

# *The Kybalion's* New Clothes

An Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Text's Dubious Association with Hermeticism

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## Introduction

*The Kybalion*, published in 1912 by the pseudonymous Three Initiates, is widely regarded as a classic of 20<sup>th</sup> century esotericism. The work consists of aphorisms from the eponymous text, as well as extensive commentary thereon. It outlines seven principles or universal laws “upon which,” it claims, “the entire Hermetic Philosophy is based.”<sup>1</sup> A proper understanding and application of these laws, according to the text, will allow an individual to achieve self-mastery.

It is now generally acknowledged that *The Kybalion* (both as a collection of aphorisms and its encompassing commentary) was a product of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New Thought movement, likely written singlehandedly by William Walker Atkinson. Despite widespread acceptance of this position, however, *The Kybalion*’s self-proclaimed association with Hermeticism has gone largely unchallenged. Philip Deslippe, in his introduction to the Penguin/Tarcher edition of *The Kybalion*, has much to say about the New Thought context out of which the work arose—and makes a convincing argument for Atkinsonian authorship—but at the same time he enthusiastically promotes *The Kybalion* as an inheritor of Hermetic tradition, claiming that it “bridged the occult worlds of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, pulling together esoteric teachings and organizing them in such a way that they would uniquely inspire a vast and diverse group of seekers until the present day.”<sup>2</sup> While the latter may be true, the assertion that *The Kybalion* is an example of Hermetic philosophy, or even an inheritor

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<sup>1</sup> Three Initiates, *The Kybalion: A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece* (1908; reprint, Chicago: The Yogi Publication Society, 1940), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Deslippe, introduction to *The Kybalion: The Definitive Edition*, by William Walker Atkinson writing as Three Initiates, edited by Philip Deslippe (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2011), 1.

thereof, is on considerably shakier ground. To be sure, *The Kybalion* is firmly ensconced within the western esoteric tradition. Is it, however, consonant with the particular milieu of Hermeticism? This study undertakes a critical analysis of the thought of *The Kybalion* as compared with and contrasted to ancient and modern Hermetic thought in order to answer this question. Additionally, while the association of *The Kybalion* with New Thought is by no means a novel concept, analyses detailing the commonalities between the two bodies of work have hitherto been largely cursory in nature. Thus one of the goals of this study is to illustrate more clearly the ways in which *The Kybalion* evinces New Thought doctrine, and to frame it appropriately within this context. *The Kybalion* thus being situated within its appropriate historical framework, the study will then proceed to evaluate *The Kybalion*'s connection or lack thereof to Hermeticism as an historical current.

### **Spurious Antiquity**

Although *The Kybalion* pretends antiquity, it is decidedly a product of modernity. The principle of vibration which the aphorisms so heavily emphasize, for example, originated in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the British philosopher and medical doctor David Hartley (1705-1757).<sup>3</sup> The commentary on the aphorisms is decidedly of 20<sup>th</sup> century provenance, referring as it does to works that were not published until the early 1900s.<sup>4</sup> The overwhelming likelihood is that the aphorisms were penned concurrently with the commentary text in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and presented as a product of ancient thought in order to afford it the veneer of

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Bowen Oberg, "David Hartley and the Association of Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 3 (1976), 442-443.

<sup>4</sup> Deslippe, intro. to *The Kybalion*, 19.

respectability that religion acquires when associated with historic tradition. Nor was this practice at all uncommon within the New Thought movement. Horatio Wills Dresser, a prominent figure in New Thought circles, freely admits that “the tendency is to attribute to the New Thought far more than can with historical accuracy be claimed for it.”<sup>5</sup> He further says that “this history [of the New Thought] might disappoint some readers, if they had made up their minds that it is necessary to look into the far past and discover ideas in India, in ancient Greece, in the Middle Ages, which resemble the therapeutic ideas of today.”<sup>6</sup>

The false pretension of *The Kybalion*'s antiquity extends even to the name of the text itself. The word “Kybalion” takes the form of a Greek noun, but has no meaning in that language or any other. It is possible that the name was constructed with a similarity in mind to the word Kabbalah, and others have speculated that it was inspired by the Graeco-Roman goddess Cybele (Gk. *Kubelē*), but as Deslippe points out “the lack of any correspondence or reference to either of them within *The Kybalion* suggests that if anything these are nothing more than coincidence.”<sup>7</sup> Rather than coincidence, however, it seems the more likely explanation that the title was chosen as an allusion to one or both of these sources to insinuate a link to antiquity. The text itself is silent on this point, saying only that “the exact significance and meaning of the term [have] been lost for several centuries.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Presenting *The Kybalion***

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<sup>5</sup> Horatio Wills Dresser, *A History of the New Thought Movement* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1919), v.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Deslippe, intro. to *The Kybalion*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 21.

*The Kybalion's* central thesis is that existence is governed by seven universal laws: the principles of mentalism, correspondence, vibration, polarity, rhythm, cause and effect, and gender.<sup>9</sup> Briefly stated, these principles when taken as a whole outline a form of philosophical idealism<sup>10</sup> in which the universe exists in the mind of deity; that the macrocosm corresponds to the microcosm; that the differences between varying states of matter, mind, and spirit are a result of differing rates of vibration; that everything has its opposite but that all opposites are ultimately identical in nature; that there is a natural swing back and forth between opposing extremes; that every cause has an effect and vice-versa; and that everything evinces both male and female qualities.<sup>11</sup> *The Kybalion* then goes on to detail a skill of “mental transmutation” which is defined as “the art of changing and transforming mental states, forms, and conditions, into others” by proper understanding and application of these universal laws.<sup>12</sup>

At first glance, these principles are all consonant with Hermetic philosophy. A deeper investigation into both the thought itself and its corresponding historical context, however, reveals that the work is overwhelmingly representative of the American New Thought movement which arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### **The New Thought Connection**

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<sup>9</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Blackburn, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), s.v. “idealism” – “Any doctrine holding that reality is fundamentally mental in nature.”

