ed. J. A. Mourão *et alii*, Lisboa, Hugin, 2001, pp. 115-125.

upon observation of facts and less theory (G. Valla, Lebrixa). Obviously, all these paedagogical methods included exhaustive tables, taxinomies and rules, so that simplifications in grammar meant a real formalism that would soon be apparent throughout the 15th and 16th centuries in the successive studies on morphology and then syntaxe, opening the way to the 17th century grammar of Port-Royal.

Impressive examples of these pragmatic views on language in Renaissance Europe can be pointed out in the work of Jacques Dubois or Sylvius: *Isagoge — Grammatica Latino-Gallica*, is clearly a grammar, as its title indicates, where Latin grammatico-morphological categories are transferred to French ones, taking the Aristotelic *Organon* as his fundament. Nevertheless declension in French is maintained, preserving the Latin model, while seeking, however, the functional help of prepositions and articles. In England, in 1530, and following the grammatical tradition of authors like Linacre, Erasmus and Gaza, Palsgrave publishes his study on French linguistic structures, *L'esclaircissement de la langue françoise*. J. C. Scaliger in *De causis linguæ latinæ* (1540) is another inevitable reference. Again based upon Latin, this grammar is a neat example of extreme linguistic rigour as it sets out the task of the grammarist to find out the logical causes of linguistic organization that will enable him to systematize them². Like all humanists of his time, Scaliger relies on facts and data and takes the actual use of language as his main study concern. He does not neglect reason, however, for he regards it as the underlying principle to all facts. Ratio preceeds and commands linguistic form and the word is seen as the sign of all ideas that are in the soul — further on Descartes will refer to innate ideas — while grammar is the science that enables one to talk according to the *use*³. In Scaliger we clearly see philosophy and logic reunited to support the empirical study and teaching of language which will in turn give way to the conception of grammar not as an art but as a science. It thus differs from rhetoric and from hermeneutics.

One word about rhetoric. Since its beginnings in ancient Greece, apart from its judicial roots, its technical usage in oratorical speeches and its philosophical appeal, rhetoric has always been close to poetics, and therefore to literary practices. Aristotle is the first to give a theoretical

² See J. Kristeva, *Le langage, cet inconnu*, Paris, Seuil, 1969, ch. XII.

³ See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations I* (1929-49) — for the idea of *use* in the sense it will emphasise the different plans logic can operate and be understood; instead of one common ground for one logical system.

definition and approach to rhetoric as he places it between dialectics — the science of reasoning — and grammar — the science of language. Throughout the Renaissance, rhetoric was regarded as an ingenious means to render originality in ornament, sublimity and strength to poetical language, which was felt to have a kind of life of its own, very similar to the emotional life of men and women. It was into poetical language that poets (in the all-embracing sense poetry had at that time) felt that they could more freely transfer all their sensual, fleshly and intellectual growth and fulfillment. Rabelais expressed this wholeness of poetical language and feeling in his praise of laughter and Carnival, as well as in his sensual reverence to all gastronomic pleasures. In Shakespeare, poetical language — combining tragedy and tears with comedy and laughter, truth with parody, sublimity with obscenity — is both a means and an end to reach beauty and psychological insight within the verse itself. Erasmus praised “*Folly*” in a poetical and philosophical text where the excess, the hyperbole, the limitless measure of the fool breaks down with all common senses of the reasonable man. This poetics of rhetoric, if you may say so, is a clear symptom that language was beginning to be felt and observed in its complex way of functioning, that it was eager to surpass former codes and barriers as proposed by medieval scholastic.

It is also obvious that with the extraordinary development of vernacular languages ever more human activities were being approached from a national standpoint. Nevertheless, alchemy, natural philosophy, magic, were so to say universal “sciences” which used a kind international discourse — somehow a “professional jargon” — to account for their specific practices. Italy, France and Germany, in continental Europe, as well as England, just across the Channel, were certainly the main centers of development both of alchemy and occult philosophy. In Italy, more precisely in Florence, names like Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and later Giordano Bruno, are most influent references. In France, Paris, there was Germain de Ganay, whereas in Germany, in Sponheim and later Würzburg, there were the brilliant as well as controversial alchemists and physicians such as Johannes Trithemius, Henry Cornellius Agrippa, and most proeminently Paracelsus. Medieval England had already known Roger Bacon, Renaissance had Colet and by the time Elisabeth came to the throne John Dee was brought to his peak of fame and influence. Therefore, linguistic barriers imposed by the various national languages all over Europe were often meaningless to obstruct the free of occult speculation. The barriers between Greek (e.g. in the texts conveying the Mysteries of Eleusis, in Pitagoric texts, or also often in the texts of the hermetic tradition), Arabic (Picatrix) and Hebrew (Cabala) — as well as Latin, had been long

abolished by medieval alchemists and occultist philosophers. Around 1600, due to Lutheran orthodoxy, Latin mediation was already out of the way and esoteric writings passed directly from one European vernacular language to another.

