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TI The search for ancient wisdom in early modern Europe: Reuchlin and the late ancient esoteric paradigm (Establishing a context for a post-Plotinian reading of 'De Arte Cabalistica')

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5824

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The Search for Ancient Wisdom in Early Modern Europe: Reuchlin and the Late Ancient Esoteric Paradigm

This article offers a contextualized interpretation of the *De arte cabalistica*, a treatise written in 1517 by Johannes Reuchlin, the German political figure, humanist, Hebraist, and “Pythagorean” Kabbalist. The study begins by establishing a context for reading the treatise and sketches a late ancient mentality, termed the “post-Plotinian moment”, of which a number of Renaissance thinkers, Reuchlin included, partook. Next the piece moves to Christian Kabbalism and Reuchlin’s place within that movement. Finally, there is a fivefold analysis of the *De arte cabalistica* framed around the issues of allegoresis, soteriology, the efficacy of language, the gulf between humanity and divinity, and information transfer.

“O quanta est haec altitudo, quanta profunditas, quae sola fide apprehenditur” [Oh how great is the height, how great the depth, of that which is understood by faith alone]. So wrote Johannes Reuchlin in March 1517, in the *De arte cabalistica*, a treatise dedicated humbly to Pope Leo X.¹ He had been suffering at the hands of slanderers, and hoped, he wrote in the treatise’s afterword, that Leo

1. On Reuchlin see L. Geiger, *Johann Reuchlin, sein Leben und seine Werke* (Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot, 1871; repr. Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1964); L. Geiger, ed., *Johann Reuchlins Briefwechsel*, Bibliothek des litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, 126 (Tübingen: Litterarischer Verein, 1875; repr. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1962); Johannes Reuchlin, *Briefwechsel*, band I, 1477–1505, Unter Mitwirkung von Stefan Rhein, bearbeitet von Matthias Dall’Asta und Gerald Dörner (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1999); M. Brod, *Johannes Reuchlin und sein Kampf* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965); the studies in M. Krebs, ed., *Johannes Reuchlin, 1455–1522: Festgabe seiner Vaterstadt Pforzheim* (Pforzheim: Im Selbstverlag der Stadt, 1955); and S. Rhein, “Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522). Ein deutscher ‘uomo universale,’” in P. Gerhard Schmidt, *Humanismus im Deutschen Südwesten: Biographische Profile* (Sigmaringen: J. Thorbecke, 1993), 59–75. For Reuchlin and his ties to Renaissance occultism, see C. Zika, *Reuchlin und die okkulte Tradition der Renaissance*, Pforzheimer Reuchlinschriften, 6 (Sigmaringen: J. Thorbecke, 1998). The *De arte cabalistica* (hereafter cited as *DAC*) was printed in 1517 in Hagenau; the standard modern version is a reprint contained in Johannes Reuchlin, *De verbo mirifico* (1494). *De arte cabalistica* (1517) (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1964); for this study I have used the reprint in Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah / De arte cabalistica*, tr. Martin and Sarah Goodman, with introductions by M. Idel and G. Lloyd Jones (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993). The quotation is from Oiii recto. Throughout, the translations are my own, though I have used and benefited from those of Martin and Sarah Goodman. For a general bibliographical study of Reuchlin’s works, see J. Benzinger, *Bibliographie der*

would remember him well and understand that Reuchlin was the first to translate Greek into German, and the first to open up the mysteries of Hebrew to the Latins. In the *De arte cabalistica*, Reuchlin makes a particular set of syncretistic manoeuvres, which leads him to equate the Kabbalah with Pythagoreanism, a comparison which had been first suggested by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (with whom Reuchlin had come into contact in 1490) in his *Heptaplus*.²

In this paper I would like to offer a contextualized examination of Reuchlin's *De arte cabalistica*. My main contention will be that Reuchlin, in writing this work, was tapping into a set of late ancient, esoteric post-Plotinian concerns resurrected in the Renaissance, which go beyond texts and citation and have to do as much with mentalities and approaches to ritual as they do with more traditional historico-philosophical questions. The "Christian Kabbalah," which I shall discuss below, meshed especially well with these concerns and provided a new dimension for thinkers such as Reuchlin to flesh out the possibilities inherent in the intrinsically flexible, yet fundamentally recognizable form of discourse to which the late ancient mentality gave rise. In what follows I shall sketch the fundamentals of this late ancient approach and its manifestation in late fifteenth-century Florence. Thereafter, I turn to Christian Kabbalism and Reuchlin's place within the movement. Finally, I shall frame my discussion of Reuchlin's *De arte cabalistica* around five separate concerns which reflect this approach, to be enumerated below.

It is important to emphasize that this study presents no new specific information on Reuchlin. Rather, the intention is to read him in a new way. In his recent major work, *Thinking with Demons*, Stuart Clark directly confronts problems raised by philosophers of language.³ In studying the thought of an intellectual, are we tapping into anything "real"? Or are we studying the words alone, divorced from any possible significance other than that which we impose on them? He goes beyond this traditional problem of philosophical realism (whose long shadow looms over debates surrounding critical theory and its applicability to historical writing) by suggesting that the task for the intellectual historian is to recreate *internal* coherences and systems of meaning in the intellectual life of the past. In this way, Clark transcends the problems regarding the correspondence theory of truth that sometimes plague

Schriften Johannes Reuchlin im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert (Bad Bocklet: W. Krieg, 1955); see there, 28–30, for the printing history of the *De arte cabalistica*. I would like to thank Salvatore Camporeale and this journal's readers for their very helpful criticisms and suggestions.

2. C. Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); L. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 67. For Pico's Hebrew sources see the contributions of Fabrizio Lelli *et al.* in *Pico, Poliziano e l'Umanesimo di fine Quattrocento*, ed. P. Viti (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 159–223. On Reuchlin and Pico, see W. Beierwaltes, "Reuchlin und Pico della Mirandola," *Tijdschrift voor filosofie* 66 (1994): 313–36; Zika, *Reuchlin und die okkulte Tradition*, 172–6. Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples also saw a fundamental similarity between Pythagorean number theory and the practice of Kabbalah, which he expressed in his never-printed *De magia naturali*. See B. P. Copenhaver, "Lefèvre d'Étaples, Symphorien Champier, and the Secret Names of God," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 40 (1977): 189–211.

3. S. Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

intellectual history, showing well how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century intellectuals who thought and wrote about witchcraft literally “thought with demons,” that is, how and why they actually incorporated them into their world view. Along the same metatheoretical lines, I intend here to offer a recreation of an internally consistent mentality reflected in post-Plotinian Platonism that was resurrected, modified, and internalized by a number of European thinkers from the end of the fifteenth century onward.

The “Post-Plotinian Moment”: Late Ancient Platonism and the Florentine Renaissance

Plotinus (AD 204–270) had deprecated the value of religious ritual in conjunction with the philosophical life, though he did not deny that it could be efficacious for non-philosophers who were trying to liberate themselves from the material world.⁴ Partially, this was because he saw matter as anti-substantial and evil; since many aspects of religious ritual, especially theurgic ritual, involved using material things, he viewed these rituals as on a lesser plane than pure contemplation. It was by contemplation alone that true philosophers could free their souls from the corporeal matter in which they were imprisoned and, ultimately, engage in *henosis*, the process of union with the One: “We must fly from here and separate ourselves from what has been added to us, and not be a composite, an ensouled body.”⁵ Partially, too, Plotinus’ attitudes toward ritual were shaped by his view of the place of the human soul. Unlike Platonists before and, importantly, after him, Plotinus suggested that the human soul, in its descent from the realm of the divine, had not descended entire. Instead it had left a part of itself with the divine: “And, if one ought to dare to express one’s own view more clearly, contradicting the opinion of others, even our soul does not altogether come down, but there is always something of it in the intelligible.”⁶ For Plotinus, when we engage in *henosis*, we are completing ourselves: we are far from the One ontologically, but not so far as other Platonists thought. More than a spark of the divine was in us; there was instead a literally essential similarity.