<sup>11</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 25-40.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Originally known under many names, including Mental Science, Christian Science, and Mind Cure, before crystallizing under the overarching name of “New Thought” in the 1890s, the New Thought was fundamentally a “popular American self-help psychology” originating in the 1870s that promised mastery through self-discipline.<sup>13</sup> In 1889, with the advent of William Juvenal Colville’s *The Spiritual Science of Health and Healing*, the therapies associated with the New Thought became spiritualized “in a manner typical of believers in mediumship or spiritism.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, while hitherto a scientific-spiritual doctrine, New Thought thereafter forged its spiritual roots in American Mesmerism.<sup>15</sup>

The exertion of mind over matter that was a central preoccupation of the New Thought was achieved by “putting ourselves in new relation to the world about us by changing our thought concerning it.”<sup>16</sup> Horatio Wills Dresser expounds further upon this principle in his introduction to *The Spirit of the New Thought*, when he states that the doctrine “is a theory and method of mental life with special reference to healing, and the fostering of attitudes, modes of conduct and beliefs which make for health and general welfare. The theory in brief is that man leads an essentially mental life, influenced, shaped, and controlled by anticipations, hopes, and suggestions.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2006), s.v. “New Thought Movement”

<sup>14</sup> Dresser, *History*, 136.

<sup>15</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Studies in the History of Religions (*Numen Book Series*) LXXII (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 483-485.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah J. Farmer, “The Abundant Life,” in *The Spirit of New Thought: Essays and Addresses by Representative Authors and Leaders*, edited by Horatio Wills Dresser (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1917), 31.

<sup>17</sup> Horatio Wills Dresser, introduction to *The Spirit of the New Thought: Essays and Addresses by Representative Authors and Leaders*, edited by Horatio Wills Dresser (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1919).

This indeed is the focus of the “mental transmutation” outlined in the *Kybalion*. A central component of mental transmutation as found in the New Thought was the “law of attraction.” Within New Thought the primary emphasis of this transmutation was on the healing of the body and mind. Physical disease was considered to be an outward expression of one’s inner state, which was regarded as the focal point of attraction. By changing one’s mental attitude through affirmations and positive thinking, disease could therefore be cured and troubling mental states overcome.<sup>18</sup> While the mind-over-matter principle was most visibly applied to illness and wellness, however, as time went on it was applied to other areas including happiness and spiritual attainment.<sup>19</sup>

The understanding and proper application of thought and attitude, then, was regarded as essentially salvific. In contrast to the “old thought,” which “was undeniably pessimistic, ... dwelt on sin, emphasized the darkness and misery of the world, [and] the distress and the suffering,” New Thought “dwelt on life and light, pointing the way to the mastery of all sorrow and suffering.”<sup>20</sup> The New Thought emphasis on salvific knowledge often comes in the guise of a doctrine of universal law. “In all things,” according to Dresser, “there is but one law. That law is good. It is the foundation principle of the universe. But, through ignorance, man temporarily suffers and causes suffering because he knows not the universality of the law—because he looks outside of his own inner world for the cause.”<sup>21</sup> The New Thought, on the other hand, “asserts

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<sup>18</sup> Dresser, *History*, 161-162.

<sup>19</sup> *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, s.v. “New Thought Movement”

<sup>20</sup> Dresser, *History*, 160.

<sup>21</sup> Dresser, intro. to *Spirit of the New Thought*, 12.

that it is possible for the soul to command the mind,” so long as we in turn “obey the laws of the mind.”<sup>22</sup>

When the content of *The Kybalion* is examined in light of the New Thought philosophy, it becomes readily apparent that the text is heavily representative of that milieu. This association becomes even clearer when the work of William Walker Atkinson, the probable author of *The Kybalion*, is examined in closer detail.

### **The Case for Atkinsonian Authorship**

William Walker Atkinson was an influential figure in the New Thought movement, serving as an editor of several publications and writing abundantly on a variety of topics, often pseudonymously. He variously referred to his writings as practical occultism, New Psychology, and New Thought.<sup>23</sup> The half dozen pseudonyms he wrote under were similarly colorful and diverse, including Yogi Ramachandra, Theron Q. Dumont, and Magus Incognito.<sup>24</sup> He was additionally a prolific lecturer and served for a time as the honorary vice president of the International New Thought Alliance.<sup>25</sup>

Philip Deslippe, in his introduction to the Penguin/Tarcher edition of *The Kybalion*, makes a strong case for ascribing sole authorship of the text to Atkinson. He dismantles many of the other common speculations as to who the author of *The Kybalion* might be, and provides

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<sup>22</sup> Nannie S. Bond, “The New Thought,” in *The Spirit of the New Thought: Essays and Addresses by Representative Authors and Leaders*, edited by Horatio Wills Dresser (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1917), 138-139.

