



***VIKTOR
RYDBERG***

***THE MAGIC
OF THE MIDDLE
AGES***



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The Magic of the Middle Ages

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I.

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THE COSMIC PHILOSOPHY OF THE MIDDLE AGES, AND ITS HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT.

INTRODUCTORY.

It was the belief of Europe during the Middle Ages, that our globe was the centre of the universe.

The earth, itself fixed and immovable, was encompassed by ten heavens successively encircling one another, and all of these except the highest in constant rotation about their centre.

This highest and immovable heaven, enveloping all the others and constituting the boundary between created things and the void, infinite space beyond, is the Empyrean, the heaven of fire, named also by the Platonizing philosophers the world of archetypes. Here “in a light which no one can enter,” God in triune majesty is sitting on his throne, while the tones of harmony from the nine revolving heavens beneath ascend to him, like a hymn of glory from the universe to its Creator.

Next in order below the Empyrean is the heaven of crystal, or the sphere of the *first movable* (*primum mobile*). Beneath this revolves the heaven of fixed stars, which, formed from the most subtle elements in the universe, are devoid of weight. If now an angel were imagined to descend from this heaven straight to earth,—the centre, where the coarsest particles of creation are collected,—he would still

sink through seven vaulted spaces, which form the planetary world. In the first of these remaining heavens is found the planet Saturn, in the second Jupiter, in the third Mars; to the fourth and middle heaven belongs the Sun, queen of the planets, while in the remaining three are the paths of Venus, Mercury, and finally the moon, measuring time with its waning and increasing disk. Beneath this heaven of the moon is the enveloping atmosphere of the earth, and earth itself with its lands and seas.

There are four prime elements in the structure of the universe: fire, air, water and earth. Every thing existing in the material world is a peculiar compound of these elements, and possesses as such an energy of its own; but matter in itself is devoid of quality and force. All power is spiritual, and flows from a spiritual source,—from God, and is communicated to the earth and the heavens above the earth and all things in them, by spiritual agents, personal but bodiless. These beings fill the universe. Even the prime elements derive their energy from them. They are called intelligences or angels; and the *primum mobile* as well as the heaven of fixed stars is held in motion by them. The planets are guided in their orbits by angels. “All the energies of plants, metals, stones and all other objects, are derived from those intelligences whom God has ordained to be the guardians and leaders of his works.”^[1] “God, as the source and end of all power, lends the seal of ideas to his ministering spirits, who, faithfully executing his divine will, stamp with a vital energy all things committed to their care.”^[2]

No inevitable causation is admitted. Every thing is produced by the will of God, and upheld by it. The laws of nature are nothing but the precepts in accordance with which the angels execute their charge. They obey from love and fear; but should they in a refractory spirit transgress the given commandments, or cease their activity, which they have the power to do, then the order of nature would be changed, and the great mechanism of the universe fall asunder, unless God saw fit to interpose. "Sometimes God suspends their agency, and is himself the immediate actor everywhere; or he gives unusual commandments to his angels, and then their operations are called miracles."[\[3\]](#)

A knowledge of the nature of things is consequently in the main a knowledge of the angels. Their innumerable hosts form nine choirs or orders, divided into three hierarchies, corresponding to the three worlds: the empyreal, that of the revolving heavens, and the terrestrial. The orders of Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones which constitute the first hierarchy, are nearest God. They surround his throne like a train of attendants, rejoice in the light of his countenance, feel the abundant inspiration of his wisdom, love and power, and chant eternal praises to his glory. The order of the Thrones, which is the lowest in this empyreal hierarchy, proclaims God's will to the middle hierarchy, to which is given the rule of the movable heavens. It is the order of Dominion which thus receives the commands of God; that of Power, which guides the stars and planets in their orbits, and brings to pass all other celestial phenomena, carries them into execution, while a third of Empire wards off every thing which could interfere

with their accomplishment. The third and lowest hierarchy, embracing the orders of Principalities, Archangels and Angels, holds supremacy over terrestrial things. Principalities, as the name implies, are the guardian spirits of nations and kingdoms; Archangels protect religion, and bear the prayers of saints on high to the throne of God; Angels, finally, have the care of every mortal, and impart to beasts, plants, stones and metals their peculiar nature. Together these hierarchies and orders form a continuous chain of intermingling activities, and thus the structure of the universe resembles a Jacob's ladder, upon which

“Celestial powers, mounting and descending,
Their golden buckets ceaseless interchange.”

