CHAPTER THREE

Alchemy and the Function of Knowledge

The theories and philosophies discussed in the previous chapter not only informed alchemical doctrine and practice, but also permeated Renaissance understandings of the functions of knowledge. This overlap is significant, as it suggests a correlation between alchemy and Renaissance attitudes towards the study of the human mind, soul, and nature. In this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate how these epistemological spheres were articulated to suggest an expressive model of the processes of the human psyche towards knowledge of both self and the external world, and, ideally, mastery over both.

*Nosce Teipsum*

The quest for self-knowledge has been integral in the evolution of human society throughout history. The classical maxim *nosce teipsum* operated almost universally as a goal of achievement and actualisation. MacFarlane and Maclean testify to the currency of this dictum, pointing out that “by 1580 the Delphic γνῶθι σεαυτόν was almost worn away with repetition” (63). In their study of the *Essays of Montaigne*, MacFarlane and Maclean stress the emphasis, during the Renaissance, on “self-study, and the importance and difficulty of knowing oneself” (63). They make it clear that Montaigne’s own reservations about *nosce teipsum* had more to do with concern for appearing indecorously self-absorbed, than with “his determination to know himself,” because for Montaigne, as for many other prominent Renaissance thinkers, “Self-knowledge was a thoroughly respectable ideal” (63).
However, ‘self-knowledge’, cannot be pinned down by a precise definition, nor can it be categorised within narrow confines of understanding. Despite the nobility of this endeavour, it was, perhaps predictably, elusive, accessible only to committed initiates. Thus Rolf Soellner points out that self-knowledge throughout the ages was variously understood to refer to the rational control of the passions (xiv); the knowledge and practice of the cardinal virtues (10); the balance of the four humours, which were believed to constitute human personality and temperament (15). The term ‘self-knowledge’ could also be applied to the seemingly contradictory epistemological fields of Christian humanism and Machiavellianism during the Renaissance: on the one hand, it could refer to the Christian humanist emphasis on the knowledge of man’s dignity and pre-eminence in a divinely ordered universe; on the other hand, one may use the term with reference to the Machiavellian concept of utilitarian and unsentimental comprehension of one’s weaknesses and strengths, together with the ability to apply this knowledge to the manipulation of others as a means to survival and advancement within the context of political and social complexity and intrigue. These are merely some of the formulations advanced during the early modern period in an attempt to conceptualise and understand human nature.

Notwithstanding the ‘postmodern’ preoccupation with the self, “at no time was there the same fascination with the study of the self as in the Renaissance” (Soellner, xi). Stephen Greenblatt comments that “there is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities” (Negotiations, 1). In his discussion of ‘Renaissance Theatre and the Crisis of the Self’, Bouwsma affirms the role of ‘aesthetic structures’ in Renaissance conceptions of self. He argues that “the discovery of the self is clearest in
Renaissance theatre” (136), and nowhere more so than in Hamlet. At one level, Hamlet’s tribute may be taken as an adumbration of the Renaissance engagement with the epistemological enquiries into the nature of man, and his place and function in the cosmic chain of being:

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god – the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? (II.ii.293-298).

Tillyard points out that this was not merely the contemplations of an anguished scholar of human nature, but is the echo of a mystery which has exercised the minds of philosophers throughout history. Nemesius, a fourth century Syrian bishop, declared:

No eloquence may worthily publish forth the manifold pre-eminences and advantages which are bestowed on this creature. He passeth over the vast seas; he rangeth about the wide heavens by his contemplation and conceives the motions and magnitude of the stars…. He is learned in every science and skilful in artificial workings…. He talketh with angels yea with God himself. He hath all the creatures within his dominion (qtd. in Tillyard, 12).