<sup>23</sup> Deslippe, intro. to *The Kybalion*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.



evidence that is at least highly suggestive as to Atkinson being the real face behind the Three Initiates. Among other similarities, he points out the overwhelmingly common theme of seven cosmic or universal laws in Atkinson's work.<sup>26</sup> Remarkable as well is the fact that in the 1912 edition of *Who's Who in America*, Atkinson's self-submitted biographical entry includes *The Kybalion* among his list of works.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps most compelling to anyone who has encountered Atkinson's other writings, however, is the uncanny similarity in style between his other works and *The Kybalion*. Deslippe himself observes that there are "similarities of content, format, and source material [that] do not exist with any other writer," and indeed that "when placed alongside Atkinson's other works from the same period, the style of *The Kybalion* is consistent and seamless with them, employing the same tone, voice, and quirks of syntax and word choice."<sup>28</sup>

Upon even the most cursory examination of Atkinson's other writings, it becomes readily apparent that these similarities are pervasive. His emphasis on vibrations, on mental transmutation, on the law of attraction, and on cosmic law in general, strongly echoes the content and prose of *The Kybalion*. In *Thought Vibration or the Law of Attraction in the Thought World*, published contemporaneously with *The Kybalion*, he specifically uses the phrase "thought transmutation," and refers to this "secret of the Will" as "the magic key which opens all doors."<sup>29</sup> He further develops this idea of the "ancient key" in *The Law of the New Thought* when he states that "ancient writers have carefully placed bits of...esoteric truth among writings of wide

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>29</sup> William Walker Atkinson, *Thought Vibration or the Law of Attraction in the Thought World* (Chicago: The Library Shelf, 1909), 2-4, 38, 50.

circulation, knowing that only those with the *key* could read...”<sup>30</sup> He continues, “[The] idea of the Oneness of All...is at the center of all religious thought, although it is hidden, until one finds the *key*. *It is the key that opens all doors.*”<sup>31</sup> Compare this to *The Kybalion*, which states that its intent is “to place in the hands of the student a Master-Key with which he may open the many inner doors in the Temple of Mystery through the main portals he has already entered.”<sup>32</sup>

The focus on the concept of vibrations and the way in which this material is presented is also strikingly similar between Atkinson’s other works and *The Kybalion*. In *Thought Vibration*, Atkinson declares that “Light and Heat are manifested by vibrations of a far lower intensity than those of Thought, but the difference is solely in the rate of vibration.”<sup>33</sup> Compare this to *The Kybalion*, which states that “the [Hermetic] teachings are to the effect that Spirit is at one end of the Pole of Vibration, the other Pole being certain extremely gross forms of matter.”<sup>34</sup> Atkinson also denies the existence of chance in both *Thought Vibration* and *The Kybalion*. In the former, he states that “there is no such thing as chance. Law maintains everywhere, and all that happens happens because of the operation of Law.”<sup>35</sup> *The Kybalion* similarly proclaims that “everything happens according to Law; Chance is but a name for Law not recognized.”<sup>36</sup> There is also a curious focus on the distinction between fear and courage. In *The Kybalion* we are told that in

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<sup>30</sup> William Walker Atkinson, *The Law of the New Thought*, edited by Lux Newman and Phineas Parkhurst Quimby Philosophical Society (1902; reprint, n.p.: Seed of Life Publishing, 2008), 2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. Emphasis in original.

<sup>32</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Atkinson, *Thought Vibration*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 138.

<sup>35</sup> Atkinson, *Thought Vibration*, 110.

<sup>36</sup> Three Initiates, *The Kybalion*, 38.

“the case of a Fearful man,” he can “be filled with the highest degree of Courage and Fearlessness” by “raising his mental vibrations along the line of Fear-Courage.”<sup>37</sup> In *Thought Vibration*, Atkinson advises, “When you feel Fearful, remember that the Real Self fears nothing, and assert Courage.”<sup>38</sup> Here the prose is so similar that Atkinson even applies the same idiosyncratic capitalization in both works, which should perhaps be unsurprising given that the two works were published within one year of each other.

Nor is Walker’s claim of an ancient origin for *The Kybalion*’s New Thought an unusual one. Various authors connected the New Thought with Theosophy, spiritism, pantheism, the religion of India, and the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg.<sup>39</sup> The New Thought “naturally found varied expressions because it appealed to individuals of different types. Each one gained the central ideas and then began to develop his special views around them.”<sup>40</sup> Atkinson himself quite notably and consistently claims that “there is nothing *new* about this truth. The same thing has been said by the ancient philosophers of India, five thousand years ago; by the philosophers of Greece, twenty-five hundred years ago; by Berkeley, Hegel and Kant, and their followers.”<sup>41</sup> Atkinson expounds on this further in *The Law of the New Thought*, when he states that “the New Thought is the *oldest* thought in existence. It has been cherished by the chosen few in all ages; the masses of the people not having been ready for its teachings. It has been called by all names

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>38</sup> Atkinson, *Thought Vibration*, 35.

<sup>39</sup> Dresser, *History*, 145-146.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>41</sup> Atkinson, quoted in Dresser, *History*, 313.

– has appeared in all guises.”<sup>42</sup> He goes on to state that the doctrine of the New Thought contains “mighty truths which have nestled in the bosom of the esoteric teachings of all religions, in the philosophies of the past and present, in the temples of the Orient, in the schools of ancient Greece.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed the first part of *The Law of the New Thought* is rife with vague references to occult lore and mystical principles.

Dresser strongly objects to this pretension of antiquity, however, stating that “the New Thought differs from the idealisms of the past just because it disregards them and starts on a practical basis. Luckily, its pioneers were uninformed in these ancient systems.”<sup>44</sup> And indeed Atkinson does seem remarkably uninformed when it comes to Hermetic philosophy, as we shall soon discover.