All terrestrial things are images of the celestial; and all celestial have their archetypes in the Empyrean. Things on earth are composed of the coarsest of all matter; things in the surrounding heavens of a finer substance, accessible to the influence of intelligences. Archetypes are immaterial; and as such may be filled without resistance with spiritual forces, and give of their plenitude to their corresponding effigies in the worlds of stars and planets. These again through their rays send forth of the abundance of their power to those objects on earth by which they are represented. Every thing on earth is consequently not only under the guidance of its own angel, but also under the influence of stars, planets, and archetypes. The universe is a vast lyre whose strings, struck no matter where, are sure to vibrate throughout their length.

It was for man that God called forth the four elements from nothing by his fiat, and it was for man that he fashioned this wonderful earth from those elements in six days. Man is the crown of creation, its master-piece, and within the narrow limits of his nature an epitome of all things existing,—a microcosm, and the image of the supreme God himself.

But since man, as a microcosm, must partake also of the coarsest matter, his dwelling-place could not be within the Empyrean, but must be fixed on earth. In order that it might be worthy to receive him, it was adorned with all the beauty of a paradise, and angels gazed from heaven with delight upon its vales and mountains, its lakes and groves, which in changing lights and shadows shone now with the purple of morning, now with the gold of the sun, and again with the silver of the moon. And this place of habitation explains symbolically by its very position the destiny of man and his place in the kingdom of God; for wherever he wanders, the zenith still lingers over his head, and all the revolving heavens have his habitation for their centre. The dance of the stars is but a fête in honor of him, the sun and moon exist but to shine upon his pathway and fill his heart with gladness.

The first human beings lived in this their paradise in a state of highest happiness. Their will was undepraved; their understanding filled with the immediate light of intuition. Often when the angel of the sun sank with his gleaming orb towards the horizon and “day was growing cool,” God himself descended from his Empyrean to wander under the lovely trees of paradise, in the company of his favored ones.

The world was an unbroken harmony. There was, to be sure, a contrast between spirit and matter, but as yet none between good and evil. It was not long to remain thus.

Lucifer, that is the Light-bringer, or Morning Star, was the highest of all angels, the prince of seraphim, the favorite of the Creator, and in purity, majesty and power inferior only to the Holy Trinity. Pride and envy took possession, it is not known how, of this mighty spirit. He conceived the plan of overthrowing the power of God, and seating himself upon the throne of Omnipotence. Angels of all orders were won over to his treason. At the first beck of the reckless spirit numberless intelligences from the lower heavens and from earth assailed the Empyrean and joined themselves to the rebellious seraphim, cherubim and thrones who had flocked to the standard of revolt. In heaven raged a mighty contest, the vicissitudes of which are covered by the veil of mystery. St. John, however, in his Book of Revelation, lifts a single fold of it, and shows us Michael at the head of the legions of God battling against Lucifer. The contest ended with the overthrow of the rebel and his followers. The beautiful Morning Star fell from heaven.^[4] Christ beheld the once faithful seraph hurled from its ramparts like a thunder-bolt from the clouds.^[5]

The conquered was not annihilated. Calm in the consciousness of omnipotence, God inscrutably determined that Lucifer, changed by his rebellion into a spirit wholly evil, should enjoy liberty of action within certain limits. The activity of the fallen spirit consists in desperate and incessant warfare against God; and he gains in the beginning a victory of immeasurable consequence. He

tempts man, and brings him under his dominion. Humanity, as well as the beautiful earth which is its abode, is under the curse of God.

The world is no longer an unbroken harmony, a moral unity. It is divided forever into two antagonistic kingdoms, those of Good and Evil. That God so wills, and permits the inevitable consequences, is confirmed by an immediate change in the structure of the universe. Death is sent forth commissioned to destroy all life. Hell opens its jaws in the once peaceful realms of earth's bosom, and is filled with a fire which burns every thing, but consumes nothing.

The battle-field is the whole creation except the spaces of the Empyrean; for into its pure domain nothing corrupt can enter. Lucifer still adheres to his claims upon its throne, and in every thing seeks to imitate God. The fallen seraphim, cherubim and thrones constitute his princely retinue and his council of war. The rebel intelligences of the middle hierarchy, now transformed into demons, still love to rove among the same stars and planets which were once confided to their care, and war against the good angels who now guide the movements of the heavens. Other demons float upon the atmosphere, causing storm and thunder, hail and snow, drouth and awful omens (whence it is said the devil is a prince who controls the weather). Others again fill the earth; its seas, lakes, fountains and rivers; its woods, groves, meadows and mountains. They pervade the elements; they are everywhere.