I'll return to the sense of universal language based on logic and philosophy, so as to specify the kind of language occultist philosophers and scientists, alchemists and all sorts of *magi* and polymaths were pursuing. Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and later on Goethe's *Faust*, are perhaps the most famous examples of these personalities literature has produced. There is clear evidence that in Renaissance there was a tight international network of these individuals — all of them highly learned humanists — who paid visits to each others, exchanged correspondence, made public lectures and written expositions, both in manuscript and in print. Most of these physicists, alchemists, natural philosophers came to express eventually a general disappointment in magic and alchemy, mainly due to the overwhelming pressure of orthodoxy in religious matters and the weight of Church and Pope sanctions.

But this question can yet be seen from another angle: religious mysticism and natural philosophy had in common a certain directness and stunning experience of the divine, or in broader terms, of the supernatural, as well as the use of a symbolic language. However, religious mysticism, uncomfortable though to Church orthodoxy, could and did spread to a larger public because the large-scale popular piety was eager to worship the handful of extraordinary individuals (saints, holy people, with supernatural virtues) they believed to be mystics and to make miracles specially after their death.

On the opposite, magic descending to the popular level would only result in superstition or worse and important differences, though not always credible, were established and understood between the *magi*, astrologers and the common witches or sorcerers. The symbolic language of magic and of alchemy — rich and evocative only for a few highly literate and learned scholars — was a complete mystery to a broader popular understanding as it was intentionally obscure. Because it was only accessible to a few initiate, who could dominate both its code and practice, magic as well as alchemy remained esoteric and was dreaded by the common people.

The great poets, however, understood this gap between the *magus* and the rest of humanity as the tragic flaw of occult sciences leading their practitioners to final damnation or repudiation of the occultist path. Marlowe's Faustus declares: «Ill burne my books», apparently too late⁴; Shakespeare's Prospero also lays down his staff and buries his books,

when returning from his exile in the occult (*The Tempest*, V: 50-56). Goethe's Faust, already aged, refuses to use magical powers to ban the spirit of Care, and by that he proclaims the superiority of 'nature', of ordinary life in the complex and imperfect world of everyone's reality.

This feature of the intellectual biographies of the *magi* became a sort of literary commonplace and has since constituted an intrinsic feature of the myth of the *magus*. For example, Shakespeare's Prosperus, in *The Tempest*, shares important resemblances to Queen Elisabeth's astrologer and polymath, John Dee, who had a holistic view of all science and magic as one. Dee was raised Catholic but adopted Protestantism, his beliefs might be called today as Christian scientist, although he used ritual magic as side-help for his work. Everything meant for him a search for knowledge and he had in fact a prodigious scientific output accompanying his occult experiments. In 1556, in his scientific zeal to keep in safe what he considered invaluable knowledge, Dee actually wrote to Queen Mary, Elisabeth's most catholic elder sister, imploring that ancient writings and monuments be carefully preserved. Yet, like many other *magi* or alchemists in continental Europe, most of them monks in their monasteries, he had to couch his letter in such a way that he was not accused of being promoting the survival of heretical stuff, Protestant writings also included. Elisabeth, not only asked Dee to make her sister's and her own horoscope but also, already as Queen, employed Dee to counter witchcraft used against her; she backed and protected him from court and popular suspicion and even attack, and he was also believed to work for her as a spy, in and outside the country — the same applying to Christopher Marlowe. John Dee had the assistance of a country psychic and sayer, Edward Kelley, who would follow him in his innumerable travels abroad. Kelley was supposed to communicate with numerous Angels who transmitted prophecies through him, while they also dictated a new language, which Dee called 'Enochian'. This was a coherent and consistent system, which bore no relation with other known tongues and which the semi-illiterate Kelley could never make up. This phenomenon, which can be referred to as an instance of gossolalia, will be observed and studied by Saussure in his early research of ancient and primordial languages, within the scope of comparative linguistics⁵.