Plotinus’ student, biographer, and editor Porphyry (AD 232–309) occasionally vacillated in his opinion regarding the efficacy of religious ritual; but, for

4. For further argumentation and bibliography on this problem see: C. S. Celenza, “Pythagoras in the Renaissance: The Case of Marsilio Ficino,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (1999): 667–711; C. S. Celenza, “Temi neopitagorici nel pensiero di Marsilio Ficino,” in *Actes du XLIIe Colloque International d’Etudes Humanistes “Marsile Ficin 1499–1999,”* ed. S. Toussaint, Cahiers de l’Humanisme, Les Belles Lettres, forthcoming (Paris, 2001); C. S. Celenza, “L’antiquité tardive et le Platonisme Florentin,” in *Philosophie et Philologie au Quattrocento*, ed. F. Marioni Zini, forthcoming (Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2001); C. S. Celenza, “Late Antiquity and Florentine Platonism,” in *Marsilio Ficino: His Sources, His Circle, His Legacy*, ed. M. J. B. Allen and V. R. Rees, forthcoming (Leiden, Cologne, New York: Brill, 2001) and for certain historiographical points, C. S. Celenza, “Late Antiquity and the Florentine Renaissance: Historiographical Parallels,” forthcoming, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2001).

5. *Enn.* 2.3.9 (echoing Plato, *Thet.* 176a8–b1 and *Phd.* 67c6): “Διὸ καὶ φεύγειν ἐντεῦθεν δεῖ καὶ χωρίζειν αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ τῶν προσγεγενημένων καὶ μὴ τὸ σύνθετον εἶναι σώμα ἐμψυχωμένον.”

6. *Enn.* 4.8.8: “καὶ εἰ χρὴ παρὰ δόξαν τῶν ἄλλων τολμήσαι τὸ φαινόμενον λέγειν σαφέστερον, οὐ πάντα οὐδ’ ἢ ἡμετέρα ψυχὴ ἔδω, ἀλλ’ ἔστι τι αὐτῆς ἐν τῷ νοητῷ αἰεῖ.”

reasons largely similar to those of Plotinus, he too thought it was something to be used by non-philosophers. The real change in the course of later Platonism came with Iamblichus (AD 242/5–326), Porphyry's student and then opponent, who consciously merged philosophy and religious ritual, and saw them as interdependent. In Proclus' commentary to Plato's *Timaeus*, in a passage which preserves an opinion of Iamblichus, we read: "we dare to react against those Platonists who contend that our soul is of the same weight as the gods and has the same essence as the divine souls and who say that it becomes the Intellect itself and the Intelligible and the One itself when it has abandoned everything and has been united with it."⁷ Plotinus' opinion concerning the place of the human soul and its ontological distance from the One, in other words, was regarded as arrogant.

Along with this came a different view of the material world. This is not to say that Iamblichus views matter (*hylē*) — considered as a philosophical category — as a good thing, for one would be hard pressed to find a Platonist who did. But he did view the created world with more optimism. On the one hand, he assigned to humankind an ontological place essentially distinct from divinity. On the other, he, like all later Platonists, believed that the ultimate goal of life was to return to the One. Given these two positions, the only solution was to assign an important place in his world view to religious ritual, which often used physical material means as aids. The material things had been placed there for a reason; far from shunning them, the wise philosopher will learn to appreciate and use them efficaciously. Hence theurgy, or "the efficacious performance of ineffable acts beyond all human [noetic] understanding."⁸ In the later history of Platonism, Iamblichus was routinely, as opposed to exceptionally, referred to as *theios*, "divine"; and an often repeated ancient epithet comparing him and Porphyry is revealing: "The Syrian [Iamblichus] was inspired by the gods, the Phoenician [Porphyry] highly learned."⁹ Iamblichus changed the Plotinus-determined direction of Platonism in such a way that the "philosopher" as a figure became understood as a person whose purview embraced efficacious religious ritual; this sort of ritual was no longer seen as beneath the philosopher's concern. It was with Iamblichus that the much-vaunted "Hermetic tradition," with its strong focus on human agency, was first linked in a lasting manner to the Platonic tradition.¹⁰

To jump without transition to the late fifteenth century in Florence would be unreasonable, since there were many medieval thinkers deeply committed to this sort of approach to ritual and the world, where the human operator can

7. Proclus, *In Tim*, III.231, 5–10, cited and translated in C. G. Steel, *The Changing Self: A Study on the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius, and Priscianus* (Brussels: Paleis der Academien, 1978), 28.

8. Iamb., *De myst.*, 2.11.96 (ed. des Places, 1989): *τελεσιουργία τῶν ἔργων τῶν ἀρρήτων καὶ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν νόησιν*. On Iamblichus and theurgy see G. Shaw, "Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus," *Traditio* 41 (1985): 1–28, and G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Ancient Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; reissued with new preface, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

9. Steel, 12.

10. See Fowden.

have an effect on the world around him and even on his mobility up the ontological scale.¹¹ Yet it was in the late fifteenth century that the greater part of the later Platonic works alluded to became available in the West, and it was Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) who made them accessible.¹² When historians of philosophy have approached Ficino, I suggest elsewhere, they have sought overmuch the Plotinian in his thought, since, for a long time, historians of ancient philosophy have considered Plotinus the rationalistic exception in a world of late ancient Platonic ritualistic decadence. When historians of esotericism have approached Ficino, they have tended to exclude Ficino's vast writings on traditional philosophical topics. However, if Ficino's entire oeuvre and his style of life are taken into account, he is more similar to the late ancient model holy man represented by figures like Iamblichus and later Proclus; and it is unsurprising that in certain fundamental ways Ficino's thought mirrors that of these post-Plotinian philosophers.

One of the most basic manifestations of this post-Plotinian tendency is the manner in which Ficino's thought includes efficacious rituals — such as the theurgic use of natural materials, exorcisms, etc. — in the general ambience of a richly scholarly Platonism: “At the same time we do not say that our spirit is prepared for the celestials only through qualities of things known to the senses, but also and much more through certain properties engrafted in things from the heavens and hidden from our senses, and hence only with difficulty known to our reason.”¹³ The “things” are endowed with power to be used and manipulated by the sagacious human operator; and the “power, it seems, must be granted to minds which use it legitimately, as medicine and agriculture are justly granted, and all the more so as that activity which joins heavenly things to earthly is more perfect.”¹⁴ Although Ficino is constantly on guard against appearing heterodox, there is a widening ideological space for discussions of human efficacy, where the operator has recourse to occult powers, provided the right ritual means are used to access them. It is a fundamentally non-Plotinian moment, and one of great importance in understanding early modern European intellectual culture, for it was shared by quite a large number of figures on the intellectual landscape.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was certainly one of those, and, as mentioned above, he had suggested early on that there was a fundamental similarity shared by the Kabbalah and Pythagoreanism, such that both, practised correctly, had the power to unlock hidden powers inherent in things material, verbal, and symbolic. The fascination of many thinkers, Pico included, for what has come to be termed Christian Kabbalism meshes well with the particular web of concerns which the post-Plotinian moment wove in Renaissance Europe, and it is to a discussion of Christian Kabbalism that I now turn.

11. See R. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

12. For bibliography on Ficino see P. O. Kristeller, *Marsilio Ficino and his Work After Five Hundred Years*, *Quaderni di Rinascimento*, 7 (Florence, 1987) and T. Katinis, “Bibliografia Ficiniana,” *Accademia* 2 (2000). The following points are developed much more fully in my studies mentioned above, at n. 3.