### **Commonalities with Hermeticism**

To be fair, there is some overlap between the thought of *The Kybalion* and the Hermetic philosophy. The most obvious connection with Hermeticism, and perhaps the only point of connection entirely specific to Hermetic philosophy itself, is of course *The Kybalion*’s use of the oft-quoted “Hermetic Axiom” from the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus, rendered in *The Kybalion* as, “As above, so below; as below, so above.”<sup>45</sup> *The Kybalion* affirms the correspondence of the macrocosm and the microcosm, stating that “there is a harmony,

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<sup>42</sup> Atkinson, *Law of the New Thought*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Dresser, *History*, 313.

<sup>45</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 28. This axiom is used in a multitude of other places within the text.

agreement, and correspondence between the several planes of Manifestation, Life and Being.”<sup>46</sup>

Apart from its expression in the Emerald Tablet, this concept is echoed in the *Asclepius*, 4: “All earthly things are images, reflections, of their eternal forms within God, and in this sense the world is an image of God.”<sup>47</sup>

The doctrine that the physical world is a reflection of the eternal forms within God is common to the Platonic milieu in general, contributing to a shared idealist cosmology between *The Kybalion* and Hermeticism. Israel Regardie expounds upon the nature of Hermetic idealism when he states that the Kabbalah (itself a Platonizing form of mysticism) “is...an objective idealism. All our perceptions are not exclusively of the ego, nor of that which is perceived; they are representations of a certain relation and interaction between the two.”<sup>48</sup> This is true not only of the Kabbalah, of course, but to the entirety of Hermetic philosophy stretching back to the *Corpus Hermeticum* itself. The Hermeticism of Late Antiquity held that the world was an image of God, which inherently “presupposes the Middle Platonist view that the ideas, i.e. the forms after which Plato’s Demiurge created the world, are enclosed in the mind (*nous*) of the supreme God, as his thoughts.”<sup>49</sup> *The Kybalion* is thus in agreement with Hermeticism, and indeed with the entirety of the Platonic milieu, when it states that “All is Mind.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, *Kybalion*, 113.

<sup>47</sup> *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. “Hermetism”

<sup>48</sup> Israel Regardie, *A Garden of Pomegranates: Skrying on the Tree of Life*, edited by Chic Cicero and Sandra Tabatha Cicero, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1999), 128.

<sup>49</sup> *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. “Hermetism”

<sup>50</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 26.

Nor, however, does this commonality lie with Hermeticism alone. Philosophical idealism is a common feature of the New Age movement as a whole, as is the idea of evolution that *The Kybalion* so readily embraces. Indeed, states Hanegraaff, “The type of idealism which proved most congenial to the new evolutionism saw the ‘external world’ as depending upon ‘an Absolute Mind which was at once the type, sum, and ground of all individual minds—the individual soul universalized.’”<sup>51</sup>

The concept of consciously overcoming the base desires and impulses of the individual by use of one’s higher faculties, as it were overcoming the will with the Will, is also central to *The Kybalion*’s philosophy, and is in fact a prerequisite for the mental transmutation which it promotes. “The average person,” *The Kybalion* states, “is too lazy to act,” and “such persons are ruled almost entirely by the minds and wills of other persons, whom they allow to do their thinking and willing for them,” whereas “[the strong men and women of the world] dominate their own minds by their Will.”<sup>52</sup> Dion Fortune agrees with this assessment when she states that “the direction of the energies of life must be removed from the domain of the desires to that of the will. Until this is done there can be no steady progression in any direction, for the desires are called forth from without, not directed from within, and vary with the external stimulus.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the principles of correspondence and mentalism already addressed, the principles of polarity and gender espoused within *The Kybalion* also find purchase within Hermetic philosophy. *The Kybalion* states that “Everything is Dual; everything has poles;

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<sup>51</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 467.

<sup>52</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 205-206.

<sup>53</sup> Dion Fortune, *The Training and Work of An Initiate*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: The Aquarian Press, 1955), 22.

everything has its pair of opposites.”<sup>54</sup> This concept of polarity can be found in Kabbalistic cosmology, in the dual pillars of Masonic and Golden Dawn temple symbolism, and in a variety of other locations within modern Hermetic thought. John Michael Greer articulates this principle as it applies to Hermetic philosophy when he states, “The essential idea behind the principle of polarity is that *anything in the universe can be understood, in magical terms, as an energy relationship between two opposed forces, resulting in a third, balanced force.*”<sup>55</sup> The principle of gender, which can be viewed as a more specific articulation of that of polarity, also finds expression within Hermetic philosophy dating back to the *Corpus Hermeticum*: “That God is androgynous is repeatedly stated in the *Poimandres* (C.H. I, 9 and 15). According to the *Asclepius*, 20, God is ‘completely filled with the fecundity of both sexes’ (*utraque sexus fecunditate plenissimus*).”<sup>56</sup> The *Asclepius*, 21, continues: “Not only god [is of both sexes]...but all things ensouled and soulless, for it is impossible for any of the things that are to be infertile.”<sup>57</sup> Thus *The Kybalion* is in agreement with longstanding Hermetic tradition when it states that “everything in the organic world manifests both genders—there is always the Masculine present in the Feminine form.”<sup>58</sup>

## Diverging Viewpoints

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<sup>54</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 32.

<sup>55</sup> John Michael Greer, *Paths of Wisdom: The Magical Cabala in the Western Tradition*, Llewellyn’s High Magick Series (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1996), 32. Emphasis in original.