⁴ *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, 1476. See *The Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. by F. C. Tucker, Clarendon, OUP, 1969, p. 194.

⁵ In the late years of the 19th century, Saussure observed in Switzerland a certain young 'psychic', Mlle Hélène Smith (pseudonym), known to fall in transe and talk a strange

Back to John Dee and his scribe assistant Kelley, there was no actual conflict at the time between being a devout early modern Christian and the actual seeing of angels; these were so firmly believed that they were seen by their devout: Blake refers experiences of the kind when he was just four years old. The problem was that the use of a complex and definitely un-Christian magical procedure — rituals including the pronunciation of magical words in certain formulas — to summon angels could also be used to summon demons and the criteria to distinguish angels from demons were not that accurate. Most obviously, Dr. Faustus and Faust knew they were summoning daemonic spirits and they knew the costs for their own souls that pact would mean in the end where there'd be no return. Dee's assistant, Kelley, moreover, is reported to have had some unfortunate surprises in the course of his angel summoning! Also, it was commonly held at the time that the Spanish Armada's defeat was due to Dee's magic intervention, which provoked the well known sudden storm and change of winds favourable to the English. It is also common knowledge that by that time, seamen in general, such as mariners, explorers, pirates, used to 'buy' winds from witches or sorcerers, to favour them in their enterprises. Whether they succeeded or not it is another question.

Nevertheless, in Renaissance Europe, science, alchemy, occult philosophy, ritual magic, all had in common that, apart from our actual language, spoken in everyday use, there was a philosophical universal language which was believed to be primordial, very akin to the hidden and forgotten language of nature, and created — or discovered — by isolated, inspired, individuals or small groups (sects) of believers, devotees, disciples or initiates. Primordial languages were only produced in a state of revelation apart from the social and the historical process, as they were seen as spontaneous, intuitive, unconscious or impulsive lexical utterances. They were presented as truthful languages as they were supposed to reconstruct the primitive Adamic language, common to all human beings before Babel, and therefore, they were unequivocal, adequate in transmitting the essential knowledge of reality. Their main purpose was not to uncover the hidden mysteries of nature, because it would be too dangerous, like alchemists knew, neither was it meant to make universal communication any easier but rather to earn the grace (or gift) of knowledge.

coherent language of which she had no former knowledge. See Todorov, *Théories du Symbole*, Paris, Seuil, 1977, 323 pp.

Here are some examples of primordial languages. First of all the so called *Adamic language*. It is a Christian representation of the original language traversing all medieval theological thought into Renaissance due to the interest Adam originated as primordial figure and human archetype. The Adamic language is transparent, each name is the translation — into linguistic material — of the ideal form of the named object, which Adam knew in perfection. Also, by the analogy between the creative character of the Divine Word (Genesis I, John, I. 1-3) and Adam's naming process (Genesis II. 19-20), the Adamic language was a mode of appropriation, by which Adam repeated the divine act of creation through the Word. That is why he was consecrated king and master of all creatures. The conception of the Adamic language in these terms agrees with a conception of human languages as essentially nomenclatures, a list of names or labels that establishes a one-to-one correspondence between each word and each object of all human experience. That accounts for the 'naturalness' of the constitution of the name itself, and for the kind of semantics involved: each name's meaning derives not from its relationship to other names (in a system) but from its direct correspondence to the signified reality⁶. It is in this sense that Paracelsus refers to the magical powers of metals that have characters, letters, signs inscribed on them, without any interference of devilish works. (*Opera Omnia*: 1603, 6 vols, 12t).

Second comes *glossolalia* as the paradigm of a primal language which is a spontaneous phonic and lexical production, exterior and marginal to existing languages. It was believed to be *The Language*, not one among many others, because of its purity and transparency. The one who pronounces it — quite unconsciously — is believed to be the mouthpiece of supernatural, divine, or spiritual forces, directly revealing thought and things in their essential truth. St. Hildegard of Bingen, back in the 11th-12th centuries is usually pointed out as a remarkable example. Glossolalia is actually a very ancient phenomenon which seems to have been associated with shamanism, witchcraft, having been used in Graeco-Roman culture in oracular divination, and playing also an important role in early Christianity.