On the one hand, this exaltation of man represents a nostalgic yearning for the Golden Age of prelapsarian perfection. Gareth Roberts notes in The Mirror of Alchemy that “knowledge was always perfect or at least fuller or

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1 He also notes that “concern with the real self lying somewhere beneath the protective layers imposed by the expectations of others also pervades the general culture of the age…. Indeed, the Renaissance preoccupation with education can be understood as a concern with shaping and fixing the self in a socially acceptable, agreeable, and profitable mode” (135-136).
more pristine in the distant past” (13). However, both Hamlet’s musings and the words of Nemesius may be read as the optimistic anticipation of the realisation of man’s limitless potential that Adam had enjoyed before the Fall. But the questions remained: Who am I? What is knowledge? What do I do with it?

Croll advances preliminary answers to these questions in his discussion of ‘The Generation, Dignity, & Excellence of the Microcosm, Or Little World Man’:

Because man hath the true and Reall possession of all things and Natures in himselfe, as also the speciall and perfect Image even of the Creator of all things; Therefore the knowledge of all things and natures, and of the Creator himselfe (wherein alone true Wisdome and Blessednesse consisteth) must take its rise from the knowledge of a mans selfe: So that Man, when he doth rightly understand himselfe, may in himselfe, as in a kind of Deified glasse, behold and understand all things. In which respect David saith, Psal. 139.14. I am fearfully and wonderfully made, marvellous are thy works (48).

Pinnell’s marginalia to Croll’s passage augment these tenets of self-knowledge, in that “He that knoweth himselfe knows God … We see God from within” (48). Yet how are we to know God, who is essentially invisible and unknowable? With reference to Ficino, Copenhaver goes some way towards answering this question from the perspective of the Renaissance occultist. Thus, “Ficino … identified love with magic and saw the operations of magic in terms which, if we hesitate to call them scientific, we should surely call cosmological. Because God’s love had created and
vitalized the world, knowledge of the world was a means of knowing God” (‘Philosophy of Magic’, 87).

Cicero’s *Tusulan Disputations*

Despite the multifaceted conception of self-knowledge during the Renaissance, the definition most current at this time, in terms of breadth and flexibility, was probably that gleaned from Cicero’s *Tusulan Disputations*. This philosophical work was popular among schoolmasters during the Renaissance, and the views contained therein were accepted as representing the proven wisdom of the classical period. Copenhaver and Schmitt acknowledge that Cicero, “the ancient Latin master of the philosophical as well as the literary *studia humanitatis*” was a seminal figure for Renaissance humanists, and argue that “The curriculum sanctified by Cicero’s example stirred the hearts of humanists unmoved by the logic and natural philosophy that dominated the Italian universities of the period” (*Renaissance Philosophy*, 26, 29). Hiram Haydn seems to reach the same conclusion with regard to the authority ascribed to Cicero. Thus, “scholarly [classical] translations and commentaries abounded, but Cicero and Plato and Seneca served as models for life as well as for style and sentiment” (xii).

Moreover, the *Tusulan Disputations* would have been accessible even to those who were strangers to Latin, for an English translation was available by 1561, and would no doubt have influenced many of the scholars and writers of the time. In this work, Cicero equates self-knowledge with “an understanding of the nature of the mind or soul” (Soellner, 9). Thus Cicero asserts that “When then Apollo says ‘Know thyself’ [inscribed in the vestibule of the temple of Apollo at Delphi], he says ‘Know thy soul’” (63). However, though Cicero’s work may have been conveniently at hand for the
literate, and while his definition of self-knowledge may have made the concept more accessible, gaining insight into this uncharted realm was by no means straightforward.

For one thing, Cicero interprets *nosce teipsum* as meaning self-transcending knowledge:

> The soul has not the power of itself to see itself, but, like the eye, the soul, though it does not see itself, yet discerns other things … assuredly it sees its power, wisdom, memory, rapidity of movement. These things are of real moment, these are divine, these are everlasting (79).

This extract seems to suggest that while one cannot directly access the workings of one’s own mind or soul, one can approach a clearer analysis through the observation of others and of the world of nature, as well as of one’s relation to the external world. Thus, self-knowledge could only be achieved through a thorough knowledge of that which exceeds the limits of self.

