THE COMING OF THE MASTERS: THE EVOLUTIONARY REFORMULATION OF SPIRITUAL INTERMEDIARIES IN MODERN THEOSOPHY

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Helena Blavatsky’s revelation of highly evolved adepts residing in the Himalayas offering wisdom and guidance to spiritual seekers became a major feature and attraction of modern Theosophy. Wouter Hanegraaff has indicated how such ‘Masters’ represent a specific phase in the modern development of intermediary beings. Whereas traditional angelic and demonic beings were evident in eighteenth-century esoteric currents such as Martinès de Pasqually’s theurgic order of the Élus Coëns, the idea of ‘hierarchies’ of non-human spiritual beings or entities became central to occultism in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, these spirits were conceived as evolving human beings, an idea that fused traditional redemption with modern ideas of progress and destiny. Swedenborg’s claim that the mesocosm was inhabited by angels and spirits of the dead struck a deep chord in the esoteric imagination. Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) wrote in The Principles of Nature (1847) that human beings continued to evolve after death through six (Swedenborgian) spheres that surround the earth for their further spiritual development. On the other hand, these hierarchies were distinct from human beings and the dead, as in Paschal Beverly Randolph’s spiritual monads emanating from the ‘Central Sun’ ordered in a sevenfold hierarchy of Spirit-Angels, Seraphs, Arsaphs, Eons, Arsasaphs, Arch-Eons and Antarphim, from which occultists could learn secrets to assist their own spiritual evolution.1 Hanegraaff goes on to argue that modern Theosophy introduces the novel idea that members of this occult hierarchy that supervises spiritual evolution on earth are actually living in our own world. While embodying the theosophical ideal of spiritual perfection, they are ‘in the world but not of it’. The theosophical ‘Masters’ were believed to live in remote places in the Himalayas and Tibet, but also appeared to theosophists

1 Hanegraaff, 'Intermediary Beings', vol. II, 628–631 (629).
in person and communicated with them through letters transmitted by occult means.\(^2\)

In his doctoral thesis Brendan French has undertaken an extensive analysis of the Theosophical Masters in the thought of both Helena Blavatsky and the ‘second generation’ Theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater.\(^3\) French’s treatment is comprehensive in devoting considerable attention to the philosophical inspiration of the Masters. Elsewhere French has, in my view correctly, identified Theosophy as a modern formulation of the *prisca theologia* or ancient-wisdom tradition. Blavatsky herself asserted that Theosophy was nothing new, but that it was the esoteric heart of all exoteric religions. French went further in asserting that Theosophy essentially presented a Hermetic revelation for a modern age. In support of this claim, he demonstrated Blavatsky’s emphasis on the vertical transit of the soul in a process of individual ascent/descent, a definitive theme of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, with which she was familiar; he also noted the affinity of her cosmological cyclism with the cyclism of prophecies in the *Asclepius*. To this extent, Theosophy rehearsed the fundamental *topoi* of Western Hermeticism. At the same time, it is self-evident that Blavatsky assimilated this Hermetic inspiration within a whole variety of mythological and non-European traditions in support of a globalised, universal wisdom-tradition. However, whereas Renaissance Neoplatonists and magicians could celebrate the semi-divine and mythological status of the ancient Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus, Blavatsky felt that Western modernity demanded facts and that any latter-day Hermes would have to be a fact. This mandate drove her to invoke a revealer figure of the *prisca theologia*, akin to Hermes but more substantial than myth. Thus French concludes that the Theosophical Masters are modern Hermes-figures, translated out of myth into the geographical and cultural alterity of the East.\(^4\)

While accepting French’s conclusions regarding the ontological status of the Masters as Hermetic revealers, in this paper I shall focus on the progressive cultural construction of the ‘Masters’ as the carriers of the *prisca theologia*, first through the thought and works of their first publicist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, and then trace their

\(^2\) Ibid., 630.

\(^3\) French, ‘The Theosophical Masters’.