13. Marsilio Ficino, *De triplici vita*, 3.12: 298–301.

14. *Ibid.*, *Apologia*, *ad fin.*

Christian Kabbalism, Pico della Mirandola, and the Career of Johann Reuchlin

The Kabbalah — the term literally means “tradition” — is a Hebrew technique of understanding which reflects two concerns: first, “a theosophical understanding of God combined with a symbolic view of reality and the theurgical conception of religious life,” and second, “the way to attain a mystical experience of God through the invocation of divine names.”¹⁵ While the Kabbalah owes some of its characteristic themes, especially its theurgic ones, to late ancient Talmudic and Midrashic literature, the textual artefacts which the Renaissance would possess, especially the *Zohar*, originated with the Castilian Kabbalists of the second half of the thirteenth century.¹⁶

Christian Kabbalah received a classic definition from Gershom Scholem; he wrote that it was “the interpretation of Kabbalistic texts in the service of Christianity (or, to be more precise, Catholicism); or the use of Kabbalistic concepts and methodology in support of Christian dogma.”¹⁷ Joseph Dan widens the definition, and suggests that certain Christian Kabbalists also believed that the study of non-biblical Hebrew religious texts had “an impact on Christianity itself, and offer[ed] a deeper, more profound understanding of Christianity.”¹⁸ In other words, Christian Kabbalists assumed two things fundamentally: first, that Christianity represented the truth; second, that anything, including non-biblical Hebrew religious wisdom, could be put to finding, unveiling, and explicating the truth; indeed, it was all, in its own way, part of the truth.¹⁹ This widened definition of Christian Kabbalah seems appropriate, since it acknowledges the relative malleability of “orthodoxy” in pre-Tridentine Europe.

15. M. Idel, “Qabbalah,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade *et al.*, 16 vols. (New York and London: Macmillan, 1995) 12: 117–24, at 117. For recent literature on the Kabbalah see the studies in L. Fine, ed., *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); and M. Hallamish, *An Introduction to the Kabbalah*, tr. R. Bar-Ilan and O. Wiskind-Elper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

16. Idel, 118–21. For a study of the *Zohar* along with translated excerpts, see I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, tr. D. Goldstein, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); for a full English translation see *The Zohar*, tr. H. Sperling, M. Simon, and P. Levartoff, 5 vols. (London: Soncino, 1931–4). It should be noted that for Renaissance Christian thinkers it was important to dissociate the Kabbalah from the Talmud, since the latter had been stigmatized as a blasphemous source, intended to combat Christianity and, in the eyes of some, as demanding that Jews use the blood of Christian children in their rituals. See J. Dan, “The Kabbalah of Johannes Reuchlin and its Historical Significance,” in *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books and their Christian Interpreters*, ed. J. Dan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 55–95, at 64; and the fine study of R. Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) esp. 111–62.

17. G. Scholem, “The Beginnings of the Christian Kabbalah,” in Dan, 17–51, at 17; the essay is a translation of Scholem’s “Zur Geschichte der Anfänge der Christlichen Kabbala,” in *Essays Presented to Leo Baeck on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday* (London: East and West Library, 1954), 158–93. In general on Christian Kabbalism see the studies in J. Dan, J. L. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944); and F. Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Dunod, 1964), esp. 44–72 on Reuchlin.

18. J. Dan, “The Kabbalah of Johannes Reuchlin and its Historical Significance,” in Dan, ed., *The Christian Kabbalah*, 55–95, at 56; see also 62 on the relationship between Kabbalah and mysticism.

19. Dan, 60.

In the Florentine Renaissance milieu, Giovanni Pico was the most important Christian Kabbalist, and was himself influenced by the translations of Kabbalistic literature by his teacher in Kabbalistic matters, Flavius Mithridates, a convert to Christianity.²⁰ Pico had gone so far as to suggest that any successful magical art had to be allied to Kabbalah in some fashion, and that no names could have any magical power if they were not Hebrew or closely derived from Hebrew: claims that put him at the centre of a lively polemic.²¹ In Pico's 900 theses, which he had proposed to debate in 1486, 119 are explicitly Kabbalistic.²² As is well known, Pico's disputation never happened, as a number of his conclusions were condemned by Innocent VIII.²³ With respect to the late ancient, pagan Platonic environment and its adaptability to Christian Kabbalism, Pico, in his 900 theses, seems to imply (though he does not explicitly propose) a continuity and overlap between the later Platonic *henads* (literally, "unities") as elaborated by Proclus, and the ten *sefirot*, so important in the Kabbalistic tradition.²⁴ Both the *henads* and the *sefirot* were manifestations — in some interpretations, emanations — of divinity. Proclus used the *henads* to create a complex ontological system, an ancillary exegetical

20. See C. Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, with S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 167 (Tempe, Ariz., 1998), 344–5. See also M. Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. B. D. Cooperman, Harvard Judaica Texts and Studies, 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 186–242; and G. Massetani, *La filosofia cabalistica di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (Empoli: Traversari, 1897). In general on Jewish thought and the Italian Renaissance see D. Ruderman, "The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, ed. A. Rabil, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 1: 382–433; and the recent review essay of A. M. Lesley, "Jews at the Time of the Renaissance," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (1999): 845–56.

21. Cf. Pico, *Conclusions*, ed. Farmer, in Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 9>22 (p. 500): "Nulla nomina ut significativa, et inquantum nomina sunt singula et per se sumpta, in magico opere virtutem habere possunt, nisi sint hebraica, vel inde proxima derivata." For polemic against Pico see Pedro Garsias, *Determinationes magistrales contra conclusiones Joannis Pici* (Rome, 1489) = L. Hain, *Repertorium bibliographicum*, 2 vols. in 4 (Stuttgart, 1826–1838) no. 7492; cf. Zika, "Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico*," 107.

22. For the text see Farmer, 210–553; for the Kabbalistic conclusions see 28.1–47 and 11>1–72. See Farmer's introductory monograph for further literature.

23. For the juridical examination of Pico's theses and the manner in which the *disputatio* was suspended, see A. Biondi, "La doppia inchiesta sulle *Conclusiones* e le traversie romane di Pico nel 1487," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494–1994)*, ed. G. C. Garfagnini, Studi Pichiani, 5, 2 vols (Florence: Olschki, 1997), 1: 197–212; for Pico's Kabbalistic conclusions and the manner in which he saw a fundamental similarity between Kabbalistic reasoning and the Pythagorean *tetractys*, see B. P. Copenhaver, "L'occulto in Pico. Il Mem chiuso e le fauci spalancate da Azazel: La magia cabalistica di Giovanni Pico," in the same volume, at 213–36.

24. On the *henads*, see Proclus, *Platonic Theology*, ed. and trans. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink, bks. 1 and 2 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1967–); *Elements of Theology*, ed. and trans. E. R. Dodds, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), props. 113–65; and the commentary *In Platonis Parmenidem*, ed. V. Cousin (Paris, 1864), 1043–65; there is an English translation of the latter in Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, trans. J. M. Dillon and G. R. Morrow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). See also the discussion of the *henads* in L. Siorvanes, *Proclus: Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 167–75. On the *sefirot*, see below, n. 27. Farmer, 70–1, and 85–9, interpreting Pico's theses 10>9 and 10>10, suggests that Pico saw this similarity and intended to bring it out into open debate at his planned disputation in Rome.

goal of which was to find correspondences in the Platonic corpus.²⁵ By them he intended to represent the emanations of the divine both in the proper, immaterial realm of the divine and in the created world. Moreover, just as “the One is the cause and goal of the universe . . . so the ‘ones’ [the *henads*] are the One multiplied.”²⁶ In order to reach the divine, human beings, in Proclus’ view, had to use and access the unities immanent in the created world.