Not only does the soul have the capacity to recognise its own outworking, but also through “the soul’s contemplation of the divine essence … man meditates on the world order and realises that the psychic substance is part of the deity” (Soellner, 10). Soellner’s equation of the ‘divine essence’ and the ‘world order’ is in keeping with the convention of making an association between the supernatural and the material. Thomas Vaughan explains in his *Anthroposophia Theomagica*.
Man, if we look on his material parts, was taken out of the great World as Woman was taken out of Man…. His Soule is an Essence not to be found in the Texture of the great world, & therefore merely Divine & Supernaturall … the Creation of Man [is] a little Incarnation, as if God in this worke had multiplyed himselfe (28-29).

Oswald Croll, drawing on Hermes Trismegistus and Agrippa, attempts to direct the reader along the path towards self-knowledge:

As the most excellent Phylosophy is that which enlightens the mind to the right knowledge of it selfe, so to be ignorant of that knowledge is the greatest shame and most pestilent disease of the mind. Ignorance, saith Trismegistus to his son Tat, is the greatest Enemy and principall Tormentor in every Man. Woe be to thee o Man, who neglecteth the large patrimony and Talent and the thing committed to thy charge, who considereth not the Treasure that is hid in thy earthen vessel, and may thereout be digged: Thou seest not God in thy selfe, whom the world seeth not, neither can receive, though he be more in us than we are in our selves, inasmuch as the Spirit of God dwelleth in the midst of our hearts. And to speak truly, we can learn more in the whole course of our life then that Divine lesson God hath set us, KNOW THY SELFE. Therefore Agryppa holily and learnedly reasoning about the right way that leadeth to true Wisdome and Eternall Hapinesse, saith it is for a man to know himselfe; according to the Oracle of Apollo written over the doors of his Temple at Delpbos (‘Discovering the Great and Deep Mysteries’, 47-48).
Both Vaughan’s and Croll’s views are in keeping with Cicero’s theory that all things contained within the world order are founded upon, and find their being in, the supreme deity. However, Cicero is at pains to point out that the most notable affinity in all creation is that between God and the soul or mind of man:

[W]hatever it is that is conscious, that is wise, that lives, that is active must be heavenly and divine and for that reason eternal. And indeed God Himself, who is comprehended by us, can be comprehended in no other way save as a mind unfettered and free, severed from all perishable matter, conscious of all and moving all and self-endowed with perpetual motion. Of such sort and of the same nature is the human mind (Tusculan Disputations, 79).

Croll, too, equates ‘intellect’ or mind with the soul of man:

Man hath an *Intelluctuall* and immortal *Soul*, or Spirit by the inbreathing of God, created … after the Image of God and the Divine *Triunity*, with the similitude also of Unity, that so in all things he might be one with his Heavenly Father, who is in us by his Spirit, from which we learn sacred Divinity, and all heavenly and earthly secrets without errour (60).

**Knowledge of Self: Knowledge of Deity**

Yet knowledge of our kinship with deity is meaningless if it ends there, for this knowledge should translate into wisdom, which may be seen as the

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2 Bouwsma provides a useful clarification of this concept within the Renaissance context: “‘Soul’, ‘mind’, and ‘reason’ were in common usage, almost interchangeable to designate what was highest in the self, properly located to direct everything below” (165).
ability to apply knowledge to the best advantage. This wisdom is approached by extending our vision and contemplation beyond self to the rest of creation: “For the man who reflects upon nature, upon the diversity of life and the weakness of humanity, is not saddened by reflecting upon these things, but in doing so he fulfils most completely the function of wisdom” (Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, 267).

The following passage from Croll articulates particularly well the belief in a relationship between knowledge and the fulfilment of a divinely ordained destiny:

When we therefore know ourselves aright … according to the Spirit and Nature, then by Gods help we enter into the gate that is opened in us, and we open to God who stands and knocks at the door of our heart, living according to the will of God, we have all things necessary as well for wisdome as for life, both for present and ever hereafter. From this diligent contemplation & knowledge [of] mans selfe, the true knowledge also of God doth immediately arise (for neither can be absolute and compleat without the other) from the consideration of himselfe a Man may attaine to a good and great measure of him who IS, all men being indeed bound to know according to the measure of their capacity … Furthermore, he that knoweth himselfe, doth know all things Fundamentally in himselfe, and being set between Time and Eternity, above him he sees God eternall, his Creator…. Under him he sees the visible World whereof he is a pattern (50, 53).