Man, the chief occasion of the strife, is in a sad condition. The bodily pains and sufferings which the earth since its curse heaps upon the path that successive generations, all

partakers of Adam's sin, must tread, are as nothing compared with the perils which on all sides assail and threaten their immortal souls. And how can these dangers be averted? Each mortal is indeed followed from his birth by a guardian angel; but how can his promptings be distinguished from those that issue from the thousand hidden agents of the Evil. Lucifer can transform himself into an angel of light, his demons can entice with a voice which counterfeits that of God and conscience. Man's will has no power to resist these temptations; it is depraved by the fall. Reason gives no guidance; darkened on account of man's apostasy, it degenerates, if left to itself, into a Satanic instrument of heresy and error. Feeling is in subjection to matter, which, already from the beginning opposed to spirit, shares the curse. Is it then to be wondered at that the career of man, beginning with conception in a sinful womb, has for its end, behind the portals of death, the eternal torments of a hell? All these myriads of souls created by God and clothed in garments of clay,—all these microcosms, each of which is a master-piece, the glory of creation, a being of infinite value, form, link by link, a chain extending from that nothingness out of which God has created them, to that abyss in which, after a brief life on earth, they must be tormented through countless ages, despairing and cursing their Creator.

Lucifer triumphs. His kingdom increases; but the poor mortal has no right to complain. The vessel must not blame the potter. When man looks into his own heart he discovers a sinfulness and depravity as infinite as are his

punishments. However severe the law of the universe appears, it still bears the impress of divine justice.

It is, therefore, but an act of pure grace, when God determines the salvation of mankind. The Church, prepared for by the election of the Jewish people, and founded by Jesus Christ the Son of God, who offered himself for crucifixion to atone for the sins of men, has grown up and disseminated its influences throughout regions where once demons, the gods of the heathen, possessed temples, idols and altars. The Church is the magic circle within which alone is salvation possible (*Extra ecclesiam nullus salus*). Within her walls the Son of God offers himself daily as a sacrifice for the transgressions of humanity; the Communion wine is by a miracle changed into his blood, and the bread into his flesh, which, eaten by the members of the Church, promote their growth in holiness and their power of resistance to the Tempter. The Church is one body, animated by the Holy Spirit of God; and thus one member compensated by surplus of virtue for the deficiencies of another. Holy men, resigning all sensual delights, and devoting their lives to the practice of penance and severities, the contemplation of spiritual things, and doing good, accumulate thereby a wealth of supererogatory works, which, deposited in the treasury of the Church, enables her to compound for the sins of less self-denying members. With liberal hand she grants remission of sins not to the living merely, but also to the dead. Thus the race of men may breathe more freely, and the multitude attach themselves again to the transient joys and pleasures of a wretched life on earth; and when a mortal plucks the flowers of pleasure which bloom in this

vale of sorrows, he need not fear so much its hidden poison, for the remedy is near at hand. The knight in the castle yonder on the summit of the crag, or the burgher beneath him in the valley, may without scruple take a wife, rear children and live in conviviality according to his means; the happy student may sing and realize his "*Gaudeamus igitur*"; the undaunted soldier may seek a recompense for the hardships of his campaign by a merry life in taverns and in women's company; even the followers of Mary Magdalene, sinning in expectation of grace, may obtain at the feet of the Church the same absolution which was given to their model at the feet of Jesus, provided only that, grateful for the mercy of Christ, who has made them members of his Church, they venerate it as their mother, partake of its sacraments, and seek its aid. The continually increasing number of cloisters, the homes of rigorous self-denial, uninterrupted penance, and mysterious contemplation, is a guarantee of the inexhaustibleness of those works of supererogation which the Church possesses. In these cloisters young maidens, who have consecrated themselves to Christ after a spiritual embrace for which the most intense impulses of their nature have been suppressed, yearn away their lives. Here in prayer and toil the pious recluse spends his days and nights. Those men also who, going forth barefooted, covered with coarse mantles, and wearing ropes about their waists, devote themselves like the apostles to poverty and the preaching of the gospel, who receive charity at the door of the layman, giving him in exchange the food of the word of God,—these all issue from the same cloisters.