In the medieval Hebrew tradition, the *sefirot* represent a way to reconcile a God who, on the one hand, is removed, deep within himself, and ineffable (called *’Eyn Sof* — “endlessness”) with a God who chooses to reveal himself and is in fact immanent in the created world. Each *sefirah* represents a manifestation of this revelation, and it is by studying the *sefirot* that human beings can come to know God’s immanent aspects and even to activate divinity.²⁷ The comparison between the neo-Platonic *henads* along with their theurgic possibilities and the *sefirot* is suggestive, and it is not unlikely that Pico saw, as Farmer has suggested, a fundamental similarity there. It is Reuchlin, however, who explicitly focuses on the *sefirot* and merges them suggestively with what was for him the Pythagorean tradition (and what is for us, of course, the neo-Pythagorean, later Platonic tradition). Zika has pointed out that Reuchlin’s works, especially the *De verbo mirifico*, are best seen within the context of contemporary debate,²⁸ a debate which, in its own way, shows the relative openness which was possible in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. One might suggest, then, that in the *De arte cabalistica* Reuchlin is advancing the debate on the efficacy of symbolic language and the manner in which one can, using symbolic language, have an effect on the sensible world. In this respect he differentiates himself sharply from many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers, who believed instead — following a venerable Aristotelian line of argument — that words were arbitrarily designated signs of things that possessed meaning only by human convention.²⁹ Instead, Reuchlin was creating and operating within a language system whose *raison d’être* was to transcend by ritual the closed nature of language and the boundary between words and things.

Reuchlin drew great inspiration from Pico’s belief in the validity of the Kabbalah, and from the general syncretic milieu in late Quattrocento Florence, as he later testified a number of times.³⁰ But his beliefs and his practices are his own and are not only simple imports from Florentine culture; this notion

25. There are basically two sorts of *henads* in Proclus, those (Siorvanes, 168) “that are independent and complete in themselves, and [those] that belong to their participants.” Cf. Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, proposition 64.

26. Siorvanes, 190–1.

27. Cf. Hallamish, 121–66; Tishby, 1: 269–307 for an introduction to the *Sefirot* and 309–70 for texts.

28. Zika, “Reuchlin’s *De verbo mirifico*,” *passim*; C. Zika, *Reuchlin und die okkulte Tradition*, 23–62, esp. 27–30.

29. See Clark, 281–93; B. Vickers, “Analogy Versus Identity: The Rejection of Occult Symbolism,” in *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, ed. B. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 95–163.

30. Secret, *Les kabbalistes*, 44.

necessitates a brief examination of his background.³¹ Reuchlin lived from 1455 to 1522, and studied at Freiburg, Paris, Basel, Orleans, and Poitiers. He made, by his own report, two trips to Italy where he became acquainted with Florentine thinkers, in 1482 and then in 1490, in the service of Count Eberhard of Württemberg. He is well-known for the "Reuchlin affair," when, in 1510, he was asked by a Cologne commission to write a recommendation concerning the entreaties of the converted Jew Johannes Pfefferkorn, who advocated the confiscation of Hebrew books in the city. In his *Gutachten* — his recommendation — Reuchlin refused to endorse the notion that all Hebrew books should be confiscated.³² In 1511 he wrote a treatise, the *Augenspiegel*, in which he defended his earlier opinion. Thereafter, his own work, the *Augenspiegel*, came under investigation. In 1512 the theology faculty of the University of Cologne condemned his work and in 1514 the work was condemned by a University of Paris commission of theologians. Controversy arose, and in the aftermath the famous work, the *Letters of Obscure Men* [*Epistolae obscurorum virorum*] was written, in which a number of well-known humanists, among them Crotus Rubianus and Ulrich von Hutten, skewered Reuchlin's scholastic critics.³³ A series of polemical writings ensued, and, at the behest of the Master of Heretical Depravity, the Brabant Dominican Jacobus Hoogstraeten (who would later critique Luther's *De libertate christiana*), a papal investigation was undertaken.³⁴ The original papal investigation ended in a *mandatum de supersedendo*, that is, an official postponement, in 1516, despite the fact that the majority of investigators had decided in Reuchlin's favour. Thus the *De arte cabalistica*, written in 1517, was clearly the work of a true believer in

31. The following account of Reuchlin's career relies on the sources cited above in n. 1. For the differences between the Kabbalism of Pico and that of Reuchlin, see H.-M. Kirn, *Das Bild vom Juden im Deutschland des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts, dargestellt an den Schriften Johannes Pfefferkorns*, Texts and Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Judaism, 3 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), 156–72, cited in H. A. Oberman, "Discovery of Hebrew and Discrimination Against the Jews: The *Veritas Hebraica* as Double-Edged Sword in Renaissance and Reformation," in *Germania Illustrata: Essays on Early Modern Germany Presented to Gerald Strauss*, ed. A. C. Fix and S. C. Karant-Nunn, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, 18 (Kirkville, Mo: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), 19–34, at 24 n.14.

32. On this episode see Geiger, 203–454; Hsia, 119–24; J. H. Overfield, *Humanism and Scholasticism in Late Medieval Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 247–97, an expanded version of J. H. Overfield, "A New Look at the Reuchlin Affair," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 8 (1971): 165–207; C. Zika, "Reuchlin and Erasmus: Humanism and Occult Philosophy," *The Journal of Religious History* 9 (1977): 223–46; H. Peterse, *Jacobus Hoogstraeten gegen Johannes Reuchlin*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Abteilung abendländische Religionsgeschichte, 165 (Mainz: Zabern, 1995); and Johannes Reuchlin, *Schriften zum Bücherstreit, 1. Teil Reuchlins Schriften*, ed. W.-W. Ehlers, L. Mundt, H.-G. Roloff, and P. Schäfer, in Johannes Reuchlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, 4 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1999). For the complexity of Reuchlin's attitudes toward the Jews, especially in the period preceding the *Reuchlinhandel*, see H. Oberman, "Three Sixteenth-Century Attitudes to Judaism: Reuchlin, Erasmus, and Luther," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. B. D. Cooperman, Harvard Judaica Texts and Studies, 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 326–64.

33. For recent literature on this problem, with new discoveries, see W. Ludwig, "Literatur und Geschichte — Ortwin Gratius, die Dunkelmännerbriefe und 'Das Testament des Philipp Melanchthon' von Walter Jens," *Mittelalterliches Jahrbuch* 34 (1999): 125–67.

34. Hoogstraeten's critique of Luther: H. A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 45.

the power of Christian Kabbalism to transform religion. Instead of receding into bland apologetics (which would have been the safer course), Reuchlin deliberately set out to write a potentially controversial treatise unifying various strands of wisdom. Dedicated to Pope Leo X, the work was intended not only to explain Reuchlin's views on the compatibility of Christian practice with "Pythagorean" Kabbalism, but also to serve as a *pièce justificative* in the eyes of the pope, and, one supposes, in the eyes of the Fifth Lateran council, one of whose many charges was to come to some sort of judgment regarding Reuchlin.³⁵ Finally, in 1521 Reuchlin's *Augenspiegel*, with the burgeoning Protestant Reformation as background, was condemned by the pope. Reuchlin was sentenced to silence on the matter and had to bear the costs of the trial.

Reuchlin was only involuntarily a polemicist and was at heart a litterateur and religious thinker.³⁶ In his earlier years he had been part of the lively Heidelberg circle of German humanists, which included Jacob Wimpheling, Conrad Celtis, and others.³⁷ He wrote a number of works, including a satirical treatise on relics (the *Sergius*) and a Terentian comedy (the *Prosaenica gymnasmatata*, also known as the *Henno*).³⁸ He was also a sophisticated scholar of Greek: he Latinized a text of the Christian bishop Proclus of Cyzicus in 1488 and, later, defended the traditional, iotacized pronunciation of Greek against Erasmus's restored version.³⁹ He himself believed that his greatest contribution was his introduction to the modern West of an accurate knowledge of Hebrew, in his *De rudimentis hebraicis* of 1506. About it he wrote: "No one before me was able to bring together the rules of the Hebrew language in a book. . . . I am the first. I have raised aloft a monument more lasting than bronze."⁴⁰

35. See N. Minnich, "Prophecy and the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517)," in *Prophetic Rome in the High Renaissance Period*, ed. M. Reeves (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 63–87, at 81–2; and Zika, *Reuchlin und die okkulte Tradition*, 63–9 on the importance of the *DAC*'s preface in determining Reuchlin's intentions.