The concept of discernment of one’s inner being through observation of the outer world accorded with the humanist notion of the macrocosm-
microcosm correspondence, which was believed to characterise all of creation. Only in appreciating his status as microcosm could man hope to approach self-knowledge (Soellner, 14). As an integral component of the cosmic structure, man’s endeavours should be to cultivate and produce, in microcosm, the inner equilibrium that would lead to a harmonious and constructive life.3

But this is not solely an esoteric or metaphysical quest. Rather, many occultists believed that it was only in ‘doing’ and ‘acting’ that the power of nature could be harnessed. Taking man beyond merely recognising, accepting, and co-operating with the cosmic bond between himself and deity, the knowledge of the macrocosm-microcosm operation of the world would translate into practical wisdom, touching on man’s place and purpose within the world, thus contributing to the overall symmetry of creation. Haydn highlights an apparent paradox, which actually serves to confirm the occultists’ fundamental belief in cosmic symmetry and order. Thus:

[The] ancient revealed body of knowledge to whose authority the magician-scientist consistently appealed was susceptible to variant expositions and interpretations – depending upon the occult line of succession to which the particular practitioner owed his loyalty. Yet

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3 With particular reference to Agrippa, Richard H. Popkin clarifies the relationship between Renaissance theories of knowledge and the macrocosm-microcosm hypothesis:

One great expositor of occult philosophy in the Renaissance, Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, portrayed human beings as belonging to three worlds, the terrestrial world of elements, the world of heavenly bodies and the world of spirit. Man as a microcosm is the ontological link between these worlds and is thus able to know each of them. So, for Agrippa, human knowledge depends upon man’s ontological nature. Man contains the harmonious unity of the three worlds, and is thereby a microcosm that reflects the harmonious unity of the world in the macrocosm. Man’s soul is able to know the effluences of the world-soul and to know in the sympathies and antipathies of things the latent powers in things that can be used by magical power. Thus, for Agrippa … nature’s secrets, her hidden powers and forces, can be known by occult means, by magic, and this is the most important knowledge (‘Theories of Knowledge’, 677).
almost all of the magician-scientists stress continuity and uniformity (212).

However, the ability to utilise the power inherent in the ‘great chain of being’ is not undemanding of personal dedication and sacrifice. The understanding of the interdependence of the macrocosm and microcosm, as well as the interactive knowledge of both, may be illustrated by reference to Agrippa. In his *Occult Philosophy*, Agrippa expounds on this cogent sympathy and accord. He makes a point of stressing the dynamic cohesion between all the seemingly disparate constituents of the cosmos:

Divinity is annexed to the mind, the mind to the intellect, the intellect to the intention, the intention to the imagination, the imagination to the senses, and the senses, at last, to things. For this is the band and continuity of Nature…. For so inferiors are successively joined to their superiors, that there proceeds an influence from their head, the First Cause, as a certain string stretched out to the lowermost things of all; of which string, if one end be touched the whole doth presently shake, and such a touch doth sound to the other end; and at the motion of an inferior the superior is also moved, to which the other doth answer, as strings in a lute well tuned (120).

**Magic as Knowledge**

Croll employs almost the same imagery of reciprocal attachment. However, within the context of this analogy, Croll also specifies unambiguously, in the final lines of this passage, the means by which the power of this cosmic affiliation may be exercised:
Such is the mutuall tye and continuity of Nature, that like a stretched cord, all the Superiour vertue floweth through every inferiour thing even to the utmost, dispersing its beams by a long and continued order and succession; on the other hand, the inferiours passe through all to their Superiors, because the working vertue is one, and the participation of the species is diffused through all; Divine Matrimony; Hence is that wonderfull tye, continuity, influence and simpathy between inferiour and superiour Naturall things: many things may be done in Magick and Cabal by the intercession of the worlds marriage (‘The Great and Deep Mysteries’, 87).