<sup>56</sup> *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. “Hermetism”

<sup>57</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 79.

<sup>58</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 189.

With at least four of the seven core principles of *The Kybalion* clearly attested within Hermetic sources (and the principle of vibration so common within the New Age Movement that it bears no comment), it is an easy mental leap to associate the text as a whole with the Hermetic philosophy it claims to represent. This association is an appealing one, but is ultimately based upon relatively superficial commonalities. When one delves deeper into the core of Hermetic philosophy, the resemblances quickly begin to fall apart.

The most readily visible divergence takes place in the realm of cosmology. In common with all Platonizing philosophies, Hermeticism speaks of a multiplicity of emanations from the godhead. Accounts differ in number, but the pattern is the same: the one God gives rise to lesser deities or principles, the last of which is responsible for creating the physical world as *demiurgos*. When Pico della Mirandola wedded Kabbalah to Hermeticism, the prevailing cosmological view was irrevocably changed to the Kabbalistic tenfold structure. This model would prove to overshadow the original cosmologies of the Hermetica. Common to all, however, is the concept of a finite number of discrete manifestations, the final or “lowest” of which constitutes what we perceive as physical reality. In contradistinction to this view, *The Kybalion* posits a vastly different model of existence.

*The Kybalion* begins its exposition on cosmology by dividing the universe into “three great classes of phenomena, known as the Three Great Planes,” i.e. the spiritual, the mental, and the physical.<sup>59</sup> This tripartite division between *anima*, *spiritus*, and *corpus* is an uncontroversial one, having a long history not merely within western esotericism as a whole, but also in exoteric theology. As *The Kybalion*’s cosmological view is expounded further, however, the similarity

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<sup>59</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 113-114.



rapidly deteriorates. “The Hermetists,” *The Kybalion* claims, “sub-divide each of the Three Great Planes into Seven Minor Planes, and each of these latter are also sub-divided into seven sub-planes, all divisions being more or less arbitrary, shading into each other, and adopted merely for convenience of scientific study and thought.”<sup>60</sup> The number seven could conceivably be taken to refer to the seven classical planets, but this is a stretch—and the further sevenfold subdivision results in no less than a 147-fold cosmological scheme. Even more dissonant with the Platonic foundation upon which Hermeticism as an historical current is built is the claim that each of these divisions are arbitrary and continuous. The divisions in Hermetic cosmology, whether those detailed in the *Hermetica* or those in the later Kabbalistic model, are most definitely neither of these. Even more strangely, while in Hermetic thought we are all believed to operate on the planes of body, mind, and spirit simultaneously, this does not seem to be the case in *The Kybalion*’s idiosyncratic perspective. Instead, we are held to occupy only a single one of the 147 planes at a time, and the destiny of the human race is to evolve ever toward the higher planes. “The average man of today,” *The Kybalion* states, “occupies but the fourth sub-division of the Plane of Human Mind, and only the most intelligent have crossed the borders of the Fifth Sub-Division. It has taken the race millions of years to reach this stage, and it will take many more years for the race to move on to the sixth and seventh sub-divisions, and beyond.”<sup>61</sup> Thus our destiny is not to rise mystically upon the planes and unite with the godhead, but rather to evolve along a slow and plodding path as a species toward this end goal. Even the deities of mankind, *The Kybalion* claims, are mortals like us: “We may call them ‘gods’ if we like, but still they are

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

Elder Brethren of the Race,—the advanced souls who have outstripped their brethren, and who have foregone the ecstasy of Absorption by THE ALL, in order to help the race on its upward journey along The Path.”<sup>62</sup> It is curious that nowhere else in the text is mention made of this ecstatic union with the godhead, but this lack of emphasis seems typical for *The Kybalion*.

Indeed, the differences in cosmology are almost trivial compared to the fundamental difference in the focus of *The Kybalion* as contrasted with that of Hermeticism across its two millennia. Hermeticism is and has always been centrally and unwaveringly focused on the experiential knowledge of divinity. This is apparent from the very first lines of the Poimandres, in which the narrator states his greatest desire: “I wish to learn about the things that are, to understand their nature and to know god [*gnōsai ton theon*]” (C.H. I.3).<sup>63</sup> The focus on salvific knowledge is so central to Hermeticism that in C.H. VII we are told that “the greatest evil in mankind is ignorance [*agnōsia*] concerning god.”<sup>64</sup> Even the common cosmological emphasis of the Hermetica revolves around this preoccupation. The overarching concern of the authors of the Hermetica was “the ultimate cause of the universe, God, and therefore the aim of all their discussions on cosmology and creation was to bring the reader or listener through admiration of the cosmos to the adoration of and mystical union with the supreme God.”<sup>65</sup> The point of all the discussion of the nature of the universe, the gods, the heavens and the earth, was to elevate the audience to the divine *gnosis*. In contrast, *The Kybalion* focuses on knowledge of the nature of

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>63</sup> Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>65</sup> *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. “Hermeticism”

the universe as a means to attaining knowledge of the universal laws, in order that this knowledge in turn may facilitate the practice of mental transmutation which is the central focus of the text.