36. Cf. Overfield, 159–63.

37. On German humanism see L. Spitz, "The Course of German Humanism," in *Itinerarium Italicum: The Profile of the Italian Renaissance in the Mirror of its European Transformations*, ed. H. A. Oberman and T. A. Brady (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 371–436; N. L. Brann, "Humanism in Germany," in Rabil, *Renaissance Humanism*, 2: 123–55; and the relevant studies in W. Ludwig, *Litterae Neolatiniae: Schriften zur neulateinischen Literatur* (Munich: W. Fink, 1989).

38. On which see H. Holstein, *Johann Reuchlins Komödien: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des lateinischen Schul dramas* (Halle, 1888; rept. Leipzig, 1973); G. Ehrstein, "Scaenica Faceta: The Choral Odes of Johannes Reuchlin's *Scaenica Progymnasmatata* (1497)," in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Bariensis: Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies*, ed. R. Schnur et al. (Tempe: Arizona State University Press, 1998), 235–41.

39. For the Proclus translation, which was done in 1488 for the prior of the Carthusian order in Basel, Jakob Loubet, but was not printed until 1529, see *Johann Reuchlins Briefwechsel*, ed. Geiger, #14 and #15 (pp. 14–20), and Benzing, 31. On Proclus of Cyzicus, the archbishop of Constantinople, + 446 AD (not to be confused with Proclus the head of the Athenian Academy), see P.-Th. Camelot, "Proklos, Erzbischof von Konstantinopel," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 8 (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1963), 768. The Erasmus controversy: R. Weiss, "Learning and Education in Western Europe from 1470–1520," in *The New Cambridge Modern History*, ed. G. R. Potter, 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 95–126, at 119–20 and H. A. Stoll, "Erasmisches und Reuchlinisches Griechisch?" in *Renaissance und Humanismus in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, ed. J. Irmscher, 1 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962), 89–97.

40. Cited and translated in Spitz, 63.

The *De Arte Cabalistica*: A Five-Fold Consideration

Reuchlin's interest in Hebrew was conditioned by the post-Plotinian mentality mentioned above, which was adaptable to various social circumstances. In his 1494 dialogue, *On the Wonder Working Word* [*De verbo mirifico*], he outlined a number of important features of an ideology of efficacious language, as he took active part in the debate, mentioned above, occasioned by Pico's 900 conclusions. The work was written after Alexander VI's bull exculpating Pico and would seem to be a response to Garsias's attack on Pico published in 1489. In it, Reuchlin suggested that words have real ritually efficacious power: Words are not just means to mystical union, rather, the *verbum mirificum* is "also the instrument," to quote Charles Zika, "by which man performs external miraculous activities in the world."⁴¹ The wonder-working word itself, the *verbum mirificum* of the work's title, is revealed in the dialogue's third and final book: It is the *pentagrammaton*, the ineffable name IHSUH, or the name of Jesus. Toward the end of true human self-knowledge and union with divinity, understanding the pentagrammaton is the final step, adding the revelation of Christ to the promise of the Old Testament. The pentagrammaton, Reuchlin writes, is "none other than the name of the Lord, the Tetragrammaton, but for the assumption of one letter 's'; which with the deity of the first syllable soaks, immerses, and steeps the second syllable, that is, the human nature which has been imbibed by the poured-out oil."⁴² In other words, as early as 1494 Reuchlin saw a way to introduce themes from the Hebrew and *prisca theologia* traditions (i.e., the Hebrew name of god — IHUH, four letters — and the fourfold Pythagorean *tetractys*), Christianize them by adding a fifth component, and add to the mix an understanding of the efficacy of symbolic language.

His thoughts were developed more fully in his 1517 treatise *De arte cabalistica*; in the interim between the *De verbo mirifico* and this treatise he had learned Hebrew and studied the Kabbalah in greater depth, making much more precise his understanding of the nature and function of the *sefirot*. In the *De arte cabalistica* we can see the five features of the late ancient mentality to which I alluded above. They are: first, a certain approach to allegoresis; second, a specific set of soteriological concerns; third, a connection of texts with praxis and ritual efficacy; fourth, a recognition of the radical disjunction between the human and the divine; and fifth, a characteristic set of problems related to the issue of information transfer.

The dialogue is among three interlocutors, Marranus, Philolaus, and Simon.⁴³ Marranus, a Moslem, and Philolaus, a Pythagorean, meet by chance at an inn

41. C. Zika, "Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico* and the Magic Debate of the Late Fifteenth Century," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 39 (1976): 105–38, at 106–7.

42. *De verbo mirifico*, G5 recto: "est ipsum nomen suum ihsuh, quod non est aliud a nomine domine Tetragrammato, nisi unius literae assumptione, quae secundam syllabam deitate primae syllabae perfundat, mergat, et intingat, id est humanam naturam oleo effuso imbibitam, unde et nomen oleum id esse supra ostendimus." Cited and translated in Zika, "Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico*," 132.

43. For an in-depth explication of the text of the *DAC*, see Zika, *Reuchlin und die okkulte Tradition*, 63–125.

in Frankfurt, where they have both come to visit Simon, the learned Jewish expositor of the Kabbalah. On the first day, Simon tells them the basics of the Kabbalah. On the second, because it is the Jewish sabbath, he is absent and Philolaus takes the floor, speaking of Pythagoreanism; on the third, Marranus and Philolaus return to Simon, who goes into greater depths and reveals certain Kabbalistic secrets. The interlocutors rarely disagree, and when they intervene in one another's speeches, it is almost always to support the main interlocutor's opinion; thus we can see all three interlocutors as expressing facets of Reuchlin's opinions.

The first feature of the late ancient mentality is a certain kind of allegoresis applied to texts which is linked in its turn to the second feature, soteriology. The approach involved reading texts in such a way as to protect a given figure, concern, or set of concerns.⁴⁴ For Ficino, for example, Plato was the figure he felt most inclined to protect.⁴⁵ Thus, when he came to difficult parts of the Platonic *oeuvre*, the myth of Er in the *Republic*, say, which suggested metempsychosis, Ficino placed the blame elsewhere, and shifted it away from Plato, averring that Pythagoras was behind this wrongheaded position in the Platonic corpus.⁴⁶ For Reuchlin, however, Pythagoras is the important figure.⁴⁷ In the *De arte cabalistica*, he gives a number of selective and suggestive readings of Pythagoras, toward the end of providing an orthodox and true Pythagoreanism, in harmony with Christianity and related to the traditions of the Kabbalah.

Reuchlin, for example, is very concerned to protect Pythagoras from the charge of transmigration of souls. So he finds a way — counter to all ancient, late ancient, medieval, and Renaissance knowledge of the Pythagorean tradition — to argue that Pythagoras did not, in fact, believe in transmigration. There is a rumour around, the interlocutor Philolaus suggests in book 2 — spurred on by ancient detractors and *invidi carptores* who either inserted things Pythagoras never would have said or thought into his books or else twisted what he said for the worse — that Pythagoras believed that the human soul could inform the bodies of beasts.⁴⁸ As the real backbone of his response, Reuchlin offers the sort of argument familiar enough to early modernity: the argument from integrity. How *could* such a great man have written such nonsense? How