John Baptista Porta is even more explicit in his disquisition on the nature of magic, and equates this occult art with:

[The] practical part of Natural Philosophy, which produceth her effects by the mutual and fit application of one natural thing unto another…. [Thus] inferiour things are made to be subject to superiours, earthly are subdued to heavenly; and by certain pretty allurements, it fetcheth forth the properties of the whole frame of the world…. I think that Magick is nothing else but the survey of the whole course of Nature (Natural Magick, 1).

Magic and other occult arts were not necessarily seen to be in opposition to religion in general, or to Christianity in particular. This does not mean that the occult was endorsed without qualification by the religiously orthodox. Porta therefore distinguishes between two sorts of magic:

The one is infamous, and unhappie, because it hath to do with foul spirits, and consists of Inchantments and wicked Curiosity; and this is
called Sorcery; an art which all learned and good men detest; neither is it able to yeeld any truth of Reason or Nature, but stands merely upon fancies and imaginations…. The other Magick is natural; which all excellent wise men do admit and embrace, and worship with great applause; neither is there anything more highly esteemed, or better thought of, by men of learning (1).

Fludd, too, highlights this distinction and attempts to demystify the recondite relationship between the divine and the human by contending that the ultimate source of true wisdom is to be found in God alone. On the other hand, the “bastard and spurious” philosophy is worldly and in conflict with Scripture (Mosaical Philosophy, 10). Croll’s opinion is consistent with this view, as he asserts that “Great things have been affected by True Magicians (by whom I do not mean Nicromancers or them of the Black Art) those accurate searchers out of Nature … without any prophanation or scandall of the Divine Majesty, or any wrong to Faith and Religion” (84).

All these views may be seen to be in accordance with the classical pattern provided by Cicero. Although considered ‘pagan’ by many devout Christians, Cicero, in his Tusculan Disputations, provides classical authentication for the Christianising of occult philosophy, and specifically of the divine ‘spark’ or imprint contained within the universe and within man himself. Thus man may attain to divine knowledge, despite his carnal limitations, for as Cicero explains, “So with the mind of man, though thou seest it not, as thou seest not God, nevertheless as thou recognizeth God from His works, so from memory, power of discovery, rapidity of movement, and all the beauty of virtue, thou shalt recognize the divine power of mind” (78).
Croll endorses this classical appreciation of the potential of the human mind and warns against both ignorance of this promise and devaluing its significance in the greater scheme of things:

Few men think what the Mind can doe that is disposed by true faith, and more few by far who know how to exercise the same by a supernaturall influence which doth governe the body; though there be many who know this disposition, yet by reason of worldly cares and thoughtfulnesse wherewith they are overwhelmed, they can doe nothing that favoureth true Wisdome (‘The Great and Deep Mysteries’, 74).

Croll’s assertion is supported by Pinnell’s succinct marginal note, in which he reminds the reader that, “The purified Mind, like a river, entereth into the very inmost secrets of things, beyond all shadowes” (74).

Renaissance humanists believed that by imitating God, one’s soul could be regenerated and restored to the pristine condition that God initially intended for it. But even more than this, they held that this revitalisation of the soul should produce a positive transformation of the external world. Thus, “To realize our divine potential we must, like God, exercise our powers in creative acts through which we reproduce in the external world the perfection we have come to see in our own minds” (Mebane, 11).

The ‘potential’ of which Mebane speaks is relevant to the humanists’ optimism regarding man’s potential to attain the power towards self-perfection, and their belief that self-fashioning was but one form of creation by which we not only imitate God, but also restore the divine image – and
the power that accompanies it – that was expunged from human nature when Adam ceded his authority to Satan.