Nor is this knowledge the gnosis of the Hermetica. The knowledge of universal law spoken of in *The Kybalion* does not represent an experiential knowledge attained through an encounter with divinity; instead, it is an intellectual understanding of the principles of universal law and the technique of mental transmutation. As technical knowledge, this would fall under the Greek concept of *episteme* rather than that of *gnosis*. The aim of the New Thought, and with it *The Kybalion*, “was to eliminate the ‘false beliefs,’ ‘the errors of mind,’ which had held [people] in subjection.”<sup>66</sup> The emphasis of *The Kybalion* was not on gnosis but on *noesis*, in the sense that its focus was “purely intellectual comprehension.”<sup>67</sup> This is in sharp contrast to the divine gnosis, which refers “not...to rational, philosophical knowledge, but to religious, spiritual insight, based on revelation.”<sup>68</sup>

The Hermetica, along with the overarching milieu of Middle Platonism out of which Hermeticism arose, display an idealist view of the cosmos: the universe is created out of the Mind of the divine, and indeed the term “Mind” (*nous*) is synonymous with the highest God. Given the central focus of *The Kybalion* on the mind and mental transmutation, one would therefore naturally be inclined to assume that these principles are consonant with the worldview of Hermeticism. And indeed there is nothing *contrary* to Hermetic philosophy in the concept of

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<sup>66</sup> Dresser, *History*, 132.

<sup>67</sup> *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, s.v. “noesis”

<sup>68</sup> *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. “Gnosticism I: Gnostic Religion”

mental transmutation. But the mind spoken of in *The Kybalion* is not the Mind of the Hermetica. The Hermetica distinguish between Mind (*nous*) as the Supreme God, the One, the Good—and the second God or demiurge called the *logos*. The thought of *The Kybalion* is decidedly focused on *logos*, and this is a central distinction between Hermetic thought and that of *The Kybalion*. The emphasis of the Hermetica is on the divine Mind as the highest expression of the godhead. All else flows from this perfect Mind, and the object of the Hermetists was to reunite themselves with Mind. *The Kybalion*, on the other hand, sets the stage by espousing that the world exists within the macrocosmic Mind of the highest—and then proceeds to shift its emphasis thereafter to the transmutation of the microcosmic mind of the individual. *The Kybalion*, then, is fundamentally concerned with mind rather than Mind, with *logos* rather than *nous*.

Nor, according to Hermeticism, is *logos* the proper focus of one's reverence (*eusebia*), which should only be on the divine *nous*, as espoused in C.H. IV.4: "All those who heeded the proclamation [of god] and immersed themselves in mind [*ebaptisanto tou noos*] participated in knowledge and became perfect [*teleoi*] people because they received mind. But those who missed the point of the proclamation are people of reason [*logikoi*] because they did not receive <the gift of> mind as well and do not know the purpose or the agents of their coming to be."<sup>69</sup> Given the Greek terminology used in the passage (*ebaptisanto* is a form of the same verb that means "to baptize"), a more revealing if somewhat looser translation of the former sentence above taking into account the connotations of the vocabulary would be, "All those who... baptized themselves in the godhead participated in revelatory knowledge and became perfect people because they received God." Far from directing one's reverence toward the *nous* of the

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<sup>69</sup> Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 15-16.

godhead, The *Kybalion* evinces a complete lack of emphasis on piety. The concept of reverence (*eusebia*) is absolutely central to Hermetic philosophy, and the focus on the interrelationship between God, the world, and humanity is a predominant component of this thought.<sup>70</sup> It is not through *The Kybalion*'s practice of mental transmutation, according to the *Hermetica*, but rather through *reverence* that one's thoughts are changed: "Reverence [*eusebia*] is knowledge [*gnōsis*] of god, and one who has come to know god, filled with all good things, has thoughts that are divine and not like those of the multitude." (C.H. IX.4)<sup>71</sup>

The "unanimous aim" of the Hermetists was "to bring the reader to the praise and worship of the supreme God, who is 'not visible [i.e. knowable], but evident within the visible' (Armenian *Definitions* 1, 2)."<sup>72</sup> In the *Poimandres*, and in the *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead*, the authors "go even further and describe ecstatic experiences in which the hermetist leaves his earthly state behind and feels himself united with the supreme God or the universe."<sup>73</sup>

In fairness to Atkinson, it should be noted that the Nag Hammadi Codices (and therefore the text of the *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead*) were not discovered until 1945 and were thus unknown during the writing of *The Kybalion*, and the *Definitions* were not published until 1956. Regardless of the "considerable differences" that exist in the expressions of Hermetic mysticism in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, however, "they all have in common that the hermetist

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<sup>70</sup> *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. "Hermetism"

<sup>71</sup> Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 28.

<sup>72</sup> *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. "Hermetism"

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

comes to an intuitive knowledge of himself, the universe and God – a knowledge that transcends the ordinary human mental faculties and is experienced as a unification with the ground of being, God.”<sup>74</sup> *The Kybalion* evinces none of this emphasis on ecstatic experience of unity with the divine or the attainment of salvific gnosis.

All in all, *The Kybalion* seems to commit the error of confusing the means with the end. Mental transmutation is held to be the pinnacle of Hermetic philosophy. A small amount of textual analysis serves powerfully to reinforce this impression. Of the 22 instances in which traits and abilities are ascribed to “the Masters” or “the Hermetists” (terms which are used interchangeably), every one of them pertains to the ability to control their mental world: to dominating their moods, transmuting and mastering their mental states, attaining emotional stability, and developing powers to control the world around them thereby.<sup>75</sup> Even the passages pertaining to the Master or the Hermetist controlling cause and effect come back in the final analysis to the control of emotional and mental states. Their superhuman power, in the end, is nothing more than a form of mental continence. Their mastery is attained by understanding the natural laws and putting them into practice rather than rising on the planes to achieve ecstatic union with the godhead.