44. Cf. J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 1: 23–4.

45. Hankins, 1: 265–359.

46. Hankins, *Plato*; and Celenza, “Pythagoras in the Renaissance.”

47. Zika, *Reuchlin und die okkulte Tradition*, 144–54.

48. *DAC*, Giii recto-verso: “Rumorem autem de illo passim divulgant hanc eius fuisse opinionem quod anima humana quorundam post mortem corpora brutorum informet, quod viris ratione utentibus incredibile videri debet, de tam excellenti philosophiae autore et abundantissimo scientiarum fonte unde ad nos emanavit divinarum et humanarum rerum cognitio. Quin potius ea suspicio trananimationis ex hominibus Pythagoricorum mysteriorum partim ignaris, partim ob invidiam perosis orta est. Non enim caruit aemulorum livore praestantissima eius viri virtus, innocentissima vita, egregia doctrina, celebris fama, utque fit, nihil non pollutum reliquerunt invidi carptores, Timon, Xenophanes, Cratinus, Aristophon, Hermippus, et alii quorum non exigua multitudo est, qui de Pythagora suis in libris mendacia plurima scripserunt, ac ea prodiderunt quae nusquam ab illo vel dicta vel scripta fuere, aut eiusmodi si qua dixisset, tantum in peiorem ea sensum perverterunt, ut facile crederetur talis ac tantus vir inconsiderate docendo aberrasse, de rerum principiis, de numeris, de faba non gustanda, de abstinendo ab animatorum esu, de inferis, deque metempsychosi et transitu animarum, de quo nunc tractamus.”

could someone who had so carefully distinguished the forms of things — the *exemplaria* — from their transitory outward appearances — the *species* — have thought that the human essence, which is the same as its form, would have anything in common with a beast?⁴⁹ What Pythagoras meant was that only those living things whose reason shows that they can distinguish differences in things are the divine genus, the genus that does not suffer change.⁵⁰ As to Pythagoras' claim that in a former life he had been Euphorbus, the Trojan, this was metaphorical, and referred to the fact that Pythagoras liked and helped athletes and was himself strong. Just as when a strong man is referred to as another Hercules, or as Numenius referred to Plato as Moses speaking Attic Greek, the similarities are not to be understood as substantial ones, rather of character and ability. To make this argument, Philolaus goes far, and suggests that beyond all this, Pythagoras was not even the first Greek to argue for the immortality of the soul. Long before, Homer had spoken of the souls of the dead engaging in conversation and prophesying.⁵¹

He goes on to say that Pythagoras, when speaking of transmigration, was actually speaking, not about souls, but about matter, and was referring to the fact that matter always has a desire to take on new forms.⁵² The interlocutor Marranus intervenes and discusses examples from the Judeo-Christian tradition where dead bodies were revived, using scriptural examples, like Jesus and Lazarus, Paul and Eutychus, etc. In other words, to bring Pythagoras into line, Reuchlin completely reinterprets all of the traditional positions about Pythagoras. That Pythagoras believed in the transmigration of souls, and that he was the first to argue for the immortality of the soul would not have served Reuchlin's overall aims to bring Pythagoras into the orbit of Hebreo-Christian truth as he saw it; thus Reuchlin, with the philologically sophisticated freedom of the Renaissance allegorist, finds arguments to fashion a suitable Pythagoras.

As it had had for certain later Platonists, especially Iamblichus, the Pythagorean tradition and even the figure of Pythagoras himself have a soteriological resonance for Reuchlin.⁵³ Not, of course, in a universal sense: no soteriological analogies are made between the figure of Pythagoras and Christ. But Reuchlin does inform us, again through Philolaus, that Pythagoras was someone whose very word had been trusted like the oracle of the gods.⁵⁴ In addition, the enterprise of neopythagorean philosophizing, for Reuchlin combined with Kabbalistic teaching, is viewed as something that can contribute to individual

49. *DAC*, Giii verso: "Qui enim exemplaria et species rerum ita distinxit, ut mutuo transmutari confundive nequant, quo nam modo humanam essentiam, quae sua est forma, comunicaret bruto?"

50. *DAC*, Giiii recto: "Vultu igitur Pythagoras animantia sola quorum sacra natura, id est ratio, demonstrat singula, divinum esse genus, scilicet a deo propagatum, ut aureis edidit carminibus, cuius species nec mutetur nec convertatur, sic generum in singulorum formas esse permanentes, licet in eadem sua forma dissimiles."

51. *DAC*, Giiii recto–Gvi recto.

52. This Stoicizing position regarding matter would be much beloved by Giordano Bruno, later in the sixteenth century. Cf. C. S. Celenza, "Giordano Bruno, the Presocratic Tradition, and the Late Ancient Heritage," *Accademia* 2 (2000).

53. For Iamblichus and the soteriological element in Pythagoreanism, see D. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived: Mathematics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

54. *DAC*, Giii recto: "tam praecipuum virum, cuius dictamini ceu oraculo deorum creditum est."

salvation. It was Pythagoras, Philolaus argues in response to a gentle challenge from Marranus, who recognized the centrality of humankind in the salvific process. Philolaus had earlier spoken of figures like Hercules, who saved people from various ills. Marranus' challenge was that figures such as Hercules do not have much to do with eternal salvation. In response, Philolaus says that the saviour should not be considered one who preserves and restores the things of the world — cities, animals, etc. — but rather he who saves this smaller world, the world of humankind.⁵⁵ As Pythagoras had recognized in his *Carmen aureum*, Philolaus goes on, humankind suffers by its own choice and does not see or hear the good that is so close to them. For Reuchlin's interlocutors, Pythagoras is not a universal saviour, of course, but he is a critical element in the soteriological equation, an oracular figure who was an important part of the unveiling of the truth by which humankind would be guided, saved, and, ultimately, divinized.

Moreover, the writer who employs this style of thought and exposition often himself takes on a kind of oracular status.⁵⁶ The soteriological resonances of the material expounded afford the expositor the ability to create a vatic persona. As Renaissance esoterists moved closer, sociologically speaking, to the traditional figure of the wandering prophet and became intellectuals forced to create spaces for themselves by merging learning with prophecy, the rhetorical posture of the "revealer" became increasingly important. It reflected a tension which was then probably two millennia old between two naturally conflicting missions, a tension which becomes visible whenever a guardian of secret knowledge chooses to publish. On the one hand, the true esoterist's goal must be to keep restricted knowledge within a closely guarded circle of initiates. On the other hand, to create a social space for himself and protect himself from incursions of hostile orthodoxies, the esoterist, who is usually removed from efficacious *political* power, must be able to develop some sort of relationship with authorities. That relationship might manifest itself in the capacity of occasional adviser (as in the case of Ficino and the Medici); court astrologer (one thinks, later, of Tycho Brahe); wandering professor (as in the case, again later, of Giordano Bruno); or, as in the case of Reuchlin vis à vis Leo X, the *De arte cabalistica*'s dedicatee, faithful Christian who is trying to bring a greater depth to Christianity by incorporating elements from non-Christian traditions.⁵⁷ Ultimately, the most common way to develop a

55. *DAC*, Gi verso—Gii verso; cf. Gii verso: "Assentiorque Salvatorem de quo tam magnifice ac tam perpetuo sacra vaticinantur eloquia, eum fore oportere, qui non tam huius grandis mundi, non regionum et urbium, non infimorum elementorum et syderum, non lignorum et lapidum, non plantarum et arborum, non piscium, non volucrum, non pecorum, quae omnia naturam ducem et suae conditionis instinctum inerranter et probe sequuntur, et ad constitutum sibi finem manent quod sunt, quam istius minoris mundi servator et restaurator sit, hoc est hominis, qui ab aequitatis sibi tradita norma et rectae rationis sententia saepe decidens generositatem suam coacervatione vitiorum in stagna profunda malorum et sempiternae corruptionis barathrum voluntarie praecipitat, unde revocare gradum propriis viribus et sua ope nequeat."

56. See Fowden; and Celenza, "Pythagoras in the Renaissance."

57. For Tycho's social environment see John R. Christianson, *On Tycho's Island: Tycho Brahe and his Assistants, 1570–1601* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For Bruno and his search for social place see Saverio Ricci, *Giordano Bruno nell'Europa del Cinquecento* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2000), 17.

relationship with power is to promise results from new knowledge which the “revealer” unveils. This in turn is connected to the third feature I would like to examine, the connection of texts with praxis and the respect for ritual efficacy.

