Roger Bacon and the Hermetic Tradition in Medieval Science

GEORGE MOLLAND

Roger Bacon would no more have wished to be called a Hermeticist than to be called a magician. For him magic was by its very nature bad, but this did not stop him from indulging beliefs and practices that bordered on the magical. Similarly, although he had no great or very favourable image of Hermes Trismegistus, his writings are infused with a spirit akin to what in a loose understanding of the term have been called Hermetic trends in Renaissance thought, and especially to the "Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science".¹

In exciting scholarship dating back some thirty years and more, a group of scholars, some closely associated with the Warburg Institute in London, demonstrated the vitality in Renaissance thought of quasi-magical traditions associated (sometimes rather remotely) with writings attributed to the supposed ancient Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus, and urged their importance for a proper historical assessment of the nascent Scientific Revolution.² The impact made by these studies has produced the impression that "Hermetic" influences upon science were in essence a Renaissance phenomenon and had


negligible medieval precedents. The aim of the present article is to help redress the balance, and, while by no means denying Renaissance originality, to show that important ideas now often regarded as characteristically Renaissance, were very much alive in the Middle Ages. To this end I shall consider two facets of the work of Roger Bacon: the role that he ascribed to *prisca auctoritas*, or ancient authority, and his attempt to naturalise some apparently magical practices by means of the doctrine of multiplication of species.

1. *Prisca Auctoritas*

The role of things ancient—I adhere to this translation against Schmitt’s preferred “venerable”—in Renaissance thought has been well summarised by the late Charles B. Schmitt in an article centred on Agonisto Steuco:

The word *priscus*, probably best translated as “venerable”, is one which recurs often in Steuco. He speaks of *priscis saeculis*, in former centuries, *prisci philosophi*, *prisca philosophia*, and *prisci* alone, referring to “the venerable philosophers and theologians”. None of this is accidental. Truth flows from a single fountain, as it were, but is manifested in various forms. Moreover, the revelation of truth dates back to the most ancient times, to the *prisca saecula*, and we can find truth in the writings derived from this period. The wisdom of earliest times is then transmitted to the later centuries, truth and wisdom being as old as man himself.3

But, for all its other virtues, Schmitt’s article paid scant attention to the Middle Ages. In like vein D.P. Walker, after discussing the fortunes of what he called Ancient Theology in the early Christian period, continued, “When in the Renaissance the Ancient Theology was revived…”4 It is as if Renaissance scholars were launching a counter-attack to the “revolt of the medievalists”5 which would have antedated many of the Renaissance’s more traditional virtues, and staking a claim for originality, or rather genuine rebirth, in this less familiar and *prima facie* rather “irrational” territory. But here again their claim must be modified, as I hope that the example of Roger Bacon will demonstrate.

The phrase *prisca auctoritas* occurs in the opening passage of

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5 To use the phrase of Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, Cambridge, MA 1948, ch. 11.