Finally there is *xenoglossalia* or the miraculous knowledge, by an illuminated believer, of an existing language that he or she didn't know

⁶ See Todorov: «(...) que les choses prennent la place des signes et que l'écart introduit par le signe entre l'homme et le monde est enfin réduit.», in «Le sens des sons», *Poétique*, 11, pp. 446-462.

or learn, but somehow is able to speak. The 'pentecostal miracle' referred to in the Acts of the Apostles (II: 3, 4) gives a thorough account of the gift of tongues that St. Paul so evidently praises as one of the seven carismas given to men by the holy grace of God. The gift of tongues is widely legitimated by the Church throughout the Middle Ages, being St Anthony of Lisbon (or Padua) and St Francis of Assisi fully acknowledged in their saintly gift. Here stand the origins of the Pentecostal Church, although, later on, Church and Inquisition would condemn xenoglossalia and xenoglosists for heresy.

Universal or philosophical languages stand as opposite to primordial languages as described above, because they are artificial linguistic constructions made by philosophers, aiming at a universal communication and understanding of the underlying logic of the world. Ramón Lull's *Ars Magna*, in the 13th century, is perhaps one of the earliest examples of a universal language as a system of symbolic notation and combinatory diagrams that was meant to discover and demonstrate the total sum of truths to which human knowledge might aspire, through a limited set of simple terms. Lull conceives a tree of science as an integrative model of organization of knowledge, aspiring to reach a larger project which would reunite all disciplines in a single universal science. He postulates the original co-naturalness between thought and being, whose articulations and deep structure could be directly observed. Lull's *Ars Magna* is a remote and prestigious proposal for the mechanization of logical operations that grammar — in its pragmatic observation of languages — was also trying to develop. His 'combinatory art' of a scientific language was greatly influential not only to the Renaissance scientist or alchemist, *magus*, or linguist, but throughout 17th century his learning largely sustained the development of the encyclopaedic Lullism of J. Henrich Alsted or Sebastian Izquierdo, being also visible in Kircher and even later in Leibniz. In the latter's philosophy of language, which would in great part contribute to the most important changes in 18th century poetics, one cannot abstract Böhme's thoughts on primordial and philosophic languages together with Lull's 'ars combinatoria'⁷. The following quotation is an extract of Lull's occultist treatise, *La Clavicula* or *La Llave (The Key)*, where some of the

⁷ I have already written elsewhere on these specific themes, e.g., 'Linguagem e Natureza no Pensamento de Jakob Böhme' in *Revista da Faculdade de Letras do Porto — Línguas e Literaturas*, XIX, Porto, 2002, pp. 445-458 [-Language and Nature in Jakob Böhme's Thought-]; 'Filosofia da Linguagem do Século XVIII', *ibid.*, XVI, Porto, 1999, pp. 59-67 [-Philosophy of Language in the 18th Century-].

most central concepts of the philosopher's thought on the secrets and mysteries of nature and the language, symbols, objects and procedures that may reveal them to the one who knows the 'art', only by God's mercy and grace⁸:

«... I've written many treatises and very extensive ones, but divided and obscure, as one can see in the testament, where I talk about the principles of nature and all that is related to the Art; but the text has been submitted to the weight of philosophy. The same happens with my book *Of the Philosopher's Mercury* and with all my works, where art is treated in an incomplete way, as I always hide the main secret. In fact, without that secret no one can enter the philosophers' mines and make something useful, therefore, and with the help of the Almighty, who revealed the great Work to me, I'll talk here about Art without any fiction. But beware not to reveal this secret to the evil ones, don't communicate it but to your intimate friends, although you should not reveal it to anyone, because it is a gift of God who gave it free to the one He finds right. He that possesses it has an eternal treasure.» (*La Clavicula — La Llave*)

⁸The same ideas around the main concept of 'the key' are recurrent in former treatises, being perhaps the most obvious, the *Corpus Hermeticus (La Clave)*, and the *Twelve Keys of Philosophy*, by Basilio Valentin. See Hermes Trimegisto, *Tres Tratados: Poimandres, La Llave, Asclepios*, trad. del griego, prólogo y notas de Francisco de P. Saramanch, Buenos Aires, Aguilar, 1966. See Victor, Zalbidea *et alii* (eds.), *Alquimia y Ocultismo*, Barcelona, Barral, 1972. The above quotation was extracted (and translated to English by myself) from Lull's text *La Clavicula* as edited by Zalbidea, *Op. cit.*, p. 163ss. See also: Pierre, Laszlo *Qu'est-ce que l'alchimie?*, Paris Hachette Livre, 1996.