Occult Knowledge as Power

Artists and dramatists also treated of the limitless potential of occult powers. A fine example of this is to be found in Christopher Marlowe’s tragedy of *The Life and Death of Dr Faustus*. Although violating the aforementioned emphasis on the divine sanction in occult practice, Faustus recognises the critical power believed to be inherent in the occult tradition:

These metaphysics of magicians
And necromantic books are heavenly;
Lines, circles, letters, and characters:
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.
O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promis’d to the studious artisan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command: emperors and kings
Are but obey’d in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;
But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man:
A sound magician is a demi-god;
Here tire, my brains, to get a deity!

(I.i.48-62).
Faustus is, of course, not interested in purging either himself or society from corruption. Instead, his desire is divorced from the context of co-operation with the Creator God, and he allies himself with the powers of the ‘Black Art’ defined by Cicero, Croll, and John Baptista Porta. Faustus’s ambition is to tap into the tremendous power latent in nature. But to do so requires an equally tremendous knowledge of nature, which he is unwilling – and too impatient – to pursue.⁴ For Faustus, this kind of knowledge and power is exemplified in one of the leading alchemical occultists of the time. He therefore vows that he

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\text{Will be as cunning as Agrippa was,} \\
\text{Whose shadows made all Europe honour him} \\
\text{(I.i.116-117).}
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Although Faustus voices his desire to achieve a personal omnipotence devoid of Christian content, he does draw on assumptions about the occult that were part of the common intellectual property of the early modern period. John G. Burke can therefore assert that, “Inherent in both Hermetism (sic) and science is the idea that man can obtain power over nature and thus control it. The differing methods are not in question here, what is important is that the mental outlook and the desire are exactly the same” (‘Renaissance World View’, 116-117).

The Corpus Hermeticum provided further ‘classical’ endorsement of the occult. As discussed in chapter one, Marsilio Ficino was adamant in his assertion that the Hermetica were not merely incidentally prophetic but actually divinely inspired. Ficino and many others like him welcomed the optimism with which man was imaged in the Hermetica, especially the assumed promise

⁴ Haydn points out that “What he [Faustus] wants is knowledge of the mysteries and miracles of ‘nature’s treasury’, and he wants it for the power it will give him” (187).
of power that was latent in nature and available to those who diligently sought it. Indeed, the writings of ‘Hermes Trismegistus’ gave impetus to the rapidly proliferating idea of Man as Magus. Occult philosophers adhered firmly to the notion that the true magician was endowed with supernatural ability to accomplish the restoration of man to his prelapsarian power. In other words, if the magician co-operates with and submits to the benevolent and loving deity, he will be granted both the insight and the ability to re-establish the ‘links’ which once existed between things terrestrial and things divine. Magic, then, is seen as exercising a divinely bestowed gift – or, as in the case of Faustus, at least a supernatural endowment. The practice of magic consists in apprehending the ‘spiritual’ essence suffused throughout the universe, and channelling it to effect change within the physical world.

Pico della Mirandola

This conviction about the efficacy of practical magic is further developed by Pico della Mirandola.\(^5\) Thus, the intervention of the magus allows for the integration of the lower spheres of temporal and spatial materiality with the higher realms of principal Ideas. This integration in turn activates the full potential of the physical world. Ralph holds that “Sharing with the humanists and Neoplatonists the belief in man’s capacity for spiritual growth, [Pico] went beyond most of them in exalting man’s potentialities, his inviolable freedom, and his central role in giving meaning to the whole natural order” (221).

Accordingly, “to perform magic is nothing other than to marry the world” (Mebane, 46). Like the alchemist, the true magus is concerned with the

\(^5\) William Kerrigan and Gordon Braden argue in *The Idea of the Renaissance* that “Pico is a master of Bloomian alchemy … he makes gold of rusty iron, novel energy of belatedness, by posing in a newly radical way the mission of exegesis, setting the marks into motion, with himself, as magical interpreter, at the center of this re-creation” (118).
organisation and interaction of cosmic correspondences, which, if correctly employed, will result in the experiential knowledge which translates into power over nature. However, the prerequisite of this kind of magic is a pure and goodly intention on the part of the practitioner. Among the alchemical adepts, it was understood that the power over nature was to be to the good of all mankind. With particular reference to Prospero, John G. Burke points out: “The powers acquired by the magus might be employed to enhance his own knowledge, goodness, and virtue or to influence the lives and fortunes of others” (‘Renaissance World View’, 103). In co-operation with God and nature, the alchemist as magus was seen as facilitating the process towards the perfection of the world as initially intended before the Fall interrupted this progression6 (Mebane, 48).