In the theurgic tradition — and this is true for late ancient Platonists, for later medieval Kabbalists, and for certain Renaissance esoterists — it is important that the things discussed work, that they have efficacious power.⁵⁸ The practice of the Kabbalah merged especially well with this tradition. Through their use of symbols, Reuchlin argues, Kabbalists propel the mind toward divinity as efficaciously as possible: “Individual words, individual mysteries, syllables, diacritic and punctuation marks, are full of secret meaning.”⁵⁹ The Kabbalah is the means by which we arrive at the highest level of understanding, even if, he adds, it is impossible that our soul arrive as high as the Messiah without an incomprehensible flash of understanding (*nisi quodam incomprehensibili intuitu quasi via momentanei raptus*).⁶⁰ Beyond just the ecstatic individual wonder-working, Reuchlin points out (through Simon the Kabbalist in book 1) that through his power, the Kabbalist becomes the friend of angels; thus he effects marvellous things (*res admirandas*), which the crowd calls miracles.⁶¹ In fact, after Adam’s sin and God’s consequent anger, God sent an angel down to Adam, to teach him how to repair the ruins. “By the divine will of greatest God,” Simon avers, again in book 1, “the angel showed Adam the way of atonement and engaged with Adam in divine conversation, which was to be understood by allegory, in a Kabbalistic way.” Nothing, not even the punctuation, was without significance.⁶²

At a certain point in the *De arte cabalistica*, Simon the Kabbalist instructs the other two interlocutors in the manner in which one arrives at “the seventy-two sacred names.” Reuchlin has Simon come up with these names by using a time-honoured Jewish technique to combine and recombine the Hebrew letters of Exodus 14:19–22, each of which has seventy-two letters

58. For the wide acceptance in later medieval society of the efficacy of magical practice, see R. Kieckhefer, “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” *The American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 813–36. Stressing Reuchlin’s focus on accessing the wonder-working word ritualistically is J. J. Bono, *The Word of God and the Languages of Man: Interpreting Nature in Early Modern Science and Medicine, I: Ficino to Descartes* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 124–8. Cf. also the classic statement regarding the mass as the foundation for late medieval belief in the efficacy of magic in the Renaissance in D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, Studies of the Warburg Institute, 22 (London: The Warburg Institute, 1958), 36.

59. See *DAC*, Diii verso: “Igitur altiore loco et digniore gradu habendi sunt cabalistae illam legis expositionem sequentes, quae per quaedam symbola mentis elevationem ad superos et ad rem divinam quam maxime propellit, hanc appellant graeci vestri anagogicam insitutionem quae non modo philosophia sit sed et sophia ipsa, hoc est sapientia. Unde merito sapientes denominantur.” And for the quotation, Eii recto: “Hic est solus verae contemplationis campus, cuius singula verba, singula sunt sacramenta, et singuli sermones, syllabae, apices, punctaque eius plena sunt arcanis sensibus, non tantum nobis autoribus, verum etiam christianis attestantibus.”

60. *DAC*, Eii recto.

61. *DAC*, Eiii verso: “Unde oritur intima Cabalistae cum angelis amicitia, per quam aliquando nomina divina rite cognoscens res admirandas conficit, quae vulgus miracula nominat.”

62. *Ibid.*, Cii recto: “Hic [angelus] autem summi dei nutu expiationis ei viam ostendit, et divinum sermonem per allegoriam recipiendum, more cabalistico exposuit, cuius non modo verbum ullum sed ne litera quantumcumque minuta et exilis ac ne apex quidem frustra ponitur.”

in Hebrew.⁶³ Before uttering the names, Simon suggests that “they should be pronounced, as invocations of angels, only by men who are dedicated and devoted to god with fear and trembling,” in short, by initiates.⁶⁴ Immediately thereafter Simon reveals the seventy-two names, then goes on to say to his two listeners: “Gentlemen, you now have to hand not only words with which you can mutter secret conversation from the deepest part of your heart; now you can compound the words you have articulated and invoke any angel you please by his symbolic name. Although they are each masters of their own individual realms, still, there is nothing they possess which is not shared. For even though they live in the supercelestial world, nonetheless they do care for these lower [subcelestial] things.”⁶⁵ The human operator, using divinely placed things in a ritualistically correct manner, effects marvels, calls down angels into service. The inner meaning of the words and their components can be plumbed and used by the divinely illuminated interpreter. Words: It is a respect for their power that the Kabbalist and the Pythagorean share. But it is only a certain, specifically anti-syllogistic use of words that is valuable, a use which respects the bonds between the sensible and the supra-sensible which are contained, secretly, in various parts of the created world, an essential segment of which, Reuchlin would argue, is language.

For Reuchlin, the Pythagorean tradition and the Kabbalistic tradition balance each other out. In the case of the Pythagoreans, Reuchlin sees the *symbola* of Pythagoras as particularly important. These were gnomic sayings attributed to Pythagoras since antiquity; Reuchlin exploits them for their ethical dimensions, primarily, but sees in their combination of enigmatic words also a great allusive power, one reflective of Pythagoreanism in general, whose origin lay in ancient Jewish and Egyptian thought.⁶⁶ In the case of the Kabbalah, the “letters and words are not only the signs of things, but are also the very stuff of the things.”⁶⁷ Combining them in the right ritual manner allowed the human operator to bring their efficacy to the fore.⁶⁸

63. On this technique see J. Dan, “The Name of God, the Name of the Rose and the Concept of Language in Jewish Mysticism,” *Medieval Encounters* 2 (1996): 228–48 and Dan, “The Kabbalah of Johannes Reuchlin,” 76–9. Pico had alluded to it in his conclusions; see ed. Farmer, 11>56; and Copenhaver, “L’occulto in Pico,” 224–9.

64. *DAC* Kiiii verso: “per invocationes angelorum ab hominibus deo deditis, devotisque cum timore ac tremore sic enuncianda.”

65. *DAC*: “Praesto iam sunt ad manum, viri optimi, cum quibus non modo ab imi pectoris penetralibus clandestina colloquia mussare, verumetiam expressas quoque voces miscere et quemlibet symbolico suo nomine invocare queatis; quanquam singularum regionum praesides, tamen nihil non communicatum habentes. Tametsi enim in mundo supercoelesti habitant, at ista nihilominus inferiora curant.”

66. *DAC*, Iiii verso–K recto. See esp. *ibid.*, Iv recto: “Hoc unum volui nescius ne esses et oblivioni haud committeres omnem ferme Pythagoricam philosophiam esse notis verborum et tegumentis rerum plenam, eumque tradendi morem, ut ante dixi, ab Hebraeis creditur et Aegyptiis ipse ad Graecos primus transtulisse.” On the Pythagorean *symbola* in the Renaissance see the introduction of Ari Wesseling in Angelo Poliziano, *Lamia: Praelectio in priora Aristotelis analytica*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, 38, ed. A. Wesseling (Leiden: Brill, 1986) and my forthcoming book, *Piety and Pythagoras in Renaissance Florence: The Symbolum Nesianum*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

67. *DAC*, Kii verso: Philolaus suggests that “Cabalam aliud nihil esse nisi (ut Pythagorice loquar) symbolicam theologiam, in qua non modo literae ac nomina sunt rerum signa, verum res etiam rerum [emphasis added].”

68. Reuchlin’s view is a variety of the sort of *vis verborum* as elaborated by Walker, 80–1.

This concern for ritual efficacy was connected in Reuchlin's eyes to the larger goal of religious reform. He, and others who shared this mentality, found themselves bestriding a dangerous and widening fault line in early modern European intellectual life. They became sources of controversy, even as they expanded the limits of acceptable religious discourse. Parenthetically, this is one of the reasons, as Charles Zika points out, that Erasmus distanced himself from Reuchlin after 1517: He saw Reuchlin's attachment to practical Kabbalah as a precarious Judaizing tendency toward ceremonialism.⁶⁹ Reuchlin's concern for human efficacy is connected in turn to the fourth feature: the radical disjunction between the human and the divine.