It may be granted that this emphasis on cosmic law and its proper application does have a place within Hermetic philosophy. Dion Fortune, in *The Training and Work of An Initiate*, lists as her three divisions of occultism “harmonization with Cosmic Law by means of right understanding,” “adjustment of disharmonies by means of the right use of the power that

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, entire.

knowledge gives,” and “purification of the soul by good works on all planes.”<sup>76</sup> *The Kybalion* of course shows heavy emphasis on at least the first two points, and if we interpret the mental self-mastery of *The Kybalion*’s “Masters” and their ability to shape the world around them thereby as applied to the achievement of good works, we can include the latter principle as well. But Fortune goes on to state that “there is nothing intrinsically spiritual about any of [these three things], yet nevertheless they are the *first three steps* of the stair that leads up to the heights of the Spirit... [emphasis added].”<sup>77</sup> Thus this knowledge of the universal laws and the harmonization of the individual therewith is merely the beginning of the journey, rather than the end goal as portrayed in *The Kybalion*. The Hermetica themselves are consistent with this point as well when they state in C.H. III.3-4, “And through the wonder-working course of the cycling gods they created every soul incarnate to contemplate heaven, ... the works of god and the working of nature; ... to know divine power; ... and to discover every means of working skillfully with things that are good. For them this is the beginning of the virtuous life and of wise thinking as far as the course of the cycling gods destines it...”<sup>78</sup> The Hermetica thus concur that this knowledge and its consequent power is the beginning of the virtuous life rather than the goal thereof.

For a text that purports to be a work of Hermetic philosophy, *The Kybalion* has surprisingly little to say about God. Atkinson does speak of “THE ALL” with some frequency, but this seems rather like a means to an end: after the rudiments of cosmology and the attributes

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<sup>76</sup> Fortune, *Training*, 69.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 13-14.

of God are laid out, little attention is given to them beyond their role in supporting the underlying structure of the universe which facilitates the technique of mental transmutation. In fact, *The Kybalion* is vehemently and explicitly anti-theological in its orientation, a trait which seems decidedly odd in juxtaposition to the orientation of Hermetic philosophy. In *The Kybalion* we are told that “theology means the attempts of men to ascribe personality, qualities, and characteristics to [THE ALL]; their theories regarding its affairs, will, desires, plans, and designs, and their assumption of the office of ‘middle-men’ between THE ALL and the people,” and are further told that “Theology and Metaphysics seem like broken reeds, rooted in the quicksands of ignorance.”<sup>79</sup> Ironically, immediately after decrying the ascription of qualities and characteristics to “THE ALL,” Atkinson himself proceeds within the very same page to ascribe to it the qualities and characteristics of infinity, omnipotence, immutability, and eternity.<sup>80</sup> Although *The Kybalion* grants the terms “Religion” and “Philosophy” greater credence, saying that these refer to “things having roots in Reality,” this distinction is at best a specious one.<sup>81</sup> It is impossible to determine what this so-called “Reality” is without resort to some sort of metaphysical and theological assumptions. There is the suggestion that what constitutes reality should simply be taken as axiomatic; but while this may be rhetorically appealing (what we do is Religion and Philosophy; what *they* do is Theology), it is philosophically fraught with difficulty. Just as there is no such thing as a free lunch, so too there is no such thing as a free metaphysics. In stark contrast to the position of *The Kybalion*, Hermetic philosophy has always engaged heavily in

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<sup>79</sup> Three Initiates, *Kybalion*, 57-58.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-61.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



theologizing. The Hermetica are rife with descriptions of God and the nature of ultimate reality, of talk of the various middle-men between God and man (in the guise of the demiurgos as well as planetary ouziarchs, the intelligible and the sensible gods, and various other entities), and of the relationship between divinity and humanity.<sup>82</sup> The philosophical Hermetica, according to Copenhaver, “deal instead with theological or, in some loose sense, philosophical issues: they reveal to man knowledge of the origins, nature and moral properties of divine, human and material being so that man can use this knowledge to save himself. The same pious philosophy or philosophical piety – a blend of theology, cosmogony, anthropogony, ethics, soteriology and eschatology – also characterizes the Latin *Asclepius*...”<sup>83</sup> Festugière, while finding the Hermetica wildly disparate in their teachings, identified “a certain attitude of piety, a certain turn of mind that lies in bending every philosophical inquiry in the direction of piety and knowledge of God” as the only common thread running throughout the entirety of the corpus.<sup>84</sup> This constitutes the central preoccupation of the Hermetica. To disparage theology, then, is in some measure tantamount to denouncing the Hermetica themselves.

### **Modern Perspectives on *The Kybalion***

Thus far we have seen that while *The Kybalion* holds a certain degree of consonance with Hermeticism as an historical current, the divergences therefrom are many and profound. Contemporary authors, however, seem strangely determined to exonerate *The Kybalion* from criticism that would cast the text as not authentically Hermetic. Deslippe, in his introduction to

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<sup>82</sup> *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, s.v. “Hermeticism”

<sup>83</sup> Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xxxii.