Pico and other occult philosophers continually reiterated that the redemption of mankind would be brought about through the intervention of occult practitioners who had accessed the secrets and powers of nature. Richard H. Popkin explains: “Pico’s concern for cabalistic studies brought an esoteric element into Renaissance theories of knowledge…. This esoteric search for knowledge continued to take place in the seventeenth century” (‘Theories of Knowledge’, 676). Vasoli, too, points out that:

Pico discovered in the Scriptures a perfectly harmonious philosophical interpretation of the universe and recognised in the inscrutable reality of God that radiant darkness with which man identified utter perfection. Pico praised magic and man’s ability to control the most occult powers of nature because he regarded them as ‘the practical part of the natural sciences’, able to increase our

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6 Thus Charles Webster maintains that for the Renaissance thinker, “The true end of knowledge … is a restoration and re-investing (in great part) of man to the sovereignty and power … which he had in his first state of creation” (The Great Instauration, 17).
freedom in a world over which God had given us dominion
(‘Renaissance Concept of Philosophy’, 69).

Ingegno also acknowledges Pico’s belief in the efficacy of magic – here equated with knowledge – to bring about a kind of divine restoration of order. Thus:

For Pico magic corresponded exactly, at the operative level, to a mystical and aristocratic conception of the highest form of knowledge. Magic was the activity of an individual who, through a knowledge of the most secret mysteries, could illuminate the divine presence in each and every thing (‘New Philosophy of Nature’, 239).

Yet such ability was only to be granted to men of unquestionable integrity and true self-knowledge. Copenhaver argues that, “Although Pico’s learning was subtle and broad, the most consistent and most original element in his approach to magic and astrology was his abiding ethical interest: magic enlarges man’s powers; astrology cannot limit man’s freedom” (‘Astrology and Magic’, 270).

The vital importance of the moral stature of practising occultists was also stressed by Francesco Giorgi, a leading Venetian theologian of the first half of the sixteenth century. According to Giorgi, the ultimate destiny of these practitioners is to strive for and eventually realise unity with the one true deity, or ‘Monas’. In his system of occultism, which fused Christian theology with Jewish Cabala, Giorgi focused on the function and influence of the astrological or supercelestial realms in the affairs of men. While this may seem to correspond to the zodiacal system whereby the particular configuration of the stars and planets is believed to determine the fates of
people, Giorgi stressed that humans shape their own destinies as they co-operate with or rebel against the celestial powers. Thus, “all the celestial influences are good, and it is only a bad reception of them which can make them bad or unfortunate” (Yates, *Occult Philosophy*, 33).

The magician-scientist believed, then, that he had a crucial part to play in co-operation with God. Thus, self-discipline in the exercise of piety and righteousness before God were prerequisites to the successful practice of his art. In fact, as the supreme Creator-Alchemist, God was believed to sanction and empower those who strove to imitate him. Thus Kerrigan and Braden maintain that “Only magic, holding out the possibility of ‘omnipotence’, is truly ‘divine’” (126). Furthermore, Burke explains:

The true sage, the magus, cleansed of evil, has knowledge of God and of the truth; and in regaining his original divinity, he reacquires an intimate knowledge of nature and an ability to employ the powers of nature for beneficial purposes. This ability to control nature was the goal of the serious Renaissance magus (‘Renaissance World View’, 101).