In Reuchlin's view, the bitterest factor militating against the understanding of the divine through faith is syllogistic logic; he stresses over and over that our powers are insufficient, and cites late ancient neoplatonizing Aristotelian commentators like Themistius and Philoponus to prove it.⁷⁰ Theology, he had earlier noted, gives a *firmior ac validior notitia*, and must be kept far from syllogistic murmurings.⁷¹ Toward the end of the *De arte cabalistica*, Simon the Jewish Kabbalist avers that "we are so damned by our feeble understanding of divine matters that we judge things that are not apparent in the same way as we judge things that do not exist."⁷² "O altitudo. O profunditas. O nostra infirmitas." [Oh, the height, oh, the depth. Oh, our weakness.]⁷³ This discussion of the radical distinction between the human and the divine serves as a backdrop and as preparation for a discussion of one of the essential parts of Kabbalah: the secret science of the power of letters, which would so fascinate a non-Kabbalistic contemporary, Johannes Trithemius.⁷⁴ Simon arrives at a point where a certain combination of names and letters discussed Kabbalistically means: "Pater deus, filius deus, spiritus sanctus deus, tres in uno et unus in tribus." And here is the quotation with which I began: "O quanta est haec altitudo, quanta profunditas, quae sola fide apprehenditur."⁷⁵ The immense gap between the human and divine is bridged by the interpreter who experiences the *profunditas* which, guided by his faith, transcends the *infirmitas* which is the human being's natural condition.

This human weakness, this *infirmitas*, is related to the fifth feature of the esoteric mentality: a certain type of information transfer in an environment of religious crisis. With human capacity alone it would be impossible to master all that is necessary to liberate the soul. "Was it not said to Abraham," Reuchlin writes, "'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you can,' but he could not, even though in his day, according to Maimonides, he was a

69. Zika, "Reuchlin and Erasmus."

70. *DAC*, Evi verso—Fi recto.

71. *DAC*, Bv recto.

72. *DAC*, Mii verso: "quia nos tam tenui erga res divinas ingenii paupertate mulctati de iis quae non apparent haud secus atque de iis quae non sunt iudicamus."

73. *DAC*, Mv verso.

74. On whose *Steganographia* and other magical works see N. L. Brann, *Trithemius and Magical Theology: A Chapter in the Controversy over Occult Studies in Early Modern Europe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

75. *DAC*, Oiii recto.

celebrated astrologer.”⁷⁶ In other words, to know the heavens, human contemplative capacity alone is not enough; one needs to make use of the *adiumenta* which the divine had placed in nature. But how to choose among these aids? How to choose, especially when the aids are not material, as they might be in “standard” theurgic practice (stones, “signed” plants, etc.), but are verbal, literary, textual? The question becomes one of canon formation, a question which we see in many guises and in many forms in the Renaissance. Which are the right texts to read? In what order? Which to exclude?

While the esoteric mentality serves often as a means of inclusion when creating small intellectual communities (i.e., insiders who are initiated, outsiders who are the uninitiated), the tradition also serves as a means of exclusion with respect to information transfer. When there are so many sources out there to choose from, how do we choose what *not* to read, what to exclude? Here insider status helps greatly, for it affords a truly natural certainty as to what to exclude. Reuchlin offers the example of a cow, which knows with an inner certitude which blades of grass to eat, which to pass over. So too does the initiated Pythagorean Kabbalist have an inner certainty.⁷⁷ At the end of book 2, the “Pythagorean” book, the interlocutors recognize the critical importance of the type of information transfer under discussion. The interlocutor Marranus sums up, saying that it seems that Pythagoreans and Kabbalists agree, since both want to bring men’s minds to perfect blessedness. To do so, they both engage in information transfer by means of symbols, signs, adages and proverbs, numbers and figures, letters, syllables, and words.⁷⁸ As the boundaries of knowledge were being burst open — by printing, by careful, ever more intense philological scholarship, by debates and by an increasingly rigid seeming religious atmosphere, manifested paradoxically in a burgeoning plurality of orthodoxies whose outer limits no one was sure of — coded, veiled wisdom was appealing, as a short cut, as a means to combine learning and inspired wisdom, an epistemological bypass to knowing the truth.

These five features, which Reuchlin shares with many other esoterists, serve to highlight also some of the things that distinguish him. His specific concentration on Pythagoreanism, for example, gave him the widest kind of hermeneutic latitude. While “veiled” wisdom was a commonplace in the Platonic tradition, the Pythagorean tradition, in the eyes of some interpreters,

76. *DAC*, Biiii verso: “Nonne Abrahae dictum fuit, ‘Suspice coelum et numera stellas si potes,’ nec potuit ipse, quanquam suo tempore, secundum Rambam, insignis astrologus erat?”

77. *DAC*, Kiii recto: “Cernitis bovem depascere floridum aliquod et viride pratum, non quidem totum, sed deliberata electione nunc hanc ingerere [*cod.* inquirere] herbam, nunc illam, subitoque aliam quidem facile relinquere, aliam autem prorsus obmittere, donec ad consentaneum et vescum sibi alimentum perveniat quo consistat et requiescat. Hoc modo Cabalistae post campos scientiarum latissimos et prata contemplationum omni amoenitate ornata multas et varias qualitercunque olentes herbas degustant, ut demum toto gramine perlustrato illud divinum Moly reperiant, cuius quanquam radix nigrescit, tamen flos, Homeri opinione, albus enitet lacti similis, quo invento cunctas repulisse miseras videntur, appetitus sui finem in hoc mundo consecuti foelicem. Virtus vero Moly est, opera difficilia radix, flos animorum tranquillitas.”

78. *DAC*, Ki, recto: “Nam quid aliud intendit vel Cabalaeus vel Pythagoras, nisi animos hominum in deos referre, hoc est ad perfectam beatitudinem promovere? Quae autem alia via quam similis utriusque tradendi modus et ambobus aequa exercitatio per symbola et notas adagia et paroemias, per numeros et figuras, per literas, syllabas, et verba.”

took this aspect one step further. Pythagoras deliberately communicated in riddles, with concealed meanings that the interpreter, here Reuchlin, had, using inner certainty, to reveal. Reuchlin is interesting in this respect precisely because he represents a kind of fusion between two mentalities often seen as contradictory.

On the one hand, his *oeuvre* in general and the *De arte cabalistica* in particular offer philological criticism and argumentation with which Valla or Poliziano would have been comfortable. Reuchlin protests a number of times that Latin interpreters have wrongly understood the meaning of Hebrew biblical texts, and his knowledge was undergirded by sound, careful scholarship. But this sort of precise philology is often linked with a proto-modern historical and critical sense associated with the rise of *Quellenforschung*. And here we see that Reuchlin is far from that latter, nineteenth-century paradigm of critical reading. The “symbolic” Pythagorean tradition which Reuchlin associated with the Kabbalah called specifically for interpretation. It was a hermeneutics without an even possible critical foundation, a philology whose base text could never, by design, be determined. When later interpreters — ancient, late ancient, medieval, and early modern — approached the above-mentioned Pythagorean *symbola*, for example, they believed they had necessarily to interpret them in order to unveil their hidden meaning. Recent scholarship has shown fairly convincingly that in the original Pythagorean communities the sayings were never imbued with the kind of deeper meaning that later interpreters often assumed, and functioned instead as ritual markers, as precepts which, under the guidance of a vatic figure, the insiders were simply to obey, not to understand in an apodeictic sense.⁷⁹ Yet for Reuchlin, surrendering to this sort of riddle-ridden, enigmatic discourse and joining it to the Kabbalah allowed him to combine the skills of a philologist with the soul of an esoterist. His case shows us better than any that philology, despite its often positivistic, “scientific” aspect, is as undergirded by ideology as are almost all intellectual discourses.

79. Especially important here is W. Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. E. Minar, Jr. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).