<sup>84</sup> Festugière, quoted in Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, lv.

the Penguin/Tarcher edition of *The Kybalion*, defends the work on this point—a surprising move given his work in unmasking Atkinson as the sole author and associating the text with the New Thought movement in which Atkinson was ensconced. While Deslippe acknowledges that the “Hermetic axioms” of *The Kybalion* likely had their origins in Atkinson’s own thought rather than in longstanding tradition, he maintains that “the elements of *The Kybalion* that would later be contested or maligned are perfectly aligned to the spirit of Hermeticism’s history.”<sup>85</sup> He then continues on to make his *apologia* in several distinct points. In the first of these he states that “to critique *The Kybalion* for being a type of unwashed, inauthentic spiritual teaching, or to be preoccupied by Atkinson’s use of a pseudonym or to question the authority of the text, is in some sense attack it for being traditionally Hermetic.”<sup>86</sup> The practice of pseudonymous authorship was indeed commonplace throughout the history of Hermeticism; but while Atkinson’s pseudonymous authorship can be defended, it does not render the text authentically Hermetic. Nor does the emphasis on cosmic law, as Deslippe implies when he states that “it was common for groups existing under the banner of Hermeticism to describe the universe in terms of cosmic or universal laws.”<sup>87</sup> Both of these practices were and still are widespread in numerous milieux, not merely that of Hermeticism. The focus on cosmic law is common to the entirety of the modern New Age movement (of which New Thought was a seminal component), and pseudonymous authorship has been so common a practice over the millennia that it needs no further comment.

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<sup>85</sup> Deslippe, intro. to *The Kybalion*, 15.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Deslippe proceeds to associate *The Kybalion* with Hermeticism via reference to the *Tabula Smaragdina*, or Emerald Tablet. “The closest parallel to an imagined ancient *Kybalion*,” he states, “would have been the Hermetic Emerald Tablet. . . The brief thirteen lines of the Emerald Tablet roughly provide a similar structure as the Seven Hermetic Laws of *The Kybalion*, and both employ the famous Hermetic line, ‘As above, so below.’”<sup>88</sup> He further claims that “while the Emerald Tablet. . .reduced Hermetic philosophy into a series of short axioms, *The Kybalion* argued its points, explaining and detailing each axiom and providing an underlying framework for them.”<sup>89</sup> This is an exceedingly bizarre claim, one which can only be taken either as a rather far-fetched attempt to lend *The Kybalion* an Hermetic veneer or as evidence of a profound lack of familiarity with the Emerald tablet itself. The Emerald Tablet is the origin of the “as above, so below” axiom,<sup>90</sup> which Atkinson echoes in *The Kybalion*, but the similarity between the two texts ends there. Apart from this single sentence, the Emerald Tablet offers no axioms, much less a structure similar to *The Kybalion*’s Seven Hermetic Laws. If the strongest similarity between *The Kybalion* and Hermeticism is to be found in the Emerald Tablet, the relation between the two is very sparse indeed.

Deslippe is by no means the only author who has defended *The Kybalion* against charges that it is inauthentically Hermetic. Richard Smoley, author of a number of works on western esotericism and former editor of *Gnosis* magazine, concedes that “the aphorisms in *The Kybalion* are very likely a pious fraud,” but while he holds that “there is a major difference between the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>90</sup> “*Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius, et quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius, ad perpetranda miracula rei unius.*” (According to the text of Chrysogonus Polydorus, Nuremburg 1541)

original Hermetic teachings and the New Thought-flavoured doctrines of *The Kybalion*,” he nonetheless believes that “it would be mistaken to conclude that this work is unfaithful to the tradition it invokes.”<sup>91</sup> As we have seen, however, it is not merely the original Hermetica with which *The Kybalion* differs—though the comparison with the *Corpus Hermeticum* provides the most visible evidence of the work’s divergence with Hermetic thought as a whole. The roots of gnosis, reverence, and ecstatic communion with the divine that were planted in Late Antiquity have remained central to Hermeticism even as it has sprouted numerous offshoot branches throughout the Renaissance and modernity.

Despite the centrality of the above values to Hermetic philosophy, however, one must question whether all texts claiming to be inheritors of the Hermetic tradition need necessarily evince all of these characteristics. Hermeticism is a broad tent, one which has given rise to numerous expressions of theory and practice. But while it is not necessary for a text to engage in theologizing in order to find a comfortable place within the Hermetic milieu, it should at least not be starkly *disconsonant* with the established body of thought. Particularly if the text claims to be a work of Hermetic *philosophy*, as does *The Kybalion*, it is answerable to the extant body of philosophy within the Hermetica and other works. The text fails on this count. As such, the longstanding supposition that *The Kybalion* is consonant with Hermetic philosophy as an historical current is one that is erroneous and in need of revision.

Hermeticism has long appropriated ideas and even entire systems which have not originated from within its own milieu. As a heavily syncretic movement both in ancient and modern times, it incorporates an eclectic mix of topics. To the original Graeco-Egyptian pagan

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<sup>91</sup> Richard Smoley, “The Mysterious Kybalion,” *New Dawn Magazine* 124 (Jan-Feb 2011), 13-14.

gnosticism of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Renaissance scholars added Jewish Kabbalism and angelic magic. John Dee contributed an entire scheme of Enochian thought and practice. In the seventeenth century, Rosicrucianism flourished under the banner of Hermes Trismegistus. The Golden Dawn contributed its para-masonic ritual influence and provided a coherent structure the likes of which hadn't been seen since Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia* four and a half centuries earlier. Even these, however, represent the logical evolution of the Graeco-Egyptian magical literature of the so-called "technical Hermetica," and evince a focus on the divine that is entirely lacking in *The Kybalion*. Can *The Kybalion* today be considered a part of the Hermetic tradition simply by reason of its widespread acceptance therein? Possibly so. But this is purely by virtue of assimilation, rather than by virtue of its own essential qualities. In the final analysis, *The Kybalion* says nothing about the Hermetic tradition—even if the contemporary Hermetic tradition has much to say about *The Kybalion*.