However, man-as-magus was destabilised and weakened through the original sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden, and it was only through diligent and continued endeavour that man could once more redeem his true status. The alchemists, especially, strove in their alchemical pursuits to emulate, albeit on a relatively modest scale, the alchemical work of creation, “in which ‘the great workemaister and Creator’ distinguished light and darkness, and more especially divided first the firmament and then dry land from the waters in divine acts of alchemical separation” (Roberts, 13). The magician-scientists who cast themselves within the Christian paradigm made
a point of entreating God for aid, and many of the alchemical texts of the period include elaborate supplications to this end.

Alchemical Knowledge as Creative Power

The alchemical endeavour may then be summed up as the search for lost wisdom. As Yates puts it, “the search for truth was thus of necessity a search for the early, the ancient, the original gold from which the baser metals of the present and the immediate past were corrupt degenerations” (*Occult Philosophy*, 1). A wonderful representation of this idea is to be found in Book Three of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton suggests that this archetypal ‘gold’ beautified the lower sphere even before the arrival of either Jesus or Satan on the earth:

The place he [the fiend] found beyond expression bright,  
Compared with aught on earth, metal or stone;  
Not all part like, but all alike informed  
With radiant light, as glowing iron with fire;  
If metal, part seemed gold, part silver clear;  
If stone, carbuncle most or chrysolite,  
Ruby or topaz, to the twelve that shone  
In Aaron’s breastplate, and a stone besides  
Imagined rather oft than elsewhere seen,  
That stone, or like to that which here below  
Philosophers in vain so long have sought,  
In vain, though by their powerful art they bind  
Volatile Hermes, and call up unbound  
In various shapes old Proteus from the sea,  
Drained through a limbeck to his native form.
What wonder then if fields and regions here
Breathe forth elixir pure, and rivers run
Potable gold, when with one virtuous touch
The arch-chemic sun so far from us remote
Produces with terrestrial humour mixed
Here in the dark so many precious things
Of colour glorious and effect so rare?

(591-612).

This passage provides an insightful gloss on the ‘powerful art’ of the alchemist. Although the philosopher’s stone has been sought in vain, the alchemist is capable of influencing nature by commanding the obedience of Hermes and Proteus. The passage also explains the source of the alchemist’s art and the goal of his quest, which was to find the ‘elixir pure’, the ultimate power in determining man’s being and destiny.

In keeping with the belief that God was the supreme Alchemist, it was held that Adam, as God’s primary successor, was “the first and most knowledgeable alchemical adept”, and that he was endowed with an extraordinary wisdom prior to the Fall (Roberts, 13). Ever since this cataclysmic reduction, which frustrated God’s intended plan, alchemists had attempted to recapture the wisdom which Adam had forfeited to pride and vainglory, and to reinstate the divine blueprint. As heirs of the tradition inaugurated by the prelapsarian Adam, alchemists believed that they were working towards the redemption of the fallen world, obeying God in evoking the Golden Age of perfect knowledge. In turn, this knowledge would effect the power necessary to control nature and even destiny.
Although alchemy seems ultimately to have failed both in its quest for the universal elixir and as a sustainable philosophical system, alchemists, for all their seemingly pointless stumbles, were adamant about their perceived task. Their often-gruelling attempts at developing a system of knowledge that was both practical and philosophical, would, they believed, give them the power to transform not only physical nature, but also the metaphysical.

Renaissance occultists were confident that they were endowed with the power to transform themselves after the pattern of their divine exemplar⁷. This power would then extend to restore a fallen and degenerate world to its prelapsarian glory. In other words, these adepts, among whom the alchemists held pride of place, had as their objective the re-creation of a Golden Age of perfect knowledge and power. According to Mebane in his discussion of Ficino’s translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*:

> prelapsarian humanity possessed godlike creative powers and was closely akin to the Son of God, the Logos who created the visible world…. [The] effects of [the] Fall can be overcome in a regenerative experience which restores divine knowledge and power. In the *Asclepius* … Hermes Trismegistus proclaims that the power of human beings to perform magic is a sign of this inherent divinity (18).

⁷ Haydn points out that “power was … the goal of the magician – that power which might turn a man into